



The Power of Words in the World

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You know the quote, right? “Preach ceaselessly. If necessary, use words.” Or something like that. Attributed to St. Francis. Who didn’t actually say it, even in proto-Italian. It is one of a whole series of beloved quotes attributed to people who didn’t say them. Martin Luther and the apple tree, or...was it the pear tree? George Washington and the cherry tree. We hear them in sermons, read them in church newsletters, see them on banners proclaiming our brand. They have made it into our cultural parlance as commonly-agreed-upon wisdom.

Much has changed in the thirty-five years since *Word & World* was founded in 1981. For one thing, technology has changed how we look up quotes, how we prove or disprove facts, how we share information. Information technology fundamentally changes how we use words. Thanks to computers we can look up any quote, seek out a synonym, send a message to a million people in the blink of an eye, answer a message from across the globe, all in less time than it would take to leaf through a dictionary, address an envelope, find a stamp. We share words with one another on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. We communicate by texting, emailing, instant messaging, as well. I don’t think that we have begun to realize the implications of technology and social media.

In addition, the meanings of words themselves have changed. When Thomas

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Friedman wrote *The World is Flat* in 2005, he changed the meaning of the word “flat.” Despite his provocative title, Friedman is not claiming that science is wrong, and that Ferdinand Magellan did not circumnavigate the globe. Rather he is claiming that globalization has “flattened” the world, levelling the playing field. This flattening can be for good or for ill. Now anyone with a cell phone anywhere in the world can set up a business without overhead, without staff, with just the phone, and some ingenuity. And anybody with a computer can produce a bomb. The flat world has great potential for good and great potential for harm. The point is, the world is no longer the same. Friedman writes:

If I am right about the flattening of the world, it will be remembered as one of those fundamental changes—like the rise of the nation-state, or the Industrial Revolution—each of which, in its day...produced changes in the role of individuals, the role and form of governments, the way we innovated, the way we conducted business, the role of women, the way we fought wars, the way we educated ourselves, the way religion responded, the way art was expressed, the way science and research were conducted, not to mention the political labels we assigned to ourselves and our opponents.¹

The world may well be flat, but our language has responded in ways anything but. In what follows, I want to consider some of the new shapes our words have taken, even as the world has been flattened—or, perhaps, transformed.

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WORDS THAT HAVE SHAPED THE WORLD SINCE 1981

In 1981, Iran released the American embassy hostages, who had been held captive for over 400 days. Tensions remained high between the United States and Iran. Words were hurled like weapons. “The Great Satan,” was one of the enduring epithets that Iran used for the United States. We had our own response. Ronald Reagan was elected president. Among his famous words were, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” concerning the Berlin wall.

Words that are harbingers of peace to some are threats to others. In 1981, three years after Jimmy Carter’s diplomatic coup in the Camp David Accords, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was killed because of his role in seeking peace through words. The same would happen to Yitzhak Rabin fourteen years later.

The proposed Equal Rights Amendment was promise to some, threat to others. It contained very few words. “Equality of rights under the law shall not be de-

¹Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2005) 45–46.

nied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” (The ratification period expired in 1982.)

The meaning of words changes. In 1981, Isis was the name of an ancient Egyptian goddess. Just a word. Nothing else.

In 1981, the AIDS virus was identified. Ronald Reagan refused to mention it in public for another four years. AIDS was too dangerous a word to speak. For those suffering from AIDS, speaking about their condition could lead to alienation, estrangement, fear. And yet words were also vital in the fight against AIDS: in the words of ACT UP, formed in 1987, “Silence = Death.”

The world has changed since 1981. In the United States we have had our first baby boomer presidents, our first African American president. And as of this writing, the election of 2016 has not yet happened, but it is undoubtedly going to produce another first, of one kind or another. The House and the Senate have switched sides more than once, and the government has been shut down more than once. We’ve watched it on television. We’ve read the tweets, the blogs, the posts. In thirty-five years the world has changed, the words have changed, and the way we use words has changed as well.

WORDS THAT HAVE SHAPED THE CHURCH SINCE 1981

Words in worship:

In 1981, Lutheran churches in the US were getting accustomed to the *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)*, an effort of the several church bodies that later came together to form the ELCA. It was a step towards the eventual merger. The team putting together the hymnal were faced with huge issues with regard to words. Would old favorites use traditional language or more contemporary? What about translations? Who would translate them and which version would be used? What about the Lord’s Prayer? What version would prevail? What about inclusive language? For people? For God? Different choices bring relief to some, grief to others. The words we use for worship are powerful and significant. Martin Luther, in his preface to the *Small Catechism*, itself a collection of words, cautioned people to find a version and stick with it.

In the first place, the preacher should above all take care to avoid changes or variations in the text and version of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the sacraments, etc., but instead adopt a single version, stick with it, and always use the same one year after year. For the young and the unlettered people must be taught with a single, fixed text and version. Otherwise, if someone teaches now one way and another way next year—even for the sake of making improvements—the people become quite easily confused, and all the time and effort will go for naught.²

I must confess that even after almost three decades of *LBW* (I began ministry

²Martin Luther, “Preface to the Small Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 348.

just as it was published), and a decade of *ELW* (the next worship book produced by the ELCA), the translations that come to me automatically are from my childhood. Without a book in front of me I am not sure which version I am reciting.

“You changed the Lord’s Prayer.” And, oddly enough, despite the anger and hostility, I understood. His grief was deep, and he was lashing out. Words matter.

I got a sense of this when I was visiting with congregations about the ELCA’s adoption of the *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust Social Statement*, and our decision to lift the restrictions on clergy in same-sex relationships. As happened in every forum, a man stood up and shouted to the crowd that the ELCA was not taking the Bible seriously. We were not heeding to the word of God. And everybody pretty much nodded in agreement. No discussion of context, of interpretation, of translation. And then the man went on. Pointing a finger at me, he lowered his voice to almost a whisper as he spat out his final accusation. “And you changed the Lord’s Prayer.” In the end, that was what convicted me as a representative of the denomination. “You changed the Lord’s Prayer.” And, oddly enough, despite the anger and hostility, I understood. His grief was deep, and he was lashing out. Words matter.

Words in church governance:

In 1981 Luther-Northwestern and Luther were not yet fully merged. The Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches were separate churches, although working together cooperatively. Women’s ordination was still eleven years new. Seminaries were beginning to attract women as students. Lutheran faculty numbers were perilously low when it came to women and people of color.

In 1988, the three churches in conversation with one another merged to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with sixty-five synods and a church-wide office in Chicago.

Gender parity for the first time was put into words in the ELCA, as was a commitment to racial and ethnic diversity. The predominately white church’s stated goal was within ten years to have the membership be ten percent people of color and language other than English.

It shall be a goal of this church that within 10 years of its establishment its membership shall include at least 10 percent people of color and/or primary language other than English. (ELCA Constitution 5.01.A.87)

Twenty-eight years later the ELCA still languishes as one of the least ethnically diverse denominations in the United States, despite growing diversity in the population at large. A nonnegotiable for the new church that remains today is the commitment to lay leadership. The vice president of the ELCA (and of each synod) is a layperson, by constitution. And every board and committee in the governance

structure is mandated to be at least sixty percent lay, with as close a balance between male and female as mathematically possible.

The parties to the merger brought their histories—relationships with other denominations, and social statements, as well as pension plans, publishing priorities, and global alliances. The early years were a great sorting out of what would stay and what would go, how this merged household would function internally, and in relation to others. The choice of words was fraught: *Synod* not *District*, *Bishop* not *President*, *Voting Member* not *Delegate*, *Associate in Ministry* not *Deacon*, *Assembly* not *Convention*.

The merged church joined the National Council of Churches in the USA, and the World Council of Churches, along with the Lutheran World Federation. The ELCA began to craft social statements and to work towards strong ecumenical relationships in the form of full communion partners.

Words outside the ELCA:

In the religious world outside the ELCA, Loren Mead published *The Once and Future Church* in 1991, an instant sensation, describing the end of Christendom. For some readers it was obvious—the phenomenon had been ongoing on the coasts. For others it was a wake-up call for the future. Still others pooh-pooed it as gloom and doom. But people read it and talked about it. Mead wrote:

The much documented collapse of mainline religion was most visible as a collapse of denominational structures and agencies that themselves were born mostly in this century. The structure of agencies, boards, and commissions invented by the American religious denominations in the first half of the 20th century was the last flowering of a great and creative age when the churches were powered by a strong, clear, uniform paradigm of mission. The rich variety of national and regional church structures developed by 1960 were supported because thousands of local congregations knew in their bones that that was the way to support the mission that had been laid upon the church.³

People were still buying books from bookstores then, and from mail order catalogues. No one was yet reading books online or on a personal electronic device.

Two years later Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter published *The Culture of Disbelief*, in which he explored the trivialization of religion of all stripes by American law and politics. He wrote: “In our sensible zeal to keep religion from dominating our politics, we have created a political and legal culture that presses the religiously faithful to be other than themselves, to act publicly, and sometimes privately as well, as though their faith does not matter to them.”⁴

The same year, Harvard professor of comparative religions Diana Eck wrote *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares*.⁵ In it she writes

³Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Durham, NC: Alban Institute, 1991) 3.

⁴Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993) 3.

⁵Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

about the challenge that religious diversity creates for people in all traditions. She outlines three approaches to the challenge: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Her follow-up book in 2001 describes the reality of American religious diversity with the title: *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation.*” She writes:

Religion is never a finished product, packaged, delivered, and passed intact from generation to generation. There are some in every religious tradition who think of their religion that way, insisting it is all contained in the sacred texts, doctrines, and rituals they themselves know and cherish. But even the most modest journey through history proves them wrong.⁶

Diversity is the new reality. Once upon a time, *Protestant, Catholic and Jew*,⁷ the definitive work of American religious sociology by Will Herberg, defined the religious scene in the United States. But it is no longer even remotely accurate. The founding leaders of the ELCA grew up in the era Herberg describes. We are not there anymore. The ELCA came into being in the United States when there was simultaneously a weakening of religious loyalties and traditions and an exponential increase in the varieties of religious traditions.

We are a church that values words as a way to approach the world. Strong on history and tradition, we lead with our theology when we engage others.

We are a church that values words as a way to approach the world. Strong on history and tradition, we lead with our theology when we engage others. There isn’t a problem we won’t face with the appointment of a task force, whose mandate it is to write a report. We take words very seriously as a church. All of our Social Statements (twelve) and all of our Social Messages (thirteen) are rooted in scripture and Lutheran theology. We use words both to define and to change our understandings.

We take a similar approach to our full communion agreements. Rooted in scripture and theology, the “Formula of Agreement” with the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, and the Reformed Church in America was carefully crafted with words that everyone could agree to. Next was “Called to Common Mission” with the Episcopal Church. Even the opposition called itself “Word Alone.” The agreement with the Moravians followed and, most recently, the United Methodist Church. As Lutherans we enter into these relationships very carefully. We have been engaged in “dialogues” with the Roman Catholics for five decades, and also with the Orthodox Church of America. With others we are in

⁶Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) 9.

⁷Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

“conversation.” Each of these words has specific meaning, specific implications. Words matter to us.

Words outside the church as we know it:

An increasing number of Americans are disconnected with religion, and have no familiarity with the words we use to address the world. The ELCA is no different from other mainline denominations in losing members steadily since 1988. The statistics are grim. From 1990 to 2014, the ELCA went from 5.2 million members to 3.7 million. It is a pattern that is repeated in other denominations. Although a substantial majority of Americans say they believe in God, that belief is not reflected in regular attendance in Lutheran or any other houses of worship. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, authors of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, have coined the term “religious liminals” for those who are “not entirely in and not entirely out.”⁸

New terms are being used to describe a growing population: “nones” and “dones.” “Nones” are people who express no religious preference at all. “Dones” are people who once had a preference, possibly even active participation, but have left it behind. But what is interesting about these clever terms (particularly “nones,” because it sounds just like “nuns”) is that these are terms insiders use for outsiders. People out there on the street who are thinking about family, job, recreation, politics, finances, sports, movies, education do not think of themselves as “nones” or “dones.” That’s our insider label. How unimaginative! How stuffy and rude!

It shows a lack of imagination and a lack of compassion to describe people by what they are not. And yet we do it all the time. While I am not a Mormon, I would not appreciate being called a “non-Mormon.” While the University of Montana is not a Lutheran institution, it is incredibly narrow to describe it as a “non-Lutheran school.” By defining people (or institutions) by how they are not like us, we demonstrate arrogance and shortsightedness.

The world needs the Word, now more than ever. But we, the established churches, seem to have surrounded ourselves with structures and language that isolate us from the very world that God so loves, structures and language that baffle, bore, and alienate much of the world today. Are we willing to change? Are we willing to learn? Are we willing to listen?

Let’s listen to the words of a generation younger than most of us in church and hear the words that so deeply connect people to the world. The first is “authenticity.” You hear it as young adults pick among the political candidates. You hear it as people meet other people of faith. You hear it as “newcomers” read the “All are welcome” sign and then experience something quite different.

Another word that comes up regularly is “community.” Community provides protection and identity, support, and boundaries. Large churches struggle to

⁸Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010) 136.

provide community in the midst of a huge institution with many people. Small churches struggle to differentiate between open community and a closed system that is not accessible to outsiders. But the fastest growing communities are online communities. How do we live into that reality?

Yet another word that peppers the vocabulary of young adults is “service.” Whether it is a basic human impulse, a longing leftover from the days when just about everyone was involved religiously, helping others is a deep need in American culture. Colleges have service requirements to graduate. Young adults are increasingly drawn to opportunities to do explicit service—Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, Teach for America, and various church-related opportunities ranging from Young Adults in Global Mission to the Lutheran or Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Service is a word that connects us to the world.

Authenticity, community, and service. These are words that connect a large portion of young adults to the world, words that are not in the vocabulary of our founding documents as an ELCA. I checked. Authenticity never appears in the Bible. Community appears fewer than twenty times. Service shows up more frequently, often referring to military or temple duty. They are not in our constitutions, nor do they form the core of the Lutheran Confessions.

Authenticity, community, and service. They may not be the words of a generation ago. But the concepts come straight from Jesus, the Word made flesh, living among us. As Christians we believe in an incarnate Word, the Word made flesh, dwelling among us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

We believe that that Word, that Logos, that Son came among us because of God’s overwhelming love for the world.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Word and world are inseparable. God’s incarnate Word is in the world, dwelling among us and in us. God’s incarnate Word shapes our words as we live in this world where God has placed us, even in the midst of all its changes. Especially in the midst of all its changes. And this Word is what give us faith, hope, and love to serve the world—right here and right now—words and all. ☩

Spoken Words : The Power Of Words In The World. 1014 Words | 5 Pages. Spoken Words.Â The Power of a Word A single word can be used to belittle, hurt, and humiliate. One word can cause so much hurt to a person that they burst into tears or spiral down into a damaging hole that they can 't get out of for an extended amount of time. Throughout history, names have been used to keep a population in its place. The Power of The Written Word. â€œThe pen is mightier than the sword.â€ Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Words have the power to change minds and evict emotion. In their book, Words Can Change Your Brain, Andrew Newberg, MD, and Mark Robert Waldman write: â€œa single word has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress.â€ What they are trying to say is that the words you use and the words you read affect your emotional state.Â Anger and fear can cause irrational and split-second decisions. This emotion has a huge bearing on how we operate in the world. According to Fast Company, anger â€œdrives you to pick long shots over [a] safe bet, succumb to stereotypes, and makes you less willing to listen to advice.â€ Words have power so what top Bible verses are written that talk about the power of words? The Power of the Tongue James 3:5b-8 â€œHow great a forest is set.Â Patheos Explore the world's faith through different perspectives on religion and spirituality! Patheos has the views of the prevalent religions and spiritualities of the world. Words have power so what top Bible verses are written that talk about the power of words? The Power of the Tongue. James 3:5b-8 â€œHow great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.