

WHY WORDS?

By Darrow L. Miller

Come on! You have got to be kidding! We are going to study words? Why study words when the world is so broken around us?

Words are powerful. Through His spoken Word God created the universe (Gen. 1). Jesus is referred to by the Apostle John as the Word of God (John 1:1, 14). Man was created by The Word-maker to be a word-maker. When man uses language, he shapes culture and the destinies of entire nations. The words we use stem from our worldview and reveal what we value. Words frame the discourse of a society and are directly connected to the behaviors, laws and structures of a society.

“Human beings cannot make sense of life without...words. Long before we get to the Christian faith, words are necessary for people to live distinctively human lives. The great news of Christianity is that God has given us His very words. We are ‘verb-ivores’—word eaters...Psalm 32:8-9 says, that’s just the difference between human beings and everything else in creation. By means of words, we become human; by means of God’s words, we become what we are supposed to be.”¹³

The words we use in our industry, words and phrases like “target population,” “food security,” “civil society,” “holistic health,” “reproductive rights,” all reflect someone’s ideas and are shaped by a particular worldview. These words ultimately shape policies and programs. A few years ago, we saw how the shift from “child survival” to “reproductive health”¹⁴ marked a dramatic change in programs on the field.

There are two maxims that relate to our subject. First, a sociological maxim:

You must change the language of the society before you change the society.

The second maxim, which comes from our friend Vishal Mangalwadi, is a theological maxim:

God spoke and created the universe. Man speaks and creates culture, which shapes the universe.

Whoever controls language controls history and shapes the future of a people and a nation. Others have expressed the power of words in similar fashion. Rudyard Kipling wrote: “Words are the most powerful drugs used by mankind.” Tristram Gylbert wrote: “Whoever controls language controls culture.” John Locke said: “Whoever defines words defines the world.”¹⁵ Dennis Peacocke, writing in his September 2000 newsletter “The Bottom Line” calls people who want to see societies transformed “Word Warriors.” He writes: “Words have incredible power because they set agendas for whole nations. The words we use to describe a situation or problem frame the way we approach it. It’s [words] that

¹³ Mark Talbot, “Distinguishing Confessing Evangelicals from Generic Evangelicals,” *Modern Reformation Magazine*, (March/April 2001), p. 35.

¹⁴ WHO defines reproductive health as “fertility control.” Included in the official definition of fertility control is “termination of pregnancy” or abortion.

¹⁵ Quoted by George Grant in *Grand Illusions*, 4th Rev. Ed. (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, March 2000), p. 118.

ultimately win wars. A bullet won't make you die for someone, but the right word lodged within you make[s] you fearless."

Let's look at two examples. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the language that many western societies used to describe the value of human life shifted from the old "*sanctity* of life" to the new "*quality* of life." The first phrase is rooted in the Judeo-Christian worldview—a worldview that acknowledges the existence of God and believes that man is made in His image. Because of this, all human life—from the youngest to the oldest, from the smallest to the biggest, from the most broken and vile to the most famous and wealthy—is held to be sacred, having an intrinsic value because of the imprinted image of God. The *sanctity* of human life produced laws that were designed to protect life and to endow it with certain unalienable rights—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to name a few. However, with the shift from the biblical worldview to the secular worldview, the word *sanctity* was replaced by the word *quality*. Today, it's uncommon for people to use the word *sanctity* in public discourse. This simple change in one word marked a sea change in the western world. Instead of all of human life having value, pragmatism or utilitarianism now reigns. Darwin's framework shapes life—the survival of the fittest. Life that is productive, healthy, strong and "wanted" is valuable. The weak, the unproductive, the unwanted are not fit to live. The "hunger houses" in Germany were the precursors to the death camps. In the USA, "Women's Health Clinics" and "death with dignity" are the euphemisms for places and procedures reflecting the Darwinian paradigm.

Second, let us look at the change in meaning for the word "compassion." In 1800, the Earl of Shaftesbury wrote, "To compassionate, i.e., to join with in passion...To commiserate, i.e., to join with in misery...."¹⁶ Compassion was seen within the framework of the biblical incarnation. To be compassionate required a personal and direct involvement in the lives of the hurting and broken. This is most dramatically illustrated in the life of Christ. Noah Webster's 1834 American Dictionary of the English Language defines compassion as: "A suffering with another; painful sympathy...." The 1997 Random House edition of the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, however, defines compassion as "a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for someone struck by misfortune, accompanied by a desire to eliminate the suffering." Noah Webster was living in a world that was shaped by the biblical worldview in which the God of the universe joined in our suffering (John 3:16, Hebrews 2:10, 14, 18). When the worldview shifted from the biblical to the secular, the meaning of the word compassion—and the very nature of what it meant to be compassionate—shifted. It shifted from "suffering together" with another and sacrificially giving of oneself, to establishing universal "programs" aimed at eliminating poverty through the redistribution of money. Incarnational ministry gave way to the hiring of "professional" charity workers. The impact of the shift in the definition of the word compassion is reflected in welfare and relief and development worldwide, as well as in the lifestyle of the average modern Christian.

¹⁶ Earl of Shaftesbury quoted in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 3.