

E-Mail Can't Handle the Weight! June, 2009

Two Part Series: What God Teaches About Our Words

By: Roy King

Does this sound familiar?

The worship leader has felt like the lightning rod for people in the church who are struggling with the choice of music.

“It was too loud.”

“It was not loud enough.”

“It was too contemporary.”

“It was not contemporary enough.”

“It was not inclusive of Latino and African American preferences.”

“There was not enough classic reformed hymnody.”

“He was preaching too much between songs.”

“He failed to lead people to *really* worship.”

“We stand for too long.”

All of this input had flowed in his direction as soon as the service concluded from ‘helpful’ folks and continued through phone calls, in staff meeting, and now in an e-mail from a person he barely knew.

This was enough. It was time for action. He arranged all of his thoughts and created the perfect defense for the choices he was making in constructing the services. He nailed his five pages of apologetic on music and worship in a ‘reply to’ the e-mail. But why waste all of these jewels on only one person? He added the elders, the staff, and everyone on his worship team. He even added a few people who had talked with him since Sunday.

He would solve all of his problems at once with this clearly logical and biblical perspective. He was angry but had it hidden nicely under a blanket of denial with his spiritual covering of ‘helping others grow in truth’. And yes, he did not think through what it was going to be like to be on the receiving end of the e-mail. And yes, he was polluting the “in boxes” of people who had really not been in on the recent waves of concerns over the music. Many of the musicians in the band only received the thanks and praise for their ministry; his desk, as part time paid staff, was where the more painful confrontations landed.

As he hit ‘send’ he felt he had solved all of his problems and cleared the truth that been like a weight on his chest.

What do you think happened over the next few days in this church?

If you think most of the elders and staff felt blindsided and betrayed for the worship leader throwing gasoline on a fire you would be right.

If you said that some people jumped to his defense and forwarded the e-mail with their additional perspective to additional people friendly to the current musical practice you would also be correct.

If you said the original sender felt like a shotgun had been used to swat a fly and, her motive for sharing a legitimate concern was unfairly judged, and betrayed because what was intended as private communication between just the two of them had now been spread through the church.

If you said that others receiving the e-mail crafted their own five page responses of debate over the music but added correction on how fellow Christians should handle conflict and exhortations of choosing love and peace over being right you would also be correct.

A raging forest fire of conflict had been lit by the match of one e-mail.

What does it look like to bring e-mail communication under biblical authority?

Words showing up in a mailbox, an in-box on a computer, a text message on a cell phone, in a note passed among students during class, or a message stuffed into a bottle found floating in the waves come under the same biblical principles. God has gone to great effort to provide very clear and commanded teaching on our words. Start your study with the passages I have included in this article but then explore many other passages by searching your Bible for “words,” “speech,” and “tongue.”

Let's start with how Jesus viewed words. Matthew 12:33-37 in the Message says,

³³ "If you grow a healthy tree, you'll pick healthy fruit. If you grow a diseased tree, you'll pick worm-eaten fruit. The fruit tells you about the tree. ³⁴ "You have minds like a snake pit! How do you suppose what you say is worth anything when you are so foul-minded? It's your heart, not the dictionary, that gives meaning to your words. ³⁵ A good person produces good deeds and words season after season. An evil person is a blight on the orchard. ³⁶ Let me tell you something: Every one of these careless words is going to come back to haunt you. There will be a time of Reckoning. Words are powerful; take them seriously. ³⁷ Words can be your salvation. Words can also be your damnation."

Our words are the fruit of the heart. Words make visible the invisible meditations and motives rooted inside of us. When I print off a charged e-mail and sit down with the sender I often hear, “I just never realized how you would take it. It is not what I really meant.” But in many cases I disagree. What they wrote probably does reflect their true heart and the Christian mask used to cover up with each other had slipped out of place. When writing anything with a relational or emotional tone do not send it until you read it out loud and decide if you would say the same thing in the same way face to face.

Another passage on the words we use is Ephesians 4:25-32.

²⁵ What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. ²⁶ Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. ²⁷ Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life. ...²⁹ Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift. ³⁰ Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted. ³¹ Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. ³² Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.

This passage employs two dramatic images. In 4:25 we are reminded that every Christian is joined to every other Christian like limbs attaching to form one body. Would I use these words I have just written to speak to myself? All Christians are now in God's family how should I address his children?

The second image is of places where we live. We are not to let the devil in the door and we are to be aware of what we are taking to bed with us.

Intimacy has two sides; working through the painful times and expressing gratitude and blessing in the good times. Loving one another is a commitment that should be true in all seasons of relationships. E-Mail can't handle the weight of these emotional and essential aspects of close relationships. Step away from the computer go and see the person. Love by listening and giving the benefit of doubt. Be ready to forgive and give truth balanced with grace. Use words you would desire others would use with you.

Dr. Roy King is director of alumni and professor of leadership at Columbia International University, www.ciu.edu. This article can be downloaded at www.royking.org. You may distribute, translate or use this material in your ministry. I ask that it not be sold without my permission. If you use this please send me a brief description of how it was used. If you translate it, please send me a copy. Send e-mail to roy@royking.org.

