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Justice Rankin

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Doug Frederick

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By

Justice Rankin

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Recreating Culture Through Language

Culture continually shifts, and language is what molds our culture. In the Segregation Era (1900-1939)¹, the ethos behind the language was essentially, “work and make ‘the Blacks’ work for us without rights.” Then as years followed, there were other quick, but prominent culture shifts; extreme sexism, racism, the muscle car era, years of “do what your family does”, then the years of technology, and the list goes on. It is important to note that these are not all separated, but woven together in time; just like the language used in those times has been woven into people’s tongues² (personal language). Much like vaccines create an antibody to be part of our immune system, the past has created forms of language that have become part of our natural language. When young people are taught that X is called “X”, then that is when “meaning and making have come together.”³ When a baby says, “dada” they put a name to something in the world - they are speaking into the world.⁴ That is what has happened in the Church with racism, ageism, sexism, ‘christianeze’, and harmful speech as a whole. Once again our past has caused a need for us to transform our language now to become more like Jesus’.

In the local church, there is development and progression that is evident and beneficial. The year of COVID has surfaced much of what needs to be shown to everyone, and this has transpired quickly and publicly — particularly in churches.⁵

Through the black lives matter movement (and much more), people were forced to

¹ Library of Congress, loc.gov

² “Tongues” in Ancient Greek is also means “Languages” and “Speech”.

³ Crouch, Andy. *Culture Making*. page 25.

⁴ Ibid, page 25.

⁵ Lewis Center for Church Leadership

(<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/8-trends-impacting-church-leadership-for-2021/>)

examine themselves and truly hear what they, themselves, are saying. Churches began carefully determining their words to make sure they were speaking light⁶ and producing good fruit. Language is the key change that needs to happen, but in order to refine, we must analyze. Just as a surgeon must diagnose the illness before performing surgery, we must analyze our culture to diagnose the surgery that is required. Mark Sayers once said that we must analyze the cultures that have come and gone so we are able to understand the people in our Church⁷ — “We must understand culture before speaking to it”⁸. John Mark Comer speaks of N. T. Wright’s wording, and he says that we are not building the kingdom, we are building for the kingdom as God is the master builder creating his masterpiece.⁹ This is just one example of the change of terminology. Opening our eyes, humbling ourselves before God, trusting Him to transform what we are doing. Language is something that we are building and we are either building the language for our own kingdom or for God’s. When starting a project, architects and engineers identify, evaluate, then create. The foundation of our tongue requires identification, evaluation, and transformation by ourselves (individually as well as corporately), through the screen¹⁰ of the language of the Lord.

Bill Hybels, known for pastoring Willow Creek Community Church, also known for sexually assaulting many women, is one of the many examples of why we must refine/screen our speech.¹¹ Through Hybels’ many accusations, he *and* the leadership of that church began to word things to protect themselves and condemn the survivors.¹²

⁶ Of Christ

⁷ Rebuilders Podcast + This Cultural Moment Podcast

⁸ Mark Sayers

⁹ Comer, John Mark, *Garden City*, page 178.

¹⁰ “The evaluation or investigation of something...”

¹¹ McKnight & Barringer, *A Church Called TOV*, page 60.

¹² *Ibid*, page 60 and 65-70.

The language that was used was to build their own kingdom, not God's. That language, by acknowledgement of the survivors of Bill Hybels' actions, was damaging. And because of the voice¹³ of the survivors, healing can take place. The unclean are now seen by the light of the words.¹⁴ Language must be a focal point in the process of change to a garden-like culture and what we say shows the intent of our hearts.¹⁵ Because of the culture of Willow Creek, the leaders of that church created a culture of harm through speech to people who spoke against the corruption of that church. E. Glenn Wagner, in *Escape from Church, Inc.*, wrote, "When pastors stop working from biblical pattern, confusion, frustration, and ineffectiveness inevitably result."¹⁶ When pastors and leaders in the Church begin to build a self-righteous culture, the resulting language is harmful. Language is the toxic undercurrent that is able to pull people into the emotional and spiritual drowning.

As the Church moves forward following Jesus, refinement of our tongue is necessary for becoming more alive in Christ. We must learn the new language that Jesus came and spoke with, bringing new life. According to Pennsylvania State University, learning a new language as an adult is very difficult, but learning a language as a child is far more possible and simple.¹⁷ Children are "literally built to absorb information"¹⁸ and adults have a much harder time because they consciously learn.¹⁹ Some of the steps of learning a new language from FluentU online are: set language goals, learn the "right" words, study smart, start using the language all day and

¹³ Referencing "language", "tongue" and "speech".

¹⁴ Light in the darkness ideas from John 1:5 whereas the light of Jesus brings forward healing and repentance.

¹⁵ Luke 6:45, "...What you say flows from what is in your heart."

¹⁶ E. Glenn Wagner, *Escape from Church, Inc.*

¹⁷ Pennsylvania State University, "Learning a Second Language is Easier for Children, but Why?"

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ They think more and their own thoughts become the barriers to effective learning (often).

everyday, learn about the culture, and practice.²⁰ Just like learning a language of a different nation, we can follow these steps to learn the language of Christ. We must be proactive so that the language that we speak is a language of truth and love. Jesus is our teacher, so we must become scholars²¹ — continually be willing to learn.

“Whether we know it or not, see it or not, or understand it or not, we are always at risk of being shallowly formed. We are formed by our false selves, our families of origin, the highly manipulated presentations of social media, and the value system of a world, the preaching and teaching in the church and out of the church, and the list goes on. So we need to be regularly called back to the essence of our lives *in* God. That essence is one of ongoing transformation; that is, Christ being formed in us.”²² We are formed by what is around us — what we are a part of. What Rich Villodas says is that we continually need to be transformed by Christ, not by our culture, so when we create culture, let us create a culture in Christ with His language of compassion, kindness, love, self-control, encouragement, discipline, goodness, peace, and so on.²³ We practice the language of Jesus so that in the future, the language of Jesus that is embedded into the child’s tongue, is what naturally flows into the world. The goal is to learn the language of the garden, creating a culture of flourishing life.

Being fully alive is what God desires for us, being fully alive in Christ.²⁴ The culture we are a part of will push and pull people over, unless the foundation is in the renewing life of Jesus. Andy Crouch says, “Culture is not just what human beings make of the world; it is not just the way human beings make sense of the world; it is in fact

²⁰ FluentU Online

²¹ “An aptitude for study”. An archaic definition of “scholar” according to Oxford Languages

²² Villodas Rich, *The Deeply Formed Life*, page XV

²³ Paul, Letter to Galatians, 5:22.

²⁴ Referencing John 10:10 - Jesus’ purpose is “...to give them a rich and satisfying life.”

part of the world that every new human being has to make something of.”²⁵ This is what we now have to react to. We must take something out of the world that has been put in. We must transform our language so that the language transforms the culture. In the Church we must recognize what language we are using. We must identify whether or not our language we speak (preach and teach) is truth, if it is simple to understand, if it is ‘christianeze’, if it is building faith or tearing it down. The Church is required to make something of the world by completely shifting our language and by deciding if the language we use pleases the Lord to the full extent.

Language and food are two of the world’s most impactful tools to create culture.²⁶ In a country like Canada, there are hundreds of different cultures that make up the entirety of Canada. And if you were to ask people how to best experience their culture or origin without visiting the place, they will more often than not think of restaurants that have authentic food. Food is a courier of culture and *recreates culture* in a place without it. *Our* language creates culture as well, and has a greater impact than what people think. If you curse in front of your child, they bring it to school and then create a negative reaction; that one word - that reaction through language - has then begun to create culture. The language we use is powerful.²⁷ By itself language forms creation.²⁸ Charles Townes, a physicist, had an idea, spoke the idea and then he brought people around him to create it. His idea is what we now call lasers. Lasers were first created by spoken idea and are now used in surgery rooms, vehicles, television, and so much more.

²⁵ Crouch, Andy, *Culture Making*, page 25.

²⁶ Crouch, Andy, *Culture Making*, page 45-46.

²⁷ Ibid, page 46. & Jesus, Gospel of John, chapter 4.

²⁸ Language of God, bringing creation in the beginning.

Language creates over and over. It is language that shifts culture. Language is what can bring change - can bring the life and fruit of Christ.

Viktor Frankl²⁹ a psychologist and a holocaust survivor from Austria, lost his wife, friends — everyone whom he loved.³⁰ The holocaust brought a level of psychological and emotional trauma that literally killed people (imagine that — people dying over psychological and emotional trauma. When Viktor Frankl was thrown in a concentration camp, he saw things happen that should never happen to other humans, and whilst in the camp, he began meeting with people. He wanted to see how people dealt with the trauma. He saw people with no hope. Something that almost all psychologists will agree is that people have an insatiable *need* for hope. Women and men were not made to live on instinct alone, but to place their hope in something that cannot be taken away. The reason for this story is because what Viktor realized was that people needed to change their inner language. They needed to move towards a language of hope, of expectation. That is what our Church needs - is a language of hope. We must not use foul or abusive language, but words of grace and encouragement.³¹

Pastors must lead the Church with the language of hope, being the voice to lead to new life, but that is not always the case. E. Glenn Wagner says, “It seems to me that everyone has a leash around the pastor’s neck except the Lord... Pastors... have nothing to say.”³² Maybe, just maybe, the reason they have nothing to say is because they then listen to the world, not to God. If God is not seeing transformation - *life* being formed in people’s lives, would he say nothing? He would speak with the language of

²⁹ Not a man who follows Jesus as Lord and Saviour. This man has one of the most incredible and interesting stories.

³⁰ In concentration camps held by the Nazi army.

³¹ Ephesians 4:29.

³² Wagner, E. Glenn, *Escape From Church, Inc.*, page 21

creation. His ruach³³ would then be in our lives again. For pastors, the language we speak over ourselves needs to be identified in Christ, who speaks identity over us. So when we are placed in a position, we must have others, but we especially need ourselves to support, encourage, and speak life into our minds and hearts because the language we speak over the ministers of the Church must be the language of life. It is a two way street. This language is rooted in the word, the language of God.³⁴

Our culture has been formed by many years of ignorance, confusion, entitlement, and so on. What our culture is dealing with now is a drastic but necessary change. Through this process of learning a new language — it will be frustrating, but we are required to carefully determine what pleases the Lord, and our language - our tongue is something of great power.³⁵ Our tongue will either build our personal kingdom or the kingdom of God. Our language must now be transformed into a language of the future, of hope for the Garden City kingdom where no one is led to confusion, or harm, but encouragement and welcoming into the beautiful garden body of Christ.³⁶ This Language needs to be a language that everyone understands, from the youngest child, to the most lived senior. With a simple, yet powerful language, we can show people how to build for the kingdom of God.

When Jesus speaks to us, he speaks into existence, He speaks identity over us. He speaks something new to “displace the current”³⁷. What comes out of our mouth is

³³ Hebrew for “Spirit”, “wind”, “breath”, contextual connected to “Spirit of God” and “Breath of God”

³⁴ This idea comes from E. Glenn Wagner, *Escape from Church, Inc.*, pages 21,25, 35, 39, and 53.

³⁵ Ephesians 5:10.

³⁶ Idea is derived from John Mark Comer’s *Garden City*, page 237. “Most of the library, that is the New Testament is looking *forward* - to the Garden-like city. It’s not about where we’ve come from as much as where we’re *going*.”

³⁷ For Andy Crouch, the language of his family created family dinners and that “will only change if someone offers us something sufficiently new compelling to displace the current...” *Culture Making*, page 67.

what can spoil, and if we speak with anything other than purity, then we are unclean.³⁸

The Greek word for fire is “*pur*” and through fire is where purity comes: “I will bring them through the fire and make them pure...”³⁹ Our language must now become pure, refining our words, putting them through fire to determine if they are holy. Our culture has already been formed, but we are now called to be builders for the kingdom to transform what we have built into something that God is building. We must analyze the culture we are a part of, then examine the cultures that are around us, so we are able to reshape the language of the Church that everyone understands and brings construction forward. The goal now is to weave the language of Jesus into our tongues, allowing ourselves to shift the way we speak to the life giving way Jesus speaks.

³⁸ Matthew 15:1-20.

³⁹ Zechariah 13:9.

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