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Abstract

"I want words to open up the world, but these days words seem little more than weapons, heat seeking missiles which we can't wait to aim at the enemy."

Posting about the power of words to bless or curse from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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When Words Are Weapons: Inside a Crisis of Faith

Justin Bailey

Lately I've been having a crisis of faith. But I am not doubting the presence or goodness of God—what I am doubting is the power and goodness of words.

Let me explain: my work is words. Every day I wake up to pore over, prepare, and present words: words on a page, on a screen, and in the classroom. During most weeks, I take students on journeys through texts in search of understanding. Together we wrestle with words, process arguments, make claims, and try out new lines of thought.

But what I have begun to doubt—especially over the last six months—is whether words really matter...or at least whether they matter in the way I want them to. I want words to open up the world, but these days words seem little more than weapons, heat seeking missiles which we can't wait to aim at the enemy.

The state of our public discourse during the pandemic highlights the weaponization of words. I could write about this as a cultural malady, but I am most discouraged by what I see in the Church. If the last few months are any indication, rather than loving the truth, we are apathetic about whether our words have any correspondence to reality. Rather than loving our enemies, we are unrelenting in our suspicion towards them; indeed, we find foes where none exist. Rather than practicing patience, we prefer wild conspiracies to peer-reviewed studies.

The seduction of my fellow Christians by conspiracy-thinking has been massively disheartening. I have been horrified to see reasonable friends posting information that could be discredited by a simple internet search. But the internet is part of the problem. By "doing our own research," we can quickly find sources to support almost any opinion

we hold. When confronted with evidence that challenges our position, all we have to do is call the credibility of our opponent into question. C.S. Lewis called this intellectual habit *Bulverism*: “Assume that your opponent is wrong, and explain his error, and the world will be at your feet.”

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has helped me understand something of the psychology behind our Bulverism. In his excellent book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Haidt challenges what he calls the rationalist delusion: the idea that reason will save us. Reason, he argues, works less like a judge who impartially evaluates the evidence, and more like an attorney who seeks to defend the client, revise the data, and eliminate the distress. Our moral intuitions—our gut-level feelings about what is right and wrong—come first; reasoning follows to justify what we feel. One of these intuitions is the impulse to be loyal to our tribe. With great ingenuity, we can rationalize almost anything that supports our team. We can justify the unjustifiable.

One of the most intriguing studies that Haidt cites was conducted just prior to the 2004 presidential election. The researcher hooked 30 “highly partisan” Democrats and Republicans to an fMRI and watched their brain scans as they processed damaging information about their candidate. The researchers found that for subjects on both sides, the part of the brain used in conscious reasoning failed to activate, while the emotional centers—perceiving an attack—went into high gear. It seems that when unfavorable information arrives, we seek to resolve dissonance by defaulting to what we already believe. Our partisan biases become *calcified*.¹ When we feel threatened, we are almost unteachable, unable to glean anything from new information.

It is because of studies like this, along with a large body of experiential evidence, that I have begun to question my faith in words, in sustained argument, in Socratic dialogue, in long pieces of writing that lay out the evidence with scholarly citations—the bread and butter of my vocation. Perhaps these features only have purchase in scholarly circles. Then again, academics (and I include myself in this) are not immune to Bulverism. Our Bulverism is just more sophisticated.

Do words work? Do they really open up the world? Or are they really just weapons waiting to be aimed—shields for insiders and swords for outsiders?

I am still in the midst of this season of doubt, and with the presidential election a few months away, I am sure that my faith will continue to be tested. But I will share a bit of my efforts to move forward with humility and hope. I will provide two sources of each.

First, I find the account provided by Haidt (but hardly original to him) to be profoundly humbling. But my theology of pervasive depravity should not lead me to expect any less: human reasoning is not the solution; it is part of the problem. Let us take care lest we believe ourselves to have broken free from our double participation in finitude and fallenness.

Second, we don't need Haidt to convince us of our capacity for self-justification and self-congratulation. We have the book of Galatians.² It seems an irrefutable truth that we are looking for a verdict, for someone or some group to declare that we are righteous, in the right, or on the right side of history. This is why we need the gospel to continually expose all other sources of righteousness whereby we seek to set ourselves apart.

Those are my reasons for humility. What about reasons for hope? First, next to my doubts about words, I place a handful of what I can only describe as religious experiences with words: the way a line of poetry has lifted me into the heavens; the way a line of theology has broken me open. At a moment's notice, I could quote words that are never far from my mind, words that have opened up *my* world, at least. I could also add to this the experiences of students and friends, but that would be their story to tell.

Finally, I cling to the hope that words are more than weapons, because most Sundays I experience them another way. I stand up in a church to try to paint an alternative world out of words. I have doubts—sometimes very deep doubts—in the power of those words, too. What preacher does not? But the hope of preachers, in our best moments, is not in our own fluency. It is that God loves the world he has made and that he shows this love by speaking. Preaching is an exercise of leading people to listen for a word from God—a word that is more than a weapon—one that arrives to bless even as it breaks.

Maybe the moments when words do this are “a rare grace, never to be counted on to recur.”³ But to experience this grace just once is enough to help us keep walking, in hope that in the midst of weaponized words, it is still possible to see another world.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 101-103. See a theological discussion of this study in Joel Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008), 119.

2. Dave Zahl says something like this in a lecture titled, "Everything I Never Learned from Seinfeld"
3. J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories"