

I was wondering whether meaning can survive culture. Whether Newbigin is right, that we as post-moderns seem to ascribe to opposing world views depending on the circumstance: scientific at work and spiritual at home maybe? Does our language change according to the circumstance between cultures and between individuals? Is altering the language necessarily meaningful (or full of meaning) or is it manipulation? As Dusty used the word manipulation for her personal concern it is the broader concern as well I think. Manipulation seems to be setting all of the place cards at the table so that that the person you select sits by the partner you have chosen. By arranging the furniture just so you get them to come to the place you desire. By using selected verbiage you somehow compromise your true intent in the larger effort of persuasion. And there the conflict must arise in whether there is a scripted appropriate behavior one should employ, and if deviating from this behavior pattern is disingenuous, although more acceptable to the party you are trying to persuade? Where is the boundary between manipulation and persuasion crossed? Or for that matter at what point are we doing the Holy Spirit's job of convicting others when really our job is the simple task of sharing the love of Christ? If you can win the argument you may, as Conrad Vernon says, very well lose the soul. Yet there is in the Newbigin text the statement that the language we use for missions must be in "the language of the receptor culture."¹ And as Dusty speaks with her father, that premise again calls into question whether altering the language is manipulative.

I recently wrote and thought about the concept of the phrase, "born again." When it was used way back when the first time it was itself a fairly startling metaphor, but idiom becomes cliché almost immediately and the idea of cliché is that its efficacy is diminished by its common use, or over use. So while "born again" carried both literal and figurative weight immediately, now its meaning seems to be shielded in its overuse, misuse and scripted use. While at no level do I imply that this turn of phrase is lessened by either its translation from Greek to English, or that it is not the specific metaphor that Jesus used to illustrate a mystical event (and as such is a good way to express the inexpressible), but I merely mention that figurative language carries weight only for a short time. The term "saved," although used as the foundation the Christian experience, is another term that now implies far more than it states.

We know that something may be "hot as hell," or one may be "fire and brimstone," or our love's eyes are like "limpid pools," but each of these expressions and untold others have all passed from meaningful to meaningless. Rather than causing one to consider the comparison of unlike objects, causing that moment of reflection and that instant of understanding that poetic language is designed to inspire, these overused, "over heard" uses of language sail right by our understanding like so many other articles and pronouns and verbs. Yet the language that is multi-referential—in this case conjuring the images of the pain of birth, the notion of again being so very small, the idea that we would also be new, and crying and helpless—is powerful language. But the same illustration over time that has seeped into the consciousness and the sub-consciousness of our church and

¹ P.5 bottom of the page

secular culture and now has little meaning, no meaning, or even negative meaning. I have heard it said that this type of insidious degradation of what once was this positive spiritual figure of speech and now is anything but, is the conscious work of some unseen enemy. While that is defensible, it is also just how language works. To use an example of the cliché to make the point, what once was clever, cutting, or inspired, becomes itself so “ten minutes ago.” Some of our terminology and our favorite verbal shortcuts are only understood within the cadre of the Christian community that have months and years of assigning similar meaning to these little snippets and phrases that bespeak current American Protestant language.

Newbigin says that we should A.) use the language of the receptor culture, and B.) mount a missionary effort aimed at our own culture. Now he was himself was raised by missionaries away from America/England, so for him this was not a much of a stretch. We who are part of the evangelical/conversion-strand of Protestantism also find this internal missionary stance quite familiar. But, what I take away from Newbigin is the very thing that the Grace/Willowcreek methodology seems to endorse. As was referenced last night, we are not about the charismatic, nor about the personality of the preacher, nor about bells and whistles for the sake of bells and whistles. The emphasis (which of course is not unique to Grace, but is indicative of a socio-cultural trend toward authentic, contemporary communication methods) Yet, the language is not just the words in sequence. The language would include the body language. While Elmer Gantryesque fire-and-brimstone gyrations and ranting were a very effective communication style for Billy Sunday and other evangelists, now this is seen as anachronistic. (*And, yes, there are many types of churches, and different styles are enjoyed by many, but the discussion is not about those who like organ solos, while that population exists. Much of sociology and studying populations is done with the broad demographic in mind. Discussing trends one must speak broadly.*) In the late seventies as our society wearied of both the war brought on by one conservative generation, and the opposition to it that was rooted in an amoral counter-culture, the rise of the Jesus Movement and the adoption of a supernatural spiritual experience coupled with a less non-descript religious structure was the next big thing. The message was translated into the familiar extension of the peace-and-love language replete with the music of that era to invite a large influx of disenfranchised ex-hippies.

While books have been written on this, and I am no expert, I give that reference to outline that each of these used a language that was timed for and appropriate to a generation that was ready to hear the gospel and then join and become the church. But this was not going to be their father’s Oldsmobile. The language and the methods shift. Grace’s success thus far is owed to far more than method. It is about content. But identical content in a less relevant package would not be as dynamic and I surmise that it would cause Grace to be a different place entirely. Because really, to allude to McLuhan, the medium is the message.

So while Newbigin had an academic bent and a burden to reach people in their own language, he does not as though he was remotely fluent in the language of the non-academic. This is the colloquial conversation of the moderately educated and heavily media inundated (sedated?) American. While another trend has been sneaking up on us in this country, I have not heard the church address it much. It is the diversification of the

population. How do we find a common language when we are not all farmers living similar lives? When we are not mostly soldiers or families of soldiers returning from a war? We are not all business people, and we are not all undereducated. The aim of sociology and the anthropology is to aim at the statistical average. While this is so the average person is now less average. We as a population are more diverse, with country music, and pop, and classical, and world music tastes.

Grace reaches this average of diversity effectively from my perspective. This may or may not be an intentional effort of Grace or churches like it. It may be that while Grace was trying to model authenticity it began to resonate with its surrounding culture so much that it indeed did create a message in the language of the receptor culture. It seems that this is a model that could be adopted because of the relative newness of the church. While Methodism and Baptists try to slowly alter method to accommodate “seeker populations,” their very strength lies in the anchors of tradition. And since message is method, changing one impacts the other and often may disenfranchise the base of these established groups. So while Grace is Presbyterian and has significant anchorage, it is implied more than stated, and the difference seems to be the language “of the Greeks” that it employs. The term that Newbigin uses in *metanoia*, which describes the change that “can never be the calculable result of correct methods of communication.”² I probably misuse the term, but it is some kind of transformation or chrysalis that happens at intervals for churches as they again discover the language of the “receptor culture?” At once it is not tied to the language and it is not possible without it. I feel that this is the place where Grace is now: the right model at the right time.

It is the adoption a language that at once is polluted with societal mores and attitudes and even scientific assumptions that is transcended and used to share truth. I am not so sure that it is pearls before swine. For me at least, I feel like swine who has been given pearls. Here we are embedded in this culture and submerged in myriad media and our fluency lies not in reading and proper language. The culture has even discarded the conceptions of right and wrong grammar, and proper language in daily interactions. These carry little import. The authentic message is more vital than the oration. It is a cry against sophistry that unites the culture. It is not words for the sake of words, the culture seeks underlying meaning. But isn't this the language of post-modernism, that we—who desire to throw off the deism of the scientific method—embrace as a discourse and vehicle that is far more useful than the formalism that Locke and even Darwin entertained? While David Lindrum voiced the our common desire for rules and lists that might make Christianity a code one could master like HTML, instead it is relative with a submerged and miraculous foundation that we don't get to fully uncover. We may believe in an ultimate truth, but for now we can take comfort in the fact that we see through a glass darkly³. Supplied with no absolutes in our schools our non-scientific, non-academic, and non-rooted culture is searching for something that does not smack of hypocrisy. They will even welcome the answer that the entire answer is not fully known. As a matter of fact, most in our culture are too skeptical to listen o anyone who says that he or she has it all figured out. But still,

² p.6 bottom of the page

³ I Cor. 13:10

this is a generation that is looking for truth. The only way that it is capable of hearing it is through the language that they know.

So what of manipulation? No easy answers really. While I could say that any authentic and persuasive techniques we employ in the language of the culture are in bounds, especially if we do it for the greater good, I don't feel that it is ever that cut and dried. *Again, as a product of post-modern education, it is always dependent on some other variable.* We can be intentional about our behavior and our words to influence and persuade others. We may do this individually or corporately. We may adopt a language that is consciously appropriate to some individual or target audience. This may seem as phony as preaching in response to focus groups. But the concept of witness is the overriding consideration. If what we say and do is truly in keeping with our heart and our beliefs, and we are phrasing it in the language and the context that those listening, then this is what Newbigin was describing. We can as a church and as individuals cast off the verbiage that attaches us to a denomination,⁴ and we focus on the missionary encounter with our culture.⁵ I feel that the message is manipulation insofar as it is not truly the heart of those speaking the words, doing the dance, painting the picture, building the website. It is manipulative when we leave out the doubt, when we say we have all the answers, when we cease to question ourselves in the doing. This is authentic Christianity. I will not say that it is without hypocrisy because as Paul says, what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I."⁶ We screw up. We say things and do things that are contrary to our heart. But most times I think that we know our heart. As we minister in services, individually or wherever, if the message and medium are being selected with the recipient in mind and our conscience in heart, I think that we take steps to parsing relevance from ritual and parsing and habit from conviction.

I will close with a final thing that I take away from Newbigin that Dave shared in closing. Speaking of our mission to our own culture, and the church as a whole he states that these efforts "...are not the product of some human heroism. They are the spontaneous overflow of a community of praise. They are the radiance of a supernatural reality."⁷

⁴ p.144 Point four, where he references denominationalism as a moral failure of Christianity. Point being that the rituals and phrases of the group supercede the heart of the Gospel.

⁵ P. 141 his third point as he references a declericalized theology, which we see as authentic message.

⁶ Romans 7:14

⁷ p. 149 Point 7