

# A WAY WITH WORDS



USING OUR  
ONLINE  
CONVERSATIONS  
FOR GOOD

DANIEL DARLING

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To all those who have nurtured my writing life:

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—My father for constantly telling me I'd be a writer one day

—My first boss, Julie Dearyan, for pushing me to get published

—My mentor, Bill Swanger, for reminding me that writing is a ministry



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Introduction

# A Book about Words

*“I know nothing in the world that  
has as much power as a word.  
Sometimes I write one, and I look  
at it until it begins to shine.”*

—Emily Dickinson

I’ll never forget hearing my oldest daughter, Grace, speak her first words. Angela and I and our family on both sides had waited so long for the moment her verbal communication rose above grunts and animal sounds to something resembling what humans speak. *What would she say? How would it sound? Would she talk at all?*

Like most first-time parents we worried irrationally, consulting baby books, our pediatrician, and other parents. Google was a bit rudimentary back then but I’m sure we also consulted the search engine for help.

Eventually Grace did speak, and her first word wasn't "mommy" or even "daddy." It was the simple, but rather effective, "No!"

## Chasing Words

Hearing Grace speak was a joy, even if the words that came from her mouth were, even at her vulnerable age, a testament to her strong will and her independence. They excited me as they would excite any parent hearing their kid speak for the first time, but perhaps more for me because I've spent a lifetime chasing words.

My mother taught me to read at an early age, and I've been devouring words ever since. We took three newspapers at our house: the *Daily Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Chicago Sun Times*. I read them every day. Sports first, then news, then features. On Sundays I spread out those gloriously fat Sunday editions and was silent for hours.

I regularly visited libraries, begged my mother to buy more Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew books, and, at times, read the ingredients on the cereal boxes when there was nothing left in our house to read. My parents, because they feared the influence of television, didn't own a set until I was in college, so it was either listening to words on the radio or reading them on a page.

But not only have I read words, I've been stringing them together from a very young age (albeit not always very well). In junior high, a teacher made an offhand comment that set a trajectory for the rest of my life. She told me, after reviewing

some essays I'd written for English literature, "Dan, I think you have a gift. You should pursue writing."

Those words changed my life. I saw myself as a writer from that very moment. It didn't hurt that my father, a man of few words, frequently whispered to me, "Dan, you are going to be a famous writer one day."

I'm not famous, but by God's grace in directing my crooked steps, I've been writing professionally for almost two decades. I've served in a variety of roles—editor, pastor, executive—but in every position I've brought with me my love for words. I'm just not good at anything else. I can't dance. I can't weld. I can't make an omelet. Words are what I love.

I feel a lot like George Will, who confessed once that he didn't know what he'd be doing if he wasn't writing, or like the novelist Ray Bradbury, who said once, "I don't need an alarm clock. My ideas wake me."

These days, that's happening more and more often. And until someone tells me I can't write words, I'm going to keep writing them.

Now, I imagine you may not be as obsessed with words as I am, and that's quite all right. God has likely given you other loves, other pursuits that awaken your soul and give you joy. But I might say that even if you are not a writer like me in search of the perfect word, you should care about words, and more important, the way you use them—both in your everyday conversation and, in the case of this book, the way we so often deploy them: online.

## A Speaking God and Speaking Humans

In *The Dignity Revolution*, I explored what it means to be created *imago dei*, that is, “in the image of God.” I continue to be fascinated by the rich language the Bible uses to describe humanity. God spoke into existence all of creation, but Moses pauses his narrative in the first two chapters to make a statement about the intricate detail God uses to create men and women. God, Moses says, reached with his hands and crafted humans from the dust of the ground and breathed into humans the breath of life (Gen. 2:7).

It’s a beautiful mystery, this idea of being a reflection of the divine. And there is much wrapped in what *imago dei* means. But one of the key ways we reflect God is that we, of all creatures, are communicating beings. We use words.

Christianity is, after all, a religion that believes in a speaking God. We sometimes take this for granted, casually saying things like, “God told me to take that job,” but we don’t often enough stop and marvel that God speaks.

He is not obligated to speak, and yet he does. You could argue, as Timothy Ward does effectively in his excellent book *Words of Life*, that speaking is at the heart of God’s self-revelation. “It is often observed that God’s words and actions are intimately related in the Bible. To say of God that he spoke, and to say of God that he did something, is often one and the same thing . . . He is a God who by his very nature acts by speaking.”<sup>1</sup> Ward is exactly right. We know of God only because he has chosen to speak.

I still marvel that after Adam and Eve fell in the garden, God went after them. So invested was he in his image-bearers that he . . . spoke to them: “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9). This is such divine grace. Ward says that God “speaking is also an integral part of God acting to save.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, you could argue that the storyline of Scripture—God’s own revealed Word to us—is a narrative of God speaking. Just think, for instance, how often the Old Testament contains the phrase, “and the word of the LORD came to . . .” The prophets were always speaking because they first heard God speak.

And in the New Testament, the coming of Jesus is framed by John as what? The Word made flesh (John 1). Even the flesh-and-blood incarnation is God communicating to his people. In other words, God doesn’t just speak words; in Christ, we are told he *is* the Word. Jesus is the living and breathing, flesh-and-blood communication of God:

Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Heb. 1:1–3)

God speaks through Moses and the prophets and, in the new covenant (an agreement framed by words), by Jesus, whose words, he says, are the very power that both created



and sustains the universe. We have, very much so, a speaking God.

Which means that those who bear his image are also speakers.<sup>3</sup>

Animals might communicate in a rudimentary way. A dog may signal to us that it has to go out by barking. An ape might be able to learn some kinds of sign language. And a parrot can mimic the four-letter words of its master. But creative communication, forming words, is distinctly human.

You'll never see an elephant writing a novel or an aardvark reading Chaucer. To further belabor this point, consider how our best art tries to humanize the animal kingdom—by making them speak as humans. Isn't this what makes Mickey Mouse and Donkey from *Shrek* and Mufasa from *The Lion King* so lovable? Words are what bring life to the beasts in Narnia and why Tolkien made the birds and beasts talk in *The Hobbit*. We make animals speak because words make the subhuman human.

Forming words and sentences is so woven into the human experience that we lament when a person loses this ability. We grieve when a singer loses her vocal cords or when Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia keeps a beloved author from writing. And we compensate for those who have been born without the ability to vocally pronounce words. Sign language allows people to still express themselves in rich ways, and braille and audiobooks allow the blind to consume words without seeing them.

The restoration of communication is often seen in Scripture as a sign of God's restoration in Jesus' new

inaugurated kingdom activity. Christ's ministry was a fulfillment of the promise to, in part, make the mute speak (Isa. 35:4–7; Mark 7:31–37). A restoration of our image-bearing, God-reflecting ability to creatively communicate is part of Christ's new-creation work.

This is true not only on the micro level but on the macro level. Where God's judgment at the Tower of Babel meant people would be *divided* by language, the promise of Pentecost means that, in Christ, God is creating a new people who, while speaking different languages, would communicate ultimately in the new language of heaven, gathered around Jesus' throne at the end of the age, representing every tongue (Rev. 7:9). And one of the most powerful ways we express our worship is by singing and shouting praise.

You could say, without exaggeration, that God is a speaking God who loves words.

## Words Gone Wild

But alas, not all the words that humans create reflect God's own beautiful words. And that's the reason for this book.

It is a bit ironic that the human race's descent into darkness began with the serpent's own twisted misrepresentation of God's words of instruction to his image-bearers. Words, after humanity's fall into sin, can now be used either to injure or inspire. This is why King David prayed that the words of his mouth be "acceptable" in the sight of God (Ps. 19:14). In

a fallen world, we often don't even understand the weight of what we say or, in this age, what we type.

David's son, Solomon, understood well the power of words. The wisest man in all the world often reflected on language in his proverbs:

There is one whose rash words are like  
sword thrusts,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.  
(Prov. 12:18 ESV)

Death and life are in the power of the  
tongue,  
and those who love it will eat its fruits.  
(Prov. 18:21)

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue." And, we might say today, the power of the thumb. Words can create or destroy, they can uplift or condemn. They can reflect the Word by which God has spoken or they can echo the whispers of the serpent. So powerful are words, the apostle James tells Christian leaders, that "no one can tame" them (James 3:8).

If Solomon saw fit to warn the people of God in the Old Testament of the power of words, and if James saw fit to warn the early church of the power of words, how much more today should God's people heed what God is speaking to us about how we speak? We live in a world with a vast and seemingly unlimited economy of words. There are more ways to communicate today than at any time in human history.

It may seem at times that stewarding our communication, especially the easy and free way we communicate online, is next to impossible. We might say with James, “Who can tame this beast?” But we should remember that those destructive half-truths in the garden of Eden were not the final word. Jesus, God’s Final Word, has spoken a word over those who have turned to him in faith. He declares in his Word that we are justified and we are transformed. Jesus has conquered that unruly, death-dealing beast and has given us God’s Holy Spirit to help us tame our tongues and our thumbs.

In the pages that follow, we will be less interested in litigating screen time and algorithms—though that is a discussion worth having. Instead, we will consider the inevitable task of communicating in the internet age. Incivility has been with us since Eden, but the immediacy and availability of digital platforms seems to exacerbate this temptation. Alan Jacobs is right when he says the farther humans get away from face-to-face conversations, the greater the opportunity for sinful speech. Today, that distance is even more pronounced, as we can spar back and forth with complete strangers, whom we know only by an avatar. “Technologies of communication that allow us to overcome the distances of space also allow us to neglect the common humanity we share with the people we now find inhabiting our world,”<sup>4</sup> Jacobs writes. I don’t think the mediums are always value-neutral.

Christians who believe in original sin can’t quite get away with blaming Twitter and Facebook and Instagram and any other platforms—as if we are helpless in this digital age and as if the way we communicate doesn’t originate from within.

Jesus reminds us, “Out of the abundance of the heart [the] mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45 ESV) . . . or the thumbs tweet, record, or post.

This will be a book asking questions about the way we conduct ourselves in this new reality, the way we behave online. The internet is not going away any time soon. Platforms may change, but the call for Christians to steward their words well is the same as it was in the beginning. May we see a revolution of kindness, so that we may pray with Paul, “Let [our] speech always be gracious” (Col. 4:6).

**“I’m thankful for Daniel Darling’s call for both responsibility and civility in every word we speak—not to mention every word we write, blog, or tweet.”**

**—Tim Challies**

**“*A Way with Words* ought to be required reading for all who enter the public square, whether as professionals, pundits, armchair theologians, or merely social media users—that is to say, all of us.”**

**—Karen Swallow Prior**

# **SOCIAL MEDIA WAS MADE** **TO BRING US TOGETHER.** **BUT FEW THINGS HAVE** **DRIVEN US FURTHER APART.**

Sadly, many Christians are fueling online incivility. Others, exhausted by perpetual outrage and shame-filled from constant comparison, are leaving social media altogether. So, how should Christians behave in this digital age? Is there a better way?

Daniel Darling believes we need an approach that applies biblical wisdom to our engagement with social media, an approach that neither retreats from modern technology nor ignores the harmful ways in which Christians often engage publicly.

In short, he believes that we can and should use our online conversations for good.

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