

Slow to Speak

thoughts on
CHRISTIAN WRITING
in the world of
DIGITAL
COMMUNICATION

Copyright © 2000
Mark W. Weaver

Slow to Speak

*“So then, my beloved brethren,
let every man be swift to hear,
slow to speak, ...”*
James 1:19 KJV

A WHILE BACK, as a new member of an online group of Christian writers, I became engaged in a string of email exchanges around the theme of how far we should allow our creative imaginations to take us when writing fiction. Should we write one way to the Christian audience and another way to the secular one? Do we have more creative liberty when writing to the non-believer? Just how innovative should we be in the face of what we know the Bible teaches?

Responses ranged widely.

At one point, the group’s moderator stepped in and attempted to end the discussion, claiming it was no longer writing related. As I was preparing to challenge that call, I received another email from the moderator, to the group at large, retracting the original stand, and more or less “apologizing” for “jumping the gun.”

It’s a brave soul who can manage a group like this and those who take on such a role are to be commended—especially those who are quick to admit an error in judgment.

“ ... God resists the proud, but gives grace unto the humble.” James 4:6

To be a writer requires a certain measure of audacity to begin with. But to be a Christian writer requires even more daring. Who are we to think that we can speak for God?

Personally, I believe that every word proclaimed or published possesses a prophetic quality. Every word that leaves us and reaches the ears or eyes of others carries a

message. The content of that message will shape and direct the lives of those on the receiving end, even if only in a minute way. Because of this, every word that emanates from us must be chosen carefully and wisely.

“My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be of understanding.” Psalms 49:3

I have a friend who recently told me about a series of email exchanges that occurred in a Christian writer’s group around the theme of typographical and grammatical errors. I was told that some of the discussion became rather heated.

In my view, typos signify a lack of attention. Often we are in too much of a hurry to read and re-read our words, making certain they communicate as clearly as possible what we really mean to say. When we are in a relaxed, informal mode, chatting or exchanging with a really close friend, it’s perhaps acceptable to not capitalize correctly and to occasionally misspell a word or two. But when we are communicating with people we don’t know, or barely know, it’s probably good to proofread our text and muse over it for a while before we send it out — maybe even have a trusted friend or spouse look it over first. My view is that our online writer’s group probably falls somewhere in the middle.

Who among us has not made typos or other silly gaffes in the email universe? Why just the other day, communicating privately in a string of exchanges, I sent out an incomplete email to someone. I must have looked pretty stupid. I certainly felt stupid. In the big picture though, it’s probably to our benefit that we make gaffes and feel stupid every now and then. At minimum it affords us a fresh opportunity to receive more of God’s grace. (see James 4:6 above).

Slow to Speak

In our immediate, microwave, fast-paced world we find that words can leave us so easily. A click of the send button and our words are gone. This is especially true for writers, whose lives revolve around words. In these ever-shifting, e-culture times, a certain amount of typos and emoticons have become acceptable. Most of us have adapted appropriately and obtained a degree of comfort with this odd, new culture.

Continued shifts toward instant, and less formalized communication have been accelerated over the last 150 years. We've evolved from the hand-written letter to the telegraph, to the telephone, to two-way, ham and CB radios, to the fax, to emails, to instant messaging and chat rooms. Some of us now have tiny video-cams and microphones mounted on our computers, carrying live voices and images of our talking faces across the web. What's next?

During the animated email group discussion noted above, as we exchanged ideas about how far we should allow our creative imaginations to carry us, opinions varied widely. Some argued that we should always stay close to the Word. Others counseled those writing for secular houses to "write it how you want." In fact, one participant published those precise words.

As a critical thinker, I paused and wondered. Does this mean that when I am outside of church, I can do what I want? Surely the author did not mean to imply that when we write for a non-Christian audience, God's oversight is irrelevant. God has never given me the liberty to write things how I want.

Wait. Let me modify that statement. God has never given me the liberty to "publish" things how I want. Oh what a difference just one word can make! If I am writing in a personal journal, open only to my eyes and

God's, I can write anything I desire. When I pray, alone, in my prayer closet, I can tell God whatever I feel. And I am at liberty to think however I choose with consequences only to me. But once my words, my prayers, my thoughts, my ideas, depart from me and become public, touching others, everything changes. Suddenly I am accountable to God for how my life is impacting those who hear or read my words, and observe my actions.

I cannot recount the times I have had to retract a statement, correct a published word or apologize for being obtuse in my communications. Every thoughtless faux pas brings with it a price tag in the relationship. I don't know about you, but my learning is painful and often slow. Even so, God is good and He redeems!

As we seek to engage others with sound, trustworthy, Christian ideas in our ever-shifting and deteriorating culture, let us be quick to listen, slow to speak, and eager to learn from others. Perhaps then, we can avoid the need for some of our embarrassing retractions, eliminate a few of our careless typos, and gradually, even if with some halting difficulty, learn to say what we really mean.

And may we always do so with a spirit of Christian graciousness toward others.

Following are two more scriptures to meditate upon:

"Listen, for I shall speak noble things; And the opening of my lips will produce right things." Proverbs 8:6 NAS

"... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." Ecclesiastes 3:7 KJV