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Miscellanea

Simplicity and Clearness of Language in the Presentation of Religious Truth

Books on the technique of literary composition and on public speaking demand that a writer or speaker use simple and clear language. "Good speech is direct, practical, and simple. . . . It is a well-known fact that modern speaking has turned its back on what had been called the 'exuberant rhetoric of the Ciceronian tradition.' . . . The sonorous platitudes and highly decorated passages of a few generations past survive only in political oratory of low degree and in some oratorical contests. . . . The truth is that great speakers in all ages have been relatively simple in their diction. The simplest, most ordinary words have a communication value which is much greater than that of unusual and bombastic ones." (*Principles of Effective Speaking*. By Sanford and Yeager. Pp. 220, 221.) "Words from the everyday vocabulary, simplicity and directness of phrase, a strong and pointed sentence structure, an ordering of parts made lucid by marked indications of plan and consecutiveness, reasoning where there is only one step from premise to conclusion and no solution is left obscure or in long suspense—these are the economizing agencies which adapt oratorical style to popular apprehension." (Genung, quoted by Winans in *Public Speaking*, p.163.) "Facts and ideas should be expressed as simply as possible. Pretentious style should be avoided. . . . Ideas must be expressed clearly and precisely; all vague or ambiguous constructions must be avoided." (*The Technique of Composition*. By Taft, McDermott, and Jensen. Pp. 291, 334.) "Just as there are three qualities of a good organization—unity, coherence, and emphasis—so there are three qualities of a good style—clearness, ease, and energy. We should employ the word, the phrase, and the sentence that will best serve these three qualities. For example, clearness is aided if we use familiar words; that is, words which are bearers of meaning for the audience." (*Public Speaking for College Students*. By Crocker. P.253.) "Avoid the use of lofty and high-sounding language to express simple thoughts." "It is the *homely* word, not the *learned* word, that goes straight to the imagination and the heart." (*Composition for College Students*. By Thomas, Manchester, and Scott. Pp. 540, 209.)

In this connection we may also be reminded that simplicity and harmony are the two qualities that make a thing beautiful, whether that be in a woman's manner of dressing, in the arrangement of a room in our home, or in a speech or a sermon.

Because of its importance, religious truth, and all that is connected therewith, should be presented in simple and clear language. If words are used that the common man does not understand, or if a matter is not clearly presented, one might just as well speak in a foreign tongue. "If I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me.

... In the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue," says Paul. (1 Cor. 14:11, 19.)

Speaking of the literary qualities of the King James Version of the Bible, McAfee says, "The first thing that attracts attention is its use of words, and since words lie at the root of all literature, it is worth while to stop for them for a moment. Two things are to be said about the words: first, that they are few; and, secondly, that they are short. The vocabulary of the English Bible is not an extensive one. . . . In the whole of the King James Version there are only about six thousand different words. . . . The words are short. . . . Short words are strong words. They have a snap and a grip to them that long words have not. Very few men would grow angry over having a statement called a 'prevarication' or 'a disingenuous entanglement of ideas,' but there is something about the word 'lie' that snaps in a man's face. 'Unjustifiable hypothecation' may be the same as stealing, but it would never excite one to be called 'an unjustifiable hypothecator' as it does to be called a thief. At the very foundation of the strength of the literature of the English Bible there lies this tendency to short, clear-cut words." (*The Greatest English Classic*, pp. 105, 106, 109.)

"Die vornehmste Frucht und Nutz der Dialectica ist, ein Ding fein rund, kurz und eigentlich definieren und beschreiben, was es gewisz ist. Darum soll man sich gewoehnen zu guten, rechtschaffenen, vernehmlichen Worten, die im gemeinen Brauch sind und ein Ding eigentlich und verstaendlich anzeigen und geben; welches eine sonderliche Gnade und Gabe Gottes ist, wer solches kann; denn viel Laduenkel und Klueglinge verfinstern oft ein Ding vorsaeztiglich, mit wunderlichen, seltsamen, ungebraeuchlichen Worten, erdenken neue Art und Weise zu reden, so zweifelhaftig, zweizuengig und geschraubt sind, die man kann deuten, wie man will, nach Gelegenheit der Umstaende, wie die Ketzer thun." "Man musz sich vor allen in acht nehmen, welche sich neuer, ungewoehnlicher und ungebraeuchlicher Worte befeissigen. Denn diese Art zu reden, widerstreitet gaenzlich der Beredsamkeit." (The study of dialectics [the art of reasoning, of presenting a matter so that truth can be distinguished from error] has served its most useful purpose when it has taught us to define and describe a thing fully and briefly as to its essentials, so that it can be known to be what it really is. Therefore, one should train himself to use right, true, and understandable words, such as are commonly used, and as tell in language easily understood what one means to say, which to do is a special gift of the grace of God, for many conceited fellows and wiseacres often intentionally obscure their thoughts by employing curious and strange words not commonly used, and by endeavoring to speak in an unusual way so that what they say is dubious, double-tongued, and so worded that it can be understood one way or another, as the circumstances suggest, and as heretics are accustomed to do." "One should be on his guard over against those who endeavor to use new, unusual, and uncommon words. That is not true eloquence.") (Luther, St. Louis Edition, XXII: 1534, 1536.)

There are three classes of people who resort to "fine writing" and "flowery speech": 1. Those who themselves do not understand the subject matter which they are treating. These love to use unusual words, big words, to hide their ignorance. Likely they have borrowed these from some of their reading and themselves often do not understand what they mean. These men ought not to speak or write at all. 2. Those who intentionally try to hide the real meaning of what they say or write. These use obscure or ambiguous language. They either have not the courage to speak their conviction, or they seek to deceive those who do not agree with them. This is characteristic of false teachers; it is the sheep's clothing worn by ravenous wolves. The books of some modern religious writers make hard reading. One often has to read a sentence two or three times before the meaning of the writer is discovered, if at all. 3. Those who would "show off" their learning. These consider it beneath their dignity to speak the language of the common man. They desire that the *hoi polloi* should know that they are listening to a learned man; and they always find some simple folk to whom they are awe-inspiring.

Speaking or writing in simple and clear language does not mean that one's vocabulary must be extremely limited nor that as a result there must be a lack of variety in presentation. The King James Version has six thousand different words; Milton uses thirteen thousand. To these we add the many words which were not used in those days, but which are commonly used and understood by the people in our day. That ought to be a sufficiently large vocabulary for any man to express his thoughts, unless he is speaking or writing for the learned professions, when unusual words and technical terms are used and understood. Even when speaking simply and clearly, we need not always use the same word, the same phrase, the same terminology, but can well use a variety of words and phrases, even as the Bible itself does, as for instance, when it speaks of sin as iniquity, transgression, trespass, fault, wickedness, evil, evildoing, corruption, backsliding, filthiness, crime, perverseness.

Paul was an educated man. Yet he said, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God," 1 Cor. 3:1, 4, 5. We shall do well to do as he did. Of the Savior it is said, "The common people heard Him gladly," Mark 12:37. They could understand what He said.

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