

Responsible words (Romans 10:8b-13)

The Living Word resides not only in our hearts but in our mouths as well.

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March 7, 2025

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Forty-one years ago, Wendell Berry wrote a penetrating essay called “Standing by Words,” in which he ties the disintegration of communities to our declining commitment to use words responsibly. Berry’s essay has something urgent to say to us today, in our age of disinformation as political strategy. I wonder if it could also aid a more robust reading of Romans 10.

Here, Paul writes of Jesus Christ—the Living Word—who draws near to us and resides not only in our hearts but in our mouths as well. Genuine proclamation—not just sincere conviction—has, by grace, a part to play in our redemption. Perhaps part of Paul’s message is akin to Wendell Berry’s insistent argument. Is Paul encouraging these young Christians to renew their commitment to share the gift of God’s Word responsibly? And, is this tied to the health of the Christian community and its capacity to set all distinctions (Jew from Greek) aside in order to recognize that the Living Word is “Lord of all?”

Berry suggests a strategy for strengthening our commitment to words, one he borrows from business accounting. There is, he points out, a distinction between internal accounting and external accounting. The first calculates the costs and benefits of activities to the firm itself. The second considers the costs and benefits to

the public good, to the community in which the firm resides. A firm that cares only for the wellbeing of its shareholders is irresponsible. In a similar way, speakers—who trade in words—should be rigorous in auditing their language. Responsible speech should honor both the inner convictions of the heart and the external wellbeing of communal fellowship. Only then are our words in the fullest sense true.

At a time in American history when words are so obviously weaponized by some political leaders, it is timely—maybe even urgent—for Christian leaders to reflectively account for our own proclamation. Do our words preserve distinctions that God has deemed irrelevant? Do our words exclude any who long to receive the Lord of all? Do our words colonize, sunder, or devalue the very community that God has so graciously joined together?

As those who have gratefully received the gift of God's Living Word, we not only long to be faithful. We yearn to be responsible as well.