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God at Babel

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God at Babel

Abstract

"When we use words, we are functioning as image-bearers of God: we create sense out of the senseless, and we put form to the formless."

Posting about conveying meaning through words 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.

<https://inallthings.org/god-at-babel/>

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Comments

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God at Babel

Rose Postma

November 30, 2021

One of the first things I have my writing students do every semester is contemplate what it means to be a writer. But since most students equate writing with having books they've authored on the shelves of the public library, they don't consider themselves writers. I want my students to understand that whenever they type words into a document, create an Instagram caption, or jot down a grocery list, they are writing. Sometimes, I even have them send me photos of writing they encounter out in the world: a compelling description of a main dish on a restaurant menu, a well-crafted tweet, a memorable note from a dorm room white board. I do this because I want them to see how they are already participating in this discipline, how important every word they use is, and how they are always creating and conveying meaning.

I always point my students to the fact that the world itself begins with words. God takes *nothing* and makes it *something* using the tools of *our* trade. It's pretty much the best origin story of any academic department or discipline. When we use words, we are functioning as image-bearers of God: we create sense out of the senseless, and we put form to the formless. I tell my students that the Fall makes our job as writers even more important. Look at all the opportunities we have to participate in God's mission and to push back against the effects of the Fall. We revise and edit resumes and cover letters to assist people in getting jobs, we help navigate difficult situations by writing complaints to insurance companies and preparing statements for small claims court, and we draft Christmas letters that make our friends and families laugh and build relationships over the miles. It is easy to view writing as a select few creating *New York Times'* best sellers, but in fact, it is a job in which almost all of us participate daily. We take the tangled threads of confusion and misinformation, untangle them, then wind them up onto a neat spool before weaving them into a rich tapestry of meaning and clarity.

I believe all these things about words and creation and how we use language to push back against the effects of the Fall, but lately, it feels more like we are living at the Tower of Babel. While the people at Babel could point to an exact morning when everything shifted, when they stopped being able to communicate with their neighbor, when words seemed to stop working, I'm not exactly sure when it happened for me. But I know that by the time the pandemic started raging across the country in the Spring of 2020, the barriers to communication at Babel had taken root in my own life.

People I had long relationships with no longer seemed able to hear what I was saying. People I worked alongside in God's kingdom for most of my life no longer understood me—nor did they seem to *want* to. I don't feel like the language I was speaking changed. Something else happened. I tried to reframe, revise, rewrite, and find better sources, thinking those things might be what was getting in the way of my words. (It is important to note that I am not just talking about disagreement here—that is something altogether different. I'm used to disagreeing, used to a robust back and forth, even raised voices inflamed with passion over the dinner table. I am not used to not being heard.) I try to imagine my friends in other professions suddenly stymied...a carpenter waking up one morning to find that hammers and nails are no longer an effective way to join two pieces of wood; a computer programmer discovering that none of her tried and true codes work; a baker realizing that yeast cannot make bread rise.

I guess I thought that even if people I knew and loved disagreed with me, they would still be able to hear me and understand what I was trying to communicate. At one point during the pandemic, I shared my concern that Christians should be careful about getting sucked into conspiracy theories and was told in response to cool it on my pro-mask agenda (I had never even mentioned masks). I told a family member I was concerned about my kids' COVID exposures making her own children sick, and the response was that her vaccine status was private (I never asked about it). I told someone how much I had been hurt by fellow Christians over the last year, and the response was, "No, you weren't." I'm not sure how to respond to people who haven't truly heard me. Do I say it all over again? Say it louder and more emphatically? Find a different way to say it?

And I am not alone—just look at the pastors leaving their pulpits (many cite being unable to effectively communicate with their congregations), community members raging at school board meetings, or social media feeds filled with misconceptions, half-truths, and blatant mischaracterizations of others' words. A whole lot of us are living in Babel. We woke up one morning and set out to make sense of the world using our words like we always have, yet we found ourselves unable to communicate with our neighbor. I tell my students that when they disagree with someone, they need to (at the very least) be able to restate the other person's position to their satisfaction, and yet I have been in multiple meetings and conversations this past year where people are unable to even acknowledge someone else's position, let alone understand it well enough to articulate.

To say the least, it has been a disorienting year for those of us who work with words—which is to say, all of us. I've spent a lot of time over the last year and a half blaming myself for being unable to connect with people in a way that they could understand. Even trying to write this piece fills me with anxiety: How will it be received? Have I explained my thoughts well enough? What will people hear when they read this? James Schaap, in describing the difficulties of communicating in World War II Holland, says, "Words weren't meaningless, but neither were they worth their salt. Maybe prayer was the only place words meant what they were supposed to." And that seems true of 2021 as well. There is a lot of talk. I have done my fair share of it, and I've only felt like a small portion of what I said was actually heard. I find myself in this

tension between believing words are important and powerful, but also finding that many of my words aren't landing—and maybe they *can't*.

In *Telling The Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Buechner says that the natural state of the world is silence (after all, it is out of the silence that God speaks). He goes on to say that, as a general rule, humans are uncomfortable with silence. I wonder how comfortable we writers would have been in that pre-creation darkness and silence, where the spirit of God hovered over the waters. We have an anxiety to fill the world with words, an impulse to create and to make meaning. I know this anxiety well. There is the urgency that if I can just say the right thing, if I can just revise enough, if I can just use the right words, I can bridge the gulf between myself and the people around me. I can make the world right. I can weave those threads into a clear tapestry of communication. But Buechner hints at the fact that my words may be less important than I give them credit for. He says, “We put frames of words around silence and shells of stone and wood around emptiness, but it is the silence, the emptiness themselves that finally matter and out of which the Gospel comes as word.” I spend a lot of time and effort building those frames around silence, making sure every jot and tittle is right, determined that if I can just construct meaning, my words can have power. But God is in the in-between. God is in the silence. Even in those gaps of communication that I try to capture with my words, God is at work.

Here in Babel, I have been thinking a lot about how to speak, to be heard, and how to listen so others can speak. It's a lot of pressure on wordsmiths to think we can make sense of the world or bridge all these gaps between people. So, I have been spending more time in the silence Buechner speaks of, in the prayer Schaap talks about. I still think working with words is an important enterprise, and we all have opportunities to do our work for God's mission using words. But the truth doesn't depend on how well I say it; the truth doesn't depend on how well-trained or gifted I am as a writer. The truth was present in the silence before God spoke, and it will still be there when I am done attempting to make sense of it. When I am not being heard, when I am lost in Babel, desperately trying to figure out how to communicate with those around me, God is at work. I'll keep using words, recognizing that despite crumbling towers, God is always at work.

This essay is part of the Fall 2021 exploration of “Making Meaning” at Dordt. We reached out to writers in our community to explore and interact with how they create meaning through words. In a culture where words can be quickly weaponized, how do we explore the beauty, truth, and gift of words? This is part of an ongoing series where writers interact with words and delve into Making Meaning through their written voice.