

Linguistic Puffery and a Multitude of Words

by T.D. Verryin

'We have contrived' says Screwtape in C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape proposes a toast* (p. 172) 'to make their language all smudge and blur'. A brilliant satanic strategy, one has to admit. When words and sentences cease to convey precise information and are used instead to stir indistinct but generally pleasant feelings, man becomes the easy victim of emotional whims, fantasies and promptings which he might believe originate in heaven, when in reality they emerge from the unexplored dark alleys of his mind. We shall return to this point when considering the meaning of the word 'slogan' at the end of this article.

The use of vaguely-recollected feelings of cosy religious security and wellbeing to cast an aura of benediction on unattractive, luxurious, over-expensive or unnecessary merchandise is common in modern advertising. Thus R... of A... L... Products offers two billfolds imprinted with *For your daily bread* and *Welcome to the fold*. Y... asks *Can a woman live by detergents alone?* S... exhorts us to *Stop loving thy neighbour's — Get thine own*. J... W... overcomes the prospective customer's reluctance to drink expensive whisky by combining status with religiosity, urging him to *Honour thyself*, while sacrilege reaches new records of vulgarity in an advertisement for Italian slacks called Jesus Jeans, across a picture of which is displayed the slogan *he who loves me follows me*.

If the ad man borrows phrase and feeling from the churchman, the churchman is often not much in arrears in adopting the jargon and manipulative techniques of merchandising to desacralize his religion.

The intention is to create an 'image', not to state a fact. This 'image' is evidently one of instant, intense and uninterrupted bliss which rewards the convert. As a bonus there is snug security and a quick solution to all life's difficulties. 'Relief', a bumper sticker claims, 'is just a prayer away' (what would Job say to that?).

'You've got a lot to live', says another, 'and Jesus has a lot to give'. Yet another announces that 'Jesus is the Real Thing', while, not be outdone by Coca Cola, a fourth proclaims that 'Things go better with Jesus'. Lest we find the mineral water analogy insufficiently suggestive of paranormal ecstasy there are other stickers to urge us to 'Groove with God', 'Let Jesus turn you on', 'get high on Jesus' and 'take the ultimate trip with the Big Man upstairs'.

St Paul's advice to Timothy to 'shun profane and vain babblings' (2 Tim. 2:16) comes forcefully to mind. But the examples we have considered so far are but the outskirts of this phenomenon. Linguistic puffery has brought about the lie that is not quite a lie and the truth that is not quite the truth. A notice board states: 'Your friendly neighbourhood church is just a few short minutes from practically anywhere in the suburb'. Another such church is said to be 'a few short miles off the express way'. Think of it. The miles to church are not restricted to 1 609,35 metres each and Ptolemy's minute can be shortened as you drive there. Einstein would find it fascinating!

If commercials can offer a big, big gallon, a full, full litre, a thick, thick inch and a whole long, long metre, why shouldn't a religionist peddle a 'full' salvation, ignoring the fact that a half salvation would not be salvation. So they go on to announce the imminence of an eternity 'that's gonna last a long, long time'!

People who abuse language in this way bleed words to death. But they also have at their disposal other methods of destroying meaning. One popular alternative is endless repetition. Everything is a 'challenge' to the 'faithful flock' who are perpetually on a 'crusade' or at the 'crossroads'. From here 'messengers' set out on the 'great commission' with faces 'aglow' and hearts 'ablaze' to take their pious platitudes to 'the farflung corners of the globe' where they are sure to be welcomed by 'joyous' native faces, while the wind 'stirs the palm fronds' along the 'golden strands' and 'banners' are 'unfurled' and 'lifted high'. The first thousand times this sort of thing is said it might arrest attention. By the ten thousandth time it has ceased to have any effect at all.

A similar inflationary devaluation of words is to be observed when people say 'awfully' for 'very', 'tremendous' for 'great', 'sadism' for 'cruelty' and so on. The makers of G... blades have experienced this problem. They have run out of words to describe the improvements in their products. 'What can we do?' one company executive asked: 'say, "this time we *really* mean it"?'

'A fool's voice is known by a multitude of words' remarks the Preacher (Eccl. 5:3). To the sorry catalogue of inane verbosity which we have already contemplated we must now add some

more acute forms of tasteless bombast, such as 'very unique', 'real reality', 'essentials necessary to the Christian life', 'God incarnate in the flesh', 'unmerited favour', 'free gift', 'ascended up into heaven' and 'first priority' – all of them the stock in trade of parish news letters and pious paperbacks.

But even such tautologies do not mark the nadir of devout imbecility. There is the fashionable jargon which pollutes the theological atmosphere, eroding all that it envelopes in its billowing clouds.

Who really knows what 'feedback' is produced by 'input' at the 'grass-roots level' when 'committed' Christians 'interact' on 'nitty gritty' 'alternatives to implement' in 'dialogue' within 'Christian constructs' and 'centres of concern'? No doubt their 'outreach' is 'exploding' as their 'relevant kerygma' brings about 'person-to-person' 'confrontation' and befuddled 'folk' 'opt' for 'viable' 'lifestyles' in 'prayer-cell circles'. Small wonder that a characteristic remark at church conferences is 'I *think* I hear you saying ...'.

The Ephesian believers were cautioned to 'let no man deceive you with empty words' (Eph. 5:16). If we are to heed this warning we need to exercise a ceaseless vigil against the hypnotic effect of slogans. Here indeed we have a word that has hardly changed in meaning for centuries. Derived from the Gaelic *sluagh-ghairm* it originally referred to the war cries of Irish or Highland clans. 'Crom-a-boo' is one early example. The sounds were not intended to convey meaning, but to play on the emotions and rouse the warriors to a frenzy of blood-lust. In such a condition they were completely at the behest of their war-lord.

It is this loss of free will which slogans are intended to effect in our day as well. How successful they can be was vividly illustrated for me by a former encyclopaedia salesman I met recently, who told me how, through the use of slogans alone, his firm had succeeded in promoting sales of the publications among illiterate people in a London slum. The children of men, the psalmist wrote, 'do but flatter with their lips, and dissemble with their double heart'. Christ himself warned us: 'Out of your own mouth you will be acquitted; out of your own mouth you will be condemned' (Mt. 12:37). This is so because 'the words that the mouth utters come from the overflowing of the heart' (Lk. 6:45).

[Author's Note: This article has been adapted from a much longer study by D.G. Kehl in *Christianity Today*.]