



April 2006

Dear friend of MARS HILL AUDIO,

When I recently read Alan Jacobs's *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis*, I realized that decades of reading Lewis had conveyed more to me than I had known. Lewis is held in high esteem by millions of Christians for his ability to explain and defend basic Christian beliefs. What is less appreciated is the fact that Lewis also (and in a way that complements his more conventional role as an apologist) conveyed a view of culture in his work that went far beyond "mere Christianity." Let's call it "ramified Christianity."

Throughout Lewis's writings, there are ideas about time and history, about food and drink, about joy and sorrow, about friendship, love, and sex, that, when taken together, provide glimpses of healthy and well-ordered cultural life as Lewis believed it should be lived. Lewis knew that the Christian account of sin and grace was necessarily linked to the Christian account of human nature and the shape of human flourishing. And he was always concerned with living out the consequences of Christian belief, not simply in the cultivation of a theoretical worldview.

One way in which Lewis influenced me was in his attitude toward language. Occasionally he wrote about language very directly; his book *Studies in Words* is a delightful if sadly neglected contribution to understanding the broad sweep of certain cultural changes by examining the evolution of the meaning of certain words. In that book he admitted that self-consciousness about where our words have been is a mixed blessing, but it is finally and surely a blessing, not a curse. "Prolonged thought about the words which we ordinarily use to think with can produce a momentary aphasia. I think it is to be welcomed. It is well we should become aware of what we are doing when we speak, of the ancient, fragile, and (well used) immensely potent instrument that words are."

The idea that language is properly cherishable is something I think I acquired (subconsciously) from Lewis in my teens. And so all of my adult life I have been sympathetic to critics who express dismay (or worse) at sloppy linguistic habits, and equally attentive to those theologians who identify the highest source and possibilities for human speech.

Tied to both our rationality and our personality, language has long been regarded by theologians as an aspect of the image of God in which we are made. "God is a God who speaks," observed theologian Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "and his speaking is the declaration of his mind and his will. Creation itself is the effect of God's speaking." And this divine quality finds an echo in all of Creation, especially in the creature whose nature would in the fullness of time be assumed by the Logos Himself.

Adam's vocation is one of naming, of engaging the world with language and God's original and continual engagement with Creation is repeatedly identified in Scripture with the event of his speech. In Psalm 33, the creative power of God is honored:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host. . . .
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

In Psalm 50, God's providential care for Creation is summarized by acts of speech:

The Mighty One, God the Lord,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
Our God comes; he does not keep silence . . .

False gods, meanwhile, are identified (in Psalm 135 and elsewhere) by the fact that "they have mouths, but do not speak." False men and women are known by bad habits of speech as well, from blasphemy and lying to gossip and cursing, the evil fruit of what James calls an untamed tongue (James 3:1-12).

There are other habits of speech which may not create the sort of conflagrations suggested by James's imaginative description, but which nonetheless undermine the divinely appointed possibilities for speech. Lewis, for example, treasured the capacity of language to make distinctions, and believed that what Henry Fairlie once called the "slackening" of our speech was something to be lamented. "The language which can with the greatest ease make the finest and most numerous distinctions of meaning is the best," Lewis asserts in the Introduction to *Studies in Words*. This love of precision is not, I think, driven by pedantry, but by the desire to preserve the possibility of personality. It is not so much grammatical purity that we should preserve, but the capacity for richness and honesty which is perpetually under assault in a culture that is both utilitarian and sensationalistic. Language is inherently a distinguishing tool; it names different things differently. But when this ability is weakened, either through carelessness or through more sinister motives, this great gift of God for human life and delight is treated with contempt.

Lewis hated jargon, since it obscured both meaning and personality. Likewise W. H. Auden distinguished between the use of language to communicate mere information and "Speech [his initial capital] in the true sense, the medium in which, as unique persons who think in the first and second person singular, we gratuitously disclose ourselves to each other and share our experiences." Linguistic habits ruled by jargon and a fashionable carelessness make such disclosure (and its possible intimacies) less likely, and an essential setting for rich human encounter is surrendered.

Josef Pieper's little book *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* is a meditation on the preciousness and fragility of language. The framework for Pieper's reflection is a consideration of Plato's distrust of the Sophists, but it's obvious that the sentiments expressed are Pieper's own. Pieper states that "word and language form the medium that sustains the common existence of the human spirit as such. The reality of the word in eminent ways makes existential interaction happen. And so, if the word becomes corrupted, human existence itself will not remain unaffected and untainted."

Later, Pieper explains how corrupt speech can be so disordering. He begins by insisting that "All men are nurtured, first and foremost, by the truth, not only those who search for knowledge—the scientists and the philosophers. Everybody who yearns to live as a true human being depends on this nourishment. Even society as such is sustained by the truth publicly proclaimed and upheld."

Truth, in Pieper's description, is not so much a timeless abstraction as a living and dynamic presence, conveying reality to us. "The natural *habitat* of truth is found in interpersonal communication. Truth lives in dialogue, in discussion, in conversation—it resides, therefore, in language, in the word. Consequently, the well-ordered human existence, including especially its social dimension, is essentially based on the well-ordered language employed." Conversely, when language is no longer employed in the service of expressing reality, when language typically becomes a tool for manipulation or self-deception, community is destroyed. Corrupted habits of speech are finally dehumanizing.

Because the Church is the community of people whose humanity has been rescued from its self-destructive tendencies, the New Testament repeatedly calls believers to honor the contours of our created and redeemed nature. The ethics of the Kingdom do not call us to abandon our humanity, but to fulfill (in Christ) all of its capacities. Since we were made in the image of a God who is love, churches should strive to be communities known for the attributes of love spelled out in I Corinthians 13. (Perhaps we should stop reading this chapter at weddings and read it instead at the commencement of congregational meetings or church committees.) Since we were created to delight in the truth, local churches should be havens from whatever patterns of mendacity the world honors. And since we are made in the image of the Logos, created by a speaking God, surely Christians, of all people, should strive to display the best and brightest patterns of speech.

The MARS HILL AUDIO mission statement commits us "to produce creative audio resources that encourage Christians to grow in obedient wisdom concerning the cultural consequences of our duty to love God and neighbor." Let me suggest that one of the cultural consequences of those twin duties would be to love, honor, and cherish the gift of language. I realize that some people might think that this is a luxury, that only when we get the love and truth things fixed should we worry about something as the quality of our language. But I don't think they are really separable. Love and truth both require well-ordered speech. Worrying about our attitude toward language is not a distraction from "higher" goals, but a means whereby they can be fulfilled.

I have at least two things in mind when I think about the Church's care for speech. This first is the duty that we have to name things truthfully. This is what William Willimon has in mind in his book *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*. Willimon insists that one of the chief tasks of preaching is spiritual formation through believers being assimilated into the language of Scripture, to learn to name things the way the Scriptures do. But this doesn't happen very often:

Unfortunately, most of the theology I learned in seminary was in the translation mode. Take this biblical image and translate it into something more palatable to people who use Cuisinarts. The modern church has been willing to use everyone's language but its own. In conservative contexts, gospel speech is traded for dogmatic assertion and moralism, for self-help psychologies and narcotic mantras. In more liberal speech, talk tiptoes around the outrage of Christian discourse and ends up as an innocuous, though urbane, affirmation of the ruling order. Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved. . . . By the time most of us finish qualifying the scandal of Christian speech, very little can be said by the preacher that can't be heard elsewhere.

In addition to learning to name things as the Bible names them, the Church also has the opportunity to demonstrate the delightful and playful aspects of the gift of language. If we really believe that God is the kind of speaking Creator described in Scripture, if we really believe that speech has creative possibilities, then shouldn't Christian communities be places where one is most likely to be encouraged to enjoy the wonderful capacities of language? Shouldn't kids raised in churches be on average more likely to become poets than other kids? Shouldn't Christian folk be more tuned into the capacities of linguistic expression than those who have rejected the Word?

For thirteen years, MARS HILL AUDIO has been doing its small part in trying to improve the quality of Christian speech, speech that strives not to be sensationalistic and manipulative or sentimental and flattering, speech that seeks to honor truth and beauty. It is this sort of deliberateness in resisting the spirit of the age that I believe the Church needs to foster. It is disappointing that many Christian communicators seem to believe that the Church is "in the business" (mind that metaphor) either of stimulating consent to a short set of propositions about sin and salvation, or of encouraging a vaguely Jesus-ward arrangement of affections. The fact that the culture in which we live is systemically disordering our lives in thought, word, and deed may be recognized, but usually only very selectively. The pursuit of a richly ramified Christianity is rarely championed, and the specific problem of the disordering of our way with words seems to be pretty much ignored by Christian teachers and preachers.

We are, as I've noted, committed to encouraging wisdom, and the testimony of many sources suggests that our way with words has a deep but often unrecognized power for good or ill. I know that many of you appreciate the fact that MARS HILL AUDIO tries to encourage wisdom in some unpredictable ways. We can only continue that work with your help. As a small nonprofit organization, we rely on the generous support of listeners who share our concern for the opportunities of edification and delight when the Church is properly counter-cultural. Almost every day, we receive letters from people who have learned of the work of an unheralded writer, or been encouraged to examine more carefully some aspect of contemporary life, thanks to an interview on our *Journal* or in one of our other products. Those letters mean a lot to us; I hope they keep coming.

Please pray for our continued faithfulness. The work we do is both rewarding and exhausting, and it will only be sustained by God's strengthening power.

Finally, may I humbly request your financial generosity? Our financial condition is not as healthy as it has been previously at this point in the year, so if it is possible for you to consider a higher level of giving than in the past, we would be most grateful. And when you send a donation, please send along a note about the sorts of topics we treat that are of most interest to you.

Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers