

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CONSIDERING THE ISSUE OF SAME-SEX BLESSINGS

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This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

In writing this paper I am assuming that the church is interested in how its language can help or hinder it in arriving at greater clarity regarding the general issue of the participation of gays and lesbians in the church. However, the goal of this paper is not to articulate “my answer,” much less “*the* answer.” I doubt that there is *one* answer that will solve the church’s political problem, much less its more important theological problem. Instead, I wish to point out some features of language and how we use it that can close down or open up possibilities for further discussion and engagement around the issues at hand.

While I think there are profound theological implications for the way we think about language (those who follow Luther would have to recognize, after all, that he is not just another theologian, but chiefly a theologian of the *Word*), I do not address those directly here, in part because I know systematic theologians are also writing essays for this study project. What I want to do instead is to lay out the elements of language that, in my view, any good theological, liturgical, and pastoral response would need to consider in order to be faithful and appropriate. I write, in other words, as a practical theologian of the Word who of necessity draws on elements of rhetoric and language, especially metaphors and symbols, to do his homiletical work. While I consider the theological task of chief importance, I think it important also to consider some aspects of language that I hope will help the church to come to some sound theological and political conclusions on a complex question.

My concerns about language in this regard can be summed up in three statements:

1. Language is always perspectival.
2. Language is not just about realities “out there” or express interior feelings “in here”; words actually *do* something.
3. Metaphors and symbols are more than ornamentation; rather, they structure the way we think and act.

1. Language is always perspectival.

There is no neutral place to stand with respect to language. While some students of language argue that all language is in fact arbitrary in the way it attaches meanings to signs (something “*is*” what people with power *say* it is), one does not need to accept their argumentation in order to recognize that the way we describe something already embodies a point of view. In speaking about homosexuality, whatever our stance, we embody a point of view and stake a claim. When a speaker, for example, talks about gays and lesbians as “those people,” the speaker actually adopts a distancing point of view—even though this may be different from his/her conscious intent. As a result, the church’s language about homosexuality and same-sex relationships and the way it addresses homosexual persons (“them” and “they” or “us” and “you”) is key. Such simple linguistic markers already signal perspective, regardless of our “intentions” prior to ever uttering a word. In fact, through our language we will often be saying more than we are aware we are saying.

2. Language neither merely refers to realities “out there” nor expresses only interior feelings “in here”; words actually *do* something.

Related to this is another key feature of language: it *does* things. On a day-to-day level, most of us assume one of the following two models of language.

The *objectivist model* of language argues that language is true to the extent that it “corresponds” to realities “out there.” If someone hears on the radio that the temperature outside is six degrees, he/she could check the veracity of the claim by consulting a properly calibrated thermometer. The goal of this model of language, therefore, is to describe accurately and objectively “things” that we see. The adequacy of this “out-there” model is measured by the accuracy of that description and the clarity with which it is communicated. Language is then only a husk for a kernel of truth that can be objectively known and encoded by a sender and unambiguously decoded (grasped) by a receiver.

The *expressivist model* of language takes an “in-here” point of view. It tends to view language as focused on internal, pre-linguistic realities: forms of feeling, subjectivity, and personal opinion. It is not inclined to make universal, objective statements about reality “out there”; in fact, it is somewhat suspicious of that possibility. Those who use this model will probably point out differences in points of view and leave it at that: “you see it your way and I see it my way.” In the end, this expressivist model uses language to bring to speech feelings and opinions, knowing full well that language is not fully adequate to the task. Its measure of truth is usually limited to assessing the sincerity of what is said. Language in this model does not help us to know more about the world “out there,” but it can give us a glimpse of the world inside “me.”

A third model, and the one I favour, tends to view language more *interactively and socially*. Language is not purely for describing realities “out there” (objectivist) or “in here” (expressivist); it is much more dynamic. Both of the previous models tend to view language as something we control. Although there is a measure of truth in this (language is, after all, a human construct), it does not explain or deal with the fact that language is also something we are

born into. In one sense, the language which we “construct” to describe things in the world or our inner feeling and opinions also acts back on its “constructors”—us, the speakers and writers. A child born into a rural environment, for example, receives a more extensive and varied vocabulary about farm animals and weather than a city child does. This in turn allows people in farming contexts to see things in nature or the weather that urbanites might otherwise miss. Similarly, a child born in the 1990s receives a vocabulary imbued with internet terminology like multiple “e-mail addresses,” “screen names,” and “aliases” that one born in the 1890s have scarcely imagined. As a result, he/she sees fluidities about identity and can act on them (imagine a student submitting homework with an e-mail address based on her real-world name then adopting a screen name like Marg Princess Warrior to play an online virtual reality game) that would have been foreign to a rugged, late nineteenth-century, self-possessed individualist. In other words, language shapes us and limits or open up possibilities of human action. As such, the relationship of language to action is much more complex than we usually realize. We often too facily set up “deeds” and “words” as opposites. In fact, they interact on one another. That interactive relationship to language first “conditions” us in the sense of limiting perspectives, but at the same time it also “liberates” us to conceive of how we might join in its ongoing construction. We do this practically all the time. The King James Version of the Bible quotes Jesus as saying “Suffer the little children...” (Mark 10:14). The older meaning of “suffer” in English was to “allow” or “let.” Today the meaning of “suffer” is more confined and decidedly negative. Modern translations therefore render the Greek word here as “Let”; even steadfast users of the King James Version likely mentally translate “suffer” to “let” when they read the passage. While the King James Version may condition us (or at least an older generation) to a particular linguistic heritage, it also opens up the possibility of human freedom in constructing language given the changed language world in which we find ourselves in comparison with that of the KJV translators.

Thanks be to God, we don’t have to treat our linguistic heritage as a straightjacket! Language changes, and human beings, though conditioned by their linguistic heritage, are always and everywhere about the task of changing it. In fact, our awareness of our conditionedness with respect to language should lead us to sober judgments about our perspectives, while our constructive role with respect to language should free us to speak with ever greater gospel freedom.

3. Metaphors and symbols are more than ornamentation; rather, they structure the way we think and act.

This idea really follows from the first two points. We often think that metaphors are our way of putting a difficult thought more simply (and expressively) as in “My feet are killing me.” But metaphors do more than simply communicate or “illustrate” or decorate a reality that already exists. Metaphors and symbolic language can render an idea as a kind of “given” and provide our language with symbolic depth. Preachers know this intuitively about the symbols and metaphors we use in the pulpit: cross, water, wine, bread are powerfully evocative. Yet no good preacher would ever use that symbolic language without asking whether its invocation was faithful to the gospel itself. For example, we are all repulsed by the flaming cross of the KKK—a usurpation of a powerful Christian symbol to intimidate racial or ethnic minorities. Now turn

and consider the metaphoric and symbolic language we use when discussing homosexuality. Chances are, we will draw from certain root metaphors: psychology, medicine, law, nature, etc. Is homosexuality a crime or perhaps a disease to be cured (sick)? Then these metaphors will shape our reaction to homosexual persons. Or, from the other point of view, is the *fear* of homosexuality a kind of mental malady (e.g., homophobia)? Then this will affect how we treat persons with a different point of view. When we use symbolic and metaphoric language, therefore, we cannot consider them apart from the way we act. In fact, as Christians it is our duty to consider such language in light of the gospel itself. When we use symbolic and metaphoric language we do more than dressing up an idea, we are making claims that shape perceptions and actions.

The upshot of all this is that the metaphors and symbols we use will affect us and how we act. Nations when going to war frequently use bestial, sub-human language to describe their enemies, “demonizing” them so as to make killing them more palatable. We who live in the shadow of the cross and in earshot of the resurrection would do well to think about how our words—better, the *Word*—might help us to speak one another into gospel freedom.