Every Tribe and Tongue: A Biblical Vision for Language in Society

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A Biblical Vision for Language in Society

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Introduction

Why Don’t They All Just Speak English?

That was the question a woman asked Michael in church recently. He was giving a presentation in a church about teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) as a ministry, a way to reach out to the neighboring community that was predominantly Hispanic. He explained that an ESL ministry could build bridges into the community in order to minister to their needs. Then he said that it would also be great for the church to have “Spanish as a Second Language” classes so that the English congregation could reach out to Spanish speakers in their own language. The response he received from one church member caught him a bit off guard. During the question-and-answer time she challenged him as to why the church should not just “teach them all English” since “they are here in the U.S.” The idea of using Spanish was out of the question; in her mind it was only logical or right to use English in that church.

Why don’t they all just speak English? The question reverberates throughout the United States, publicly shouted or quietly wondered. Americans who struggle to understand the server at the fast food restaurant, the tech support person taking a customer service call in another country, or a bilingual sign at the doctor’s office, may get frustrated by linguistic differences. Wouldn’t it be easier if we all spoke the same language? Isn’t refusing to speak English, or failing to speak it well, even a subtle form of disloyalty to America, a lack of solidarity with other Americans? Sometimes, no doubt, some of this frustration is tinged with racial prejudice. Other times, it may purely be irritation with miscommunication.

The pressing issue of Latin American immigration to the United States makes this kind of frustration more than just occasional and anecdotal. Americans hear and read about in the media and discuss with each other the ways the U.S. government is, and should be, responding to the waves of immigrants seeking to live in America—including those
who bypass legal processes and enter the country as undocumented workers. Presidential races and congressional legislation puts questions of immigration front and center, and our leaders take an urgent interest in how we as citizens feel about these issues. Christian engagement in public discourse in America must address these issues head on and therefore cannot avoid these contentious debates.

The problem is, Christians tend to get very little guidance about how to respond to issues related to immigration—both the small-scale cross-cultural encounters at the fast food restaurant and the larger-scale political debate. Some churches boldly take political sides, other churches may try to distance themselves from all such controversy, but in neither case are they helping Christians to bring deeply biblical discernment to their public citizenship. Indeed, since the Bible apparently seems to say little, if anything, about these issues, some Christians might not see the need to make such a connection.

We offer this book as a way, first, to rediscover biblical stories and principles that relate to questions about immigration and societal multilingualism; and second, to outline possible ways to guide thoughtful engagement in the discourse of the “public square” based on this biblical witness. We will try to show that, far from being an afterthought in the Bible, the call to love our neighbors and to gather people of every nation in the worship of God is at the very core of the gospel message.

We write this book out of two powerful passions: first, a deeply-rooted love of God’s gift of language to human beings, and second, a determination that the North American church take seriously its charge not simply to love the “stranger and alien” but to live as “strangers and aliens” within the American nation to which it has been called to witness.

We each love language and love linguistics—the academic study of language. However, we also each fear that when many American Christians enter public conversations about policies regarding language and immigration, they place their American national identity ahead of their kingdom citizenship. Tacitly or deliberately, American Christians often accept the assumptions that their own culture is the “norm” and other cultures are “different” (and the importance of this norm is surprisingly high in a land that prides itself on opportunity for all, in which most native-born citizens are only a few generations removed from their own ancestors’ immigration).
We stress that we are not interested merely in a Christianized form of "political correctness." We welcome calls for "celebrating diversity" and "practicing tolerance" in America, but we refuse to leave it at that. We are not called to "tolerate" others, but to love and embrace others as neighbors, and thus as ourselves. And more profoundly, we are called to see ourselves "as aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Pet 2:11). Moses tells the Israelites in Deut 10:19, "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Our treatment of the "strangers" among us must be deeply rooted in the reality that we, too, are strangers whom God has embraced as his own.
God's creation began with language. "Then God said . . ." we read in Genesis 1. God said. And it happened; God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Of all the ways God could have caused creation to happen, Scripture tells us that God, in some mysterious way, used speech.

Language, it seems from Scripture, is integral to the act of creation, and integral to who God is. God speaks, God acts, and creation bursts forth. God's word, and words, goes out into all creation, and creation becomes a beautiful echo of his good words.

God's word went out, Genesis says, over the "formless void and [the] darkness [that] covered the face of the deep." God's creative speech results in the opposite of chaos; creation turns chaos into order, formlessness into beauty, darkness into light. God's word thunders over the chaotic void, and creation blossoms. God creates by speaking beauty into the chaos.

From the beginning, then, God's word has brought the universe to order and goodness. Instead of a "formless void," there is a beautifully formed world. Instead of chaos, there is beauty—and all because "God said."

"By God's speech that which did not exist comes into being," writes Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Genesis. "The way of God with his world is the way of language. God speaks something new that never was before."

God created the world by his dabar, his word. The Hebrew word dabar can mean both "word" and "thing." The ambiguity suggests a connection, and there is one: God's dabar creates a dabar; his word creates a thing. We heard a rabbi recently say that he tries to remember this double

meaning as he looks around at God's world. “I see things in creation and try to think of them not as things, but as God’s spoken words. I see a bird and I think, ‘there’s God’s spoken word.’”

Then, as God's finishing touch on creation, God says, “let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,” in order to help watch over the world. Not because God can't handle the job without humans, but because God delights in creating creatures who are stamped with his likeness. He walked with them, and he talked with them.

“It is not surprising that God, who is ‘far beyond what we can ask or think’ should deal with us by means of language,” Eugene Peterson writes. “God speaks. For Christians, basic spirituality is not only a noun, God, but also a verb, Said (or Says).”

And the first thing these image-bearers are asked to do is to speak. Speak words, speak truth, assign linguistic units and meaning to the reality of God's creation. “The Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.” The first body part human beings are on record as using is the tongue.

To this day, humans are called to speak beauty into the chaos. Where herds of unclassified animals roam or fly, humans speak order into the anonymity. Where our tongues would be tied for lack of a linguistic symbol to use, humans make a system of symbolic communication. Every name, every term, every vocabulary word and function word in every language ever used by humans, has been merely a continuation of this naming act that we were created for. “Just as Adam named the creatures in the Garden of Eden, we define ideas and objects by using vast vocabularies of verbal and nonverbal symbols that subtly represent (or misrepresent) the reality of God’s world,” says Quentin Schultze.

God spoke beauty into the chaos, spoke humans into existence, and immediately seemed to say, “now keep it going.” Keep speaking beauty into the chaos. “God created us to be stewards of symbolic reality,” writes Schultze. As Stephen Webb states:

2. Peterson, Subversive Spirituality, 23.
4. Ibid., 21.
We can add our voices to the divine harmony because we were created in God's image. Theologically construed, speaking is not a trait projected upon God by analogy to human experience. We do not speak first and then think about God as speaking too. On the contrary, we can speak only because God created us to be hearers of God's Word. We are created in God's image, but that image is more like an echo than a mirror. God spoke us into being so that we too might have the joy of sharing in the spoken Word.5

God created us for language, but not for any one language. Rabbis used to muse that Hebrew was the perfect language, assuming that Adam and Eve spoke Hebrew in the Garden of Eden, and that Hebrew was the “one language” talked about in Genesis 11 before the Tower of Babel (for a different reading of this passage, see chapter 2). Hebrew was indeed used by God to speak with Israel, and its descendant, Aramaic, was used by Jesus during his life on earth. But beyond that, Hebrew is simply another language among languages. Any language can and does allow humans to employ their image-bearing linguistic ability. No language is better than any other at doing it. We should see language as a sacred gift from God, but should not see our native language, or your native language, or anyone's native language, as any more holy or blessed than any other. We will look at this more next chapter, but for now we can say: Language is a gift; a language is a tool.

Nor does this mean that a person must be able to speak in order to bear God's image, any more than it means someone must be able to see or walk in order to bear God's image, simply because that is how God created humans. All human beings bear the image of God. People with linguistic disabilities still communicate, still speak and proclaim (with hands, with faces, with machine devices), because humans are communicating beings, whatever their abilities. As James Vanden Bosch says, “Although language is a significant part of what it means to be human, it is not the essence of a person's value in God's eye, and therefore a Christian . . . must not undervalue humans who are without language or who experience language impairments or deficits.”6

Whatever their language, abilities, or personalities, humans are communicating beings. But humans are not talking robots, emitting whatever signals the programmer commands them to make. Instead,

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these image-bearing creatures are given a choice—keep on speaking beauty into the chaos, or instead, speak chaos into the beauty. God let the fate of the world, the future of his creation project, hinge on the words that humans would say next.

**SPEAKING CHAOS INTO THE BEAUTY**

Randall Dale Adams was on trial for the 1976 murder of a Dallas police officer. Two witnesses said they saw Adams pull the trigger. A third, a psychologist, testified that Adams would remain a threat to society unless he was given the death penalty. Adams was found guilty and sentenced to death.

Adams’ sentence was later commuted to life in prison on a technicality. But thirteen years later, the truth about the 1976 murder finally emerged: the two witnesses had lied in court. One of the witnesses, who had been released after he testified against Adams, probably committed the murder himself. That witness was later tried and executed for another murder.

With our ability to use language, we have great capacity to speak beauty into the chaos. But because of the effects of sin, we often do just the opposite; we speak chaos into the beauty. We have the opportunity to use our language to echo the truth, clarity, and goodness to God’s creation. But sin leads us to speak words that build lies, suspicion, pride, nationalism, and destruction in God’s world.

God created the good world by speaking words; the serpent brought ruin to creation by speaking words of his own. “Eat the fruit from that tree and you will be like God,” the serpent says to seduce Eve into sin. The words, and the actions they prompt, turn the beautiful garden into a house of lies.

Once the deceit and the defiant act it prompted has pumped chaos into the garden, the words and the lies keep flowing. “Did you eat that fruit?” God asks Adam, and he whimpers and says, “Eve—she made me do it.” “Is that true?” God asks Eve, and she says, “The serpent made me do it.” God asks direct questions, but the words pile up like sandbags, filled with denial, evasion, and blame.

Ever since, we humans have kept on piling up words that speak chaos into the beauty, and falsehood into the truth. “Our communication

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becomes a pervasive, destructive idolatry,” writes Quentin Schultze. “We spread distorted, selfish, and manipulative information. We lie, defame, verbally abuse, and gossip.” Our false and self-serving words go out into creation, and wherever they go, they spread the misery of sin.

The book of James does not underestimate the huge messes that we can make with our tongues:

The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. (James 3:5–9 TNIV)

Just as the tongue of the serpent was enough to start a wildfire of chaos in the Garden of Eden; we each can start raging fires of lies and pride with our tongues, our language-shapers. The tongue can fling out words of beauty or chaos. Often it opts for chaos. Maybe this is why James says earlier, in chapter 1, that we should be “quick to listen, slow to speak.”

The two witnesses against Randall Dale Adams created chaos with their tongues. They spoke false words that piled up to form an apparent mound of evidence that Adams had committed murder. The words of the psychologist who testified against Adams piled up to form a picture of Adams as a man who was unfit to live. The words filled that courtroom, filled the ears and minds of all who were listening, and after all the words had been spoken, a man was unjustly sentenced to death. The tongue was nearly an “on” switch for the electric chair.

Few of us, perhaps, will lie under oath in court, but we all seize opportunities to speak chaos into the beauty every single day. A boast, a half-truth, an evil silence, an excuse, a rumor, an outright lie—any of these can come rolling off our tongues at any time, because of the power of sin in us. We also feel the wounds of false words that have been uttered to us, about us, behind us, around us, and we suffer the pain of these words. No matter what language you speak, the words of your language contain the potential to speak beauty or to speak chaos.

8. Schultze, Communicating for Life, 75–76.
Into a world that was created good, created by God’s speaking beauty into chaos—into that world we now speak words of chaos every day, and the world groans under the weight of these words, groans—as Romans 8 says—to have the burden of these words lifted, and for beauty to re-emerge, to win out over chaos. What does the world need in order for that to happen?

**SPEAKING BEAUTY AGAIN INTO THE CHAOS**

In an unmistakable echo of Genesis 1 and its story of what happened “In the beginning,” John 1 ties the work of creation to God’s ultimate act of love: the Incarnation, when God took on human flesh. And the name of God’s incarnate presence is, unforgettably, *Logos,* “the Word.” Scholars have since made Hebrew translations of John, and the Hebrew word they use for *Logos* is *dabar.*

And the Word [*Logos, Dabar*] 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. . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

In the beginning, God’s word went out over the waters and birthed creation. Now God’s “Word,” God’s *dabar,* is birthed into creation as a human being, Jesus Christ, a person who uses human language and human languages to teach, to pray, and to cry, “It is finished!”

Before, God’s people were told to “hear” the word of the Lord, and “hear” meant not only to receive but to obey. When they failed, God asked, “are you really listening? Can you hear me?” The failure is not just moral, it is communicative—a crisis of blocking out the word of the Lord. God sends his prophets, who insist “hear the word of the Lord,” but the people’s ears are closed.

And so finally God sends his loudest message ever. He sends not just more words, but the Word. He no longer speaks through human leaders, he comes as a human leader to speak. And not just speak, also to “hear,” to obey, his own words of the law. The Word comes not only to speak but to *act,* to heal, to love, to weep, to touch, to throw tables, to bleed. Jesus was the only person who ever perfectly kept God’s commandments, and, paradoxically, the only one to be fully punished as though he didn’t. He came not only with a new sermon to preach (“you have heard . . . but I
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tell you”), but also came to live that sermon out by example. The way he lived seemed to say, or to suggest, “This is what it looks like to hear the word of the Lord.” This is beauty instead of chaos.

Of course, his own obedient living was not enough to make things right, to restore the dream of creation, to re-speak beauty into chaos. Christ came not just to try to resist the chaos to but to finish it off, to let beauty trump chaos for eternity. But re-establishing the beauty would happen in a descent into the darkest depths of chaos imaginable. In order to let chaos have its last, final, fullest gasp, before it collapsed into beauty for the rest of time. On the cross we see the apparent triumph of chaos, the apparent failure of God’s greatest attempt to speak beauty. The Word, for three days, is silenced. Before beauty wins—or maybe in order for beauty to win—beauty is first pushed to the brink of oblivion. The Word speaks in a dying sigh.

Then, in resurrection, the Word comes thundering out of the tomb, beauty is spoken back into chaos, and the creation dream is not only alive but it is eternally validated. The greatest hope of the “formless void” is dashed by God’s victorious Word. Jesus rises and greets his followers, and to prove to them it’s not just their imaginations, the first thing he does is to speak to them. “Mary,” he says, and Mary lunges for him in recognition. “Hi,” he says to his disciples, and they embrace him ecstatically. He says a blessing over the meal with the travelers from the road to Emmaus to show that once again, the Word has become flesh.

Only through the Word could the dream of speaking beauty become eternal reality—speaking beauty throughout creation, as far as chaos can reach. Christ’s redemption happened not only to restore human beings to dialogue with God—though it does, wonderfully, that too. Christ’s redemption happened for nothing less than to recapture the creation dream in all its cosmic scope, to speak beauty once again into the chaos, light into the darkness, as far as the skies stretch, wherever fish swim, grass sways, and creatures crawl. “Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross,” Paul says in Colossians 1.

In creation, God speaks beauty into chaos. In the Garden of Eden, humans speak chaos into the beauty. In Christ, God speaks beauty back into the chaos, once again, once and for all. And beauty becomes the language that will never be silenced.
To be transformed in Christ, then, is to be restored to dialogue with
God—back on speaking terms—and also to be brought back in to God’s
grand dream of speaking beauty back into the chaos. Every word we
speak, everything we do, everywhere we go in creation is a chance to
speak this same beauty, or more accurately, to have God speak beauty
through us. Every conversation, every task, every hour of work or play,
gives us a chance to join in God’s new creation project of speaking beauty
back into the chaos, and over the chaos forever.

Our words are like notes we play in a symphony, says Quentin
Schultze. “We enter the stage of God’s creation and make our music.
When we play well, in tune with our gifts and God’s score, the music is
magnificent. We pour spiritual life into a luscious creation. . . . On the
other hand, when we stubbornly write our own score, we orchestrate
dissonance, destruction, and despair.”

We play well, we speak beauty, not only in the truthfulness of our
speech, but in the joy and hope, the compassion and courage, of our
speech. And not only our speech but our actions—our “hearing” of God’s
word, and our living like Jesus did when God’s Word became flesh.

We can speak beauty through our truthful speech in courtrooms,
our loving speech in a talk with a friend, our mending speech in a con-
versation with an enemy. And we can speak beauty by listening to others’
speech, since speaking beauty happens only in dialogue.

“The fact is that all human communication depends on God’s
grace,” says Schultze. “First, our Creator has established the physical laws
of sound and sight that we need to communicate. Second, God goes a
step further, creating situations in which we can spread shalom even with
our imperfect talents. Third, our Creator grants each of us the gifts nec-
essary to communicate. In all these ways, grace arrests entropy [chaos]
and makes productive communication possible.”

Christ died for nothing less than for God’s good, loving communica-
tion to be restored—between humans and God, and between humans
and other humans. The Word became flesh so that God’s image-bearers
could once again join God in speaking beauty into the chaos, in speaking
light into the darkness. In our speech, in our actions, in our love, in our
courage, we speak either chaos or beauty, darkness or light, despair or
hope. In our language in the broadest sense—our shared communication

10. Ibid., 34.
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to deepen our understanding of each other, God, and creation—we, day by day, word by word, action by action, keep speaking chaos, or, through Christ the redeemer, we start to speak beauty again.