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LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION, AND FAITH

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INTRODUCTION

"Our Father which art in heaven.... hallowed.. give...". These are familiar words. These are powerful words of a great prayer. As Christians we often use this prayer, but have we realized the three elements that ought to be understood to make this prayer meaningful? Language, communication, and faith. It takes all three to have relationships. Each is briefly defined as follows:

1. Language - The ability to communicate orally our thoughts and wishes.
2. Communication - The ability to send a message to another in order to receive a response.
3. Faith - The very core of existence and relationships.

This paper contends that there is a relationship between the three. It is language that enables us to communicate much of our faith. Without language faith could not be communicated. Faith relationships should be communicated with care, and the choice of words makes a world of difference.

LANGUAGE: THE TOOL OF COMMUNICATION

Language interacts with every other aspect of human life and it can be understood only if it is considered in relation to

society. Language is the personal property of every human being. Human society in its present form would be impossible without the use of language.

Origins of Language

One can debate the origin of language. Religion often describes how human language came about. Hindus suggest when Brahma, the creator of the universe asked his wife goddess Saraswati what gift she would desire the most, she chose the gift of education which required language. As a result, Brahma gave his people the Sanskrit language which Hindus consider as the oldest.

The Bible suggests that God created Adam and Ever with the ability to communicate with each other and God was also responsible for the origin of multiplicity of languages. Many definitions of language have been proposed. Edward Sapir describes thus:

Language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.¹

The U.S linguists, Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager formulated the following definitions in their outline of Linguistic analysis:

¹ Edward Sapir. Language. (Michigan: Harcourt: Braice and World, Inc., 1921) 30.

A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.²

Others have talked about language as a system of conventional vocal symbols by means of which human beings communicate. Thomas Pyles and John Alges define language as:

A system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate.³

From the above definitions we come to understand that language is a system. Language is conventional or arbitrary. Language is also made up of vocal symbols and most important of all language is for human communication.

Every normal person acquires in childhood the ability to make use of a system of vocal communication that comprises a cumbersome set to noises resulting from movements of certain organs within his throat and mouth. These organs are called the speech organs. By means of these the child is able to impart information, express feelings and emotions, influence the activities of others and to express varying degree of friendliness and hostility toward persons who make use of substantially the same set of noises.

The inability to use language is a matter of great concern. To be human, after all, is to be able to communicate. The greatest punishment that any human being can be given is the inability to use language. The human mind is bubbling with ideas

² Bernard Bloch & George L. Trager, Linguistic Analysis (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 170.

³ Thomas pyles & John Algeo, The Origin and Development of the English Language (Harcourt: Braice and World, Inc., 1921) 4.

that need to be shared with fellow human beings and this can be done only through language.

When people begin to reflect on language, its relation to thinking becomes a central concern. Several cultures have independently viewed the main functions of language as the expression of thought. Ancient Indian grammarians speak of the soul apprehending things with the intellect and inspiring the mind with a desire to speak, as Bloomfield puts it "Speech is the representation of the experiences of the mind"⁴

I would like for us to see what happens in a speech event. A speech event involves a series of operations. First of all an idea is born in the speaker's mind. This idea is then encoded into a language that the speaker knows. This encoded message is then transmitted by the speaker's nervous system to his/her speech organs. The speech organs are activated. The message is articulated by the speech organs which create disturbances in the air. The air carries these sounds in a wave-like motion. If the sounds reach on the eardrums of the receiver, his nervous system picks up the encoded message and transmits it to the brain of the listener. Here the message is decoded if the speaker and the listener share the same linguistic code (language).

The procedure is repeated hundreds and hundreds of times a day. But how often does one stop to think of it? Language is the second nature to a human being. To be human is to use

⁴ Leonard Bloomfield, Language (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas India Press, 1963), 78.

language. Therefore we use language without having to think much about it.

Learning a language comes almost as naturally as breathing or laughing for most children. A child is born with the ability of Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Linguists believe there is no language that is easier to learn than the other. All languages are made up of the same basic materials - sounds and meanings (expression and content).

COMMUNICATION

Language is the basic tool of communication. Man needs to communicate ideas, feelings, social situations and the like. We will look at two basic kinds of needs which force human beings to communicate.

Social needs: (man to man)

People are social beings as some scientists like to call them. As we are bound by a society in which we live, we need language to communicate (talk) with fellow beings about our needs, food, shelter, and clothing etc. Interaction with each other is essential for the existence of society. We are culturally bound. Language is transmitted culturally, and interestingly, culture is passed on through the use of language.

Spiritual need: (Human to God)

We are not satisfied with communicating only with our fellow human beings. We look to someone supernatural with whom

we want or long to communicate. This is where religion comes in. Every culture or society recognizes this supernatural - called God. This god, man calls by different names and comes in association with different religions. Man uses human language to communicate with this supernatural. The mode of communication may be invocation, chants, songs, prayers, and the like.

The Bible contains instances of this kind of communication. I am reminded of the prayer of David where he pleads with God: "Create in me a clean heart, oh Lord and renew a right spirit within me."⁵ The language used is powerful. Every religion has a specific way in which man can reach the divine. Language is not something to be taken lightly. By effective use of language man can make the divine happy, pleased and responsive in a positive way. The same language can, on the other hand, the divine displeasure. Hence the commandment, "Thou shall not take the name of God in vain."⁶ This goes to say that language is a powerful instrument in the hands of humankind, which we can use for our advantage or disadvantage.

One may ask -- can't communication take place without having to use "language"? To this we may say yes and no.

Yes, because one can communicate without the use of linguistic code (i.e language). Here we mean non-verbal communication: the use of gestures like shaking of one's head from side to side communicating a specific meaning, the waving of

5 Psalm 51 (KJV)

6 Exodus 20:7 (KJV)

hands, the clenching of the fist, the raising of the eyebrows, the biting of lips, the winking of the eye, the stumping of the feet and many other such actions. But gestures are very limited in what can be communicated. Moreover, gestures do not carry universal meaning. Shaking the head, for example may mean "YES" in one culture and "NO" in another. Other non-verbal means of communication includes: sign language such as use of flags, lights (traffic lights), use of drums, etc.

No, because the scope of such communication is limited. These are not as powerful and efficient as language is in terms of communication.

At this point I would like to make a mention of animal communication. Animals also communicate, but their communication is limited. For example, there is a particular way in which a dog barks when he is hungry, a different kind of bark when he needs his mate and so on. The bees perform a particular kind of dance to show or communicate about the availability of honey. Their communication is very basic. It centers around food, danger, mating etc.

But human communication based on language is highly systematized and needs a complex creature like the human being to use it. Language is very creative and powerful in human hands.

FAITH

Webster's new collegiate dictionary defines faith as "a firm belief in something for which there is no proof".⁷ I like the way he puts it. It talks about complete confidence. Faith is a firm belief -- a firm belief in the people you live and interact with, and a firm belief in the supernatural (i.e., God). When we say faith, we are talking about something for which we ask no proof. Faith is complex, but in concise terms, it represents a sense of personal meaning, life orientation or world view. Don C. Roy reflects the nature of faith in the following way:

- relationship with others (fellow human beings)
- one's understanding and sense of the supernatural
- one's relationship to the supernatural, and the level of trust, commitment and ethical and moral behaviour.⁸

The Holy Bible defines Faith thus: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."⁹ The entire chapter of Hebrews 11 expounds on what faith is all about. To have faith is not enough, we need to communicate this faith to others and to God.

⁷ Merriam Webster, Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1973), 208.

⁸ Don Roy, "Growing in Faith: A New Primary Bible Curriculum for Australia and New Zealand. A Paper Prepared for The Journal of Adventist Education to appear in 1999.

⁹ Hebrews 11:1 (NIV).

FAITH: A Relationship with Others

I have a son who is eleven months old. From the time he was born he has developed a certain amount of trust in me, because I am his mother. I am reminded of one particular incident. It was the time when he started walking. When I stretched my hands and gently beckoned him to come up to me, he would take a step or two, wait, look around, gather more courage and take a few more steps to reach me. If the same exercise was repeated with a stranger taking the place of his mother, he would not do it. At that stage the child could trust only his mother. Exchanges between parent and child are the basic lessons of emotional life. 10

Personal faith grows naturally when children gain knowledge.

As adults we know that we cannot live peacefully and happily unless we have and exercise faith. We cannot get into the plane unless we have faith that the plane will get us safely to our destination. Unless you trust the hostess, we cannot eat the food that is on the table. Unless you trust your doctor, you cannot lie down on the operation table. How many of us walk in the dark believing that the next step we take will land us on a snake? With that kind of attitude we would be the most miserable creatures living on the earth. Faith is absolutely necessary for peace of mind.

10 Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence (Sydney: Bantam Books, 1995), 87.

This faith that we have in one another is seen through our actions and words. Through words we communicate our faith to others. Language plays a powerful role in communicating our faith with others. The way we use language can enhance or destroy a person's trust in us or the opposite can also happen. It can destroy one's faith in others.

Language can be used powerfully to foster the growth of trust and belief. A story is told of a girl who was very pessimistic because of her childhood experiences, and refused to believe or trust anyone. But in the hands of a loving Christian teacher, who talked to her lovingly and with concern, things began to change. The girl was once again able to exercise faith because of the communication that the loving Christian teacher had exercised. Trust is probably the most essential element of faith. Trust is learnt to a large extent in personal relationships.

FAITH: A relationship with God (the Supernatural)

Gillespie describes faith as something that can include belief and trust in God, a knowledge of God's will and experience of God's presence or grace, power and beauty in one's life, letting go of self to see its object (Jesus).¹¹ God's gift that leads people to Him is a world-view which provides meaning,

¹¹ Bailey V. Gillespie, The Experience of Faith (Birmingham, Alabama Press, 1988), 107).

and a kind of glue in the relationship between people and their God.

The Bible is full of stories of how people exercised their faith in God. If it was not for the faith that Noah developed in his God through daily communion with Him, he would not have built the boat nor gone into it and waited for the flood to come. He waited for several days before the first drop of rain fell upon the face of the earth. And then it rained for 40 days and nights and the boat was upon the water, which had destroyed everything else on the earth. It was his implicit faith and his daily communion with God that saw him through. Noah's children and wife put their trust in God and were able to stay on board. Faith is a great experience of testing God's presence in one's life.

By faith Abraham, when he was asked to go, went out, not knowing where he was going. When God speaks we just obey. His language is compelling, for it moves us to action.

The story of Esther is another classic example of faith in God. Before she put her faith into action, Esther fasted and prayed to God. She communicated with God, day and night. At the end, her faith in God made her say the powerful words: "If I perish, I perish."¹² Her faith saved the entire Jewish nation. She communicated her faith in words.

What great faith the woman with the issue of blood had. In simple language she expressed her faith. She said that if only I

¹² Esther 4:16 (KJV)

could touch the hem of His garment, I will be made whole. Great faith! She was healed.

"I will arise and go..." were the words of the prodigal son. It must have taken great faith to believe that his father would accept him. He put his faith into action, and we know the rest of the story.

Language simple or profound, used at the right time, in the most appropriate way, communicates. It communicates our faith and trust in fellow human beings and God. Heaven rejoices when we communicate our faith in Jesus Christ and His saving blood.

APPLICATION

As we interact with students in the classroom, let us use the powerful tool of communication, i.e., language, to foster in our students the faith that we have in God. Let us reveal to them in ways simple and profound that God is real and can be trusted. Just as the faith of David, Noah, Abraham, the prodigal son and the woman was rewarded in the Bible times, so will our faith be rewarded by the same God even today.

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