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EDITORIAL

CARING FOR WORDS AS A MORAL ISSUE

Isaias D'Oleo-Ochoa
 Editor-In-Chief

One of the most interesting experiences I had in dealing with language precision using the English language has to do with the word *progressive*. A couple of years ago, I was part of a church group discussing a controversial topic which led to a heated debate. There were people from different religious affiliations who were holding both liberal and conservative sides. In our table, there were six persons—two of them representing the liberal side of the group. While we were discussing the assigned topic, a college student holding a liberal position, said to the other three conservative peers and me: “Unlike you guys, I’m open minded and a *progressive* person. I do not like to use the word *liberal* because it has a bad connotation...” The group did not find any problem with the use of the word *progressive* instead of *liberal*. In some contexts, they are used as synonyms. But I respectfully confronted him: “Are you saying that because we hold a conservative position regarding this particular topic we are not *progressive* persons?” Although he did not respond at that moment, after some seconds later, the college student acknowledged that using the word *progressive* was not the best way to describe his position. The whole group reflected on this issue and concluded that being a *progressive* person does not necessarily denote holding a liberal or conservative side, but has a lot of to do with having a constant desire of promoting the betterment and improvement of the *status quo*. In that respect, both liberal and conservative sides can eventually be *progressive* or not.

This experience reminds me of one of Marilyn C. McEntyre’s claims in her book *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*. She rightly states,

“Caring for language is a moral issue. Caring for one another is not entirely separable from caring from words. Words are entrusted to us as equipment for our life together, to help us survive, guide, and nourish one another.”¹

¹ Marilyn C. McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009): 1-2.

This statement means that the way we use language has the potential to help or harm someone else, and because of that, we must be responsible for caring for words in the same way we care for others. We ought to do so for both the reliability of the communication process and the sake of our community's wellness. The short yet stimulating illustration above-mentioned shows us that language precision does matter because using euphemisms will not always be helpful in our discussions, particularly as they relate to divisive issues. After discussing why the term *progressive* was not a good substitution for *liberal* in that particular context, our group conversation returned to the main topic of the discussion and became more hospitable in terms of language. In fact, all the members of the group were able to express their points of views more clearly by using more precise words and fewer euphemisms.

Since words have the power to build up or to tear down other people, we ought to master the practice of language care. In academia, for instance, such care is observed when researchers pay attention to the common practice of discussing other people's ideas carefully or never personally attacking other colleagues for their ideological, political, and religious beliefs. Now since language nourishes not only our individual and group life but also spiritual life, caring for words in Christian communities has definitely a prominent place. Language plays a central role in the study of God and the relationship between Him and humanity. Therefore, it is imperative to heed the way we use our words. First, language shapes our understanding of the world, and second, through language, we also know about God. Without an adequate use of language as a foundation, the study of theology would be difficult to do responsibly.

In a few words, caring for language should be a concern of everyone, and not just of those who make their living using it—e.g. authors, columnists, and writers. However, this task is not easy. Our device-driven society today is regrettably accustomed to misuse language by promoting fallacies, partial truths, language vagueness, and so on. Because the misuse of language might eventually lead to lies and false assumptions, we must fight against this tendency. Academic writing and theological research done in community, for example, is a powerful means to do so and it is our responsibility as theologians to do it well. In the end, being a good theologian is also about being a dependable steward of language who enriches the community one belongs amidst cultural noise. And it is

precisely in this respect that the *Stromata* is both a graduate journal and a ministry. The publication is strongly committed to promoting good scholarship at CTS while at the same time being God's instrument to build up the church and their future leaders.

With the current edition, CTS publishes Volume 58 of the *Stromata* in their 60th anniversary (1956-2016) of being a vehicle of scholarly expression. It is my desire that you find interesting readings, and that this issue will serve to expand your knowledge on the topics discussed by our contributors.