

## Talking “Code”

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How people talk reveals much about their character. Jesus confirmed this when He said, “...For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matt. 12:34b).

There are several graphic Biblical illustrations of this fact. The Ephraimites were detectable by the fact that they could not say the word “shibboleth” with the first “h” (**Judg. 12:5,6**). The infiltration of foreign culture among the post-exilic Jews of Judah was ominously signified by the fact that the children of their interracial marriages did not speak their language (**Neh. 13:23,24**). Peter exposed himself as Jesus’ disciple by the way he spoke (**Matt. 26:73**).

Yet, sometimes the very opposite effect may occur when the speakers communicate in words whose meaning some hearers do not understand. “Jargon” is an example of this phenomenon, since it uses words with specialized, technical meanings peculiar to a certain area of knowledge or expertise. Outsiders unfamiliar with them are at a loss as to what is being said.

There is nothing necessarily nefarious about such jargon, and, in fact, it might sometimes be helpful for certain purposes. Euphemisms, for instance, can be thought of as a kind of jargon. Parents might have occasion to communicate with one another in the presence of their young children without divulging to them information which is deemed beyond their maturity level. Other euphemisms teach or palliate. For example, “sleep” virtually became a part of the New Testament jargon for “death” (**Matt. 9:24; Jn. 11:11-16; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 15:6,18,20,51; 1 Thess. 4:13-15**).

However, when the intent of users is to deceive or maintain secrecy they resort to a more intense form of jargon called “code.” A “code” is a system of words, letters, or symbols which only the sender and receiver know. Its purpose is to withhold information from those who are not instructed or initiated in the code’s meanings and who might jeopardize the mission of the users before the time when such secrecy is no longer possible or necessary. Such codes are most familiar to those in settings which require high levels of security. In the WWII Pacific theater, for instance, U.S. military forces employed Native American “windtalkers” from the Southwest to communicate because their language was so obscure that it proved to be an unbreakable code to the Japanese.

Then, it should come as no surprise that, in prosecuting the greatest conflict of all, Satan and his agents resort to the use of code language. Their design is to obscure the truth from people. Not all false teachers used by Satan necessarily intend to hide the truth. Nevertheless, this is the effect, since they use Bible words to convey ideas which are unbiblical. Yet, in worst-case scenarios, some false teachers engage in deliberate dishonesty, or at least a cover-up of the truth, by giving words meanings which they know their hearers will not give to them.

The Bible also provides examples of codes, especially of the non-verbal variety. The scarlet cord hung in the window of Rahab was a sort of code which must have seemed innocent enough but which, between her and the Israelites, had a special signification (**Josh. 2:14-21; 6:17,23-25**). Jonathan and David established a code between themselves to inform the latter as to whether it would be safe for him to come out of hiding (**1 Sam. 20:18-42**). Proverbs refers to the use of certain gestures as codes (**6:13**;

**10:10).** Judas created a sort of code between himself and those who arrested Jesus when he told them that he would identify Him with a kiss (**Matt. 26:47-49**).

Talking in code offers several advantages to those who would, consciously or not, abuse the truth:

1. The primary advantage of talking in code is the power it gives its users to conceal what they believe from those who might oppose their teachings if they understood what they were really saying. In this, they rely on the dishonesty of equivocation, or the use of words which are susceptible to different meanings. Thus, if false teachings are challenged, their proponents simply fall back on the defense that what they are accused of meaning is not what they meant and that they have been misrepresented. In short, it disarms opponents by offering its users credible deniability. Thus, they turn the tables on their opponents, who are then put on the defensive, as if they have violated the Biblical injunction against judging, since they are unable to prove that the false teacher meant what they said he means.

Therefore, a commendable effort to warn brethren of a false teacher suddenly makes them look like they have unfairly accused and harried an innocent man, who might even be transformed into a victim deserving of everyone's pity for having had to endure such persecution at the hands of "witch-hunting" brethren.

2. For this reason, code-talk also serves to salve the conscience of the false teacher. He is able to convince himself that he is really the one who has come to understand the true meanings of Biblical terms and that it is not his fault if others are too ignorant to know them. Hence, trying to expose the false teacher might ironically confirm him in his suspicion that he is simply being "persecuted for the sake of righteousness" by brethren who are jealous of his growing knowledge and influence. One is reminded of David who, when confronted by his older brother about his interest in Goliath's challenges, tried to pass it off as nothing more than innocent curiosity: "What have I done now? Was it not just a question?" (**1 Sam. 17:29**).

3. A further advantage in talking code is that it communicates effectively to those who know the code. This is most evident in the political field. Thus, when liberal politicians speak of their aims by using the rather innocuous term, "progress," those who are aware of the code know that he refers to that such as "entitlement programs" and "income distribution." Likewise, when conservative politicians talk about "national security," those "in the know" realize that they refer to military spending or intervention. Like everyone else, the code user seeks the support and camaraderie of those who share his views. Therefore, it is important to him that he is able somehow to signal sympathetic parties that he identifies with them and wishes to have their friendship. Of course, doing this openly would expose him while he still considers himself too vulnerable for such a revelation and before he is ready to emerge into the light and show himself plainly for what he is. Therefore, he resorts to talking code, which serves, at the same time, to *conceal* his message from those who do not know the code but *reveal* it to those who do.

4. Another purpose of code-talk is at least as important to its users as any other. Though code is not understood by the uninitiated, the user still wishes for it to influence them. He would like one day for them to be among those who also know, embrace, and use the code. Yet, introducing them to its full meaning before they are ready to accept it runs the risk of having them reject it altogether. Thus, code talk serves the very important purpose of conditioning people to accept false ideas. Users initially want their hearers to think that the words they use carry the customary meanings with which they are comfortable. Yet, the code has an almost subliminal effect on their psyches. It is the "mood music" of false doctrine. If false teachers can avoid alarming the naive long enough by using these code words, they may be able to win their trust and eventually introduce them as a much more sympathetic and susceptible audience to the real ideas and false teachings behind these words. When they consider that they have achieved this objective, they shift meanings while continuing to use the same words. If the code-talking false teacher has done his job well, many of those who have heard him and come to entrust

their souls to him will succumb to his siren call without being aware of the changes which have taken place. It might be that more become lost in the “sea of sin” through inattentive “drifting” (cf. Heb. 2:1) than by being driven by a tempest of apostasy. Many who are in the eye of a hurricane can only luxuriate in the fine weather.

### ***Deciphering “Code Words”***

Thus, becoming familiar with the meaning of the code used by false teachers is crucial. What code-talkers mean by certain words and what others mean by using them might be worlds apart. Liars know well the effectiveness of “double-speak,” but it required a long, costly Cold War to educate many to the fact that a “People’s Republic” or a “Democratic Republic” are the very opposite of what their names suggest they are. Thus, people entrust themselves to the ambiguity of code-talk at their own peril.

Yet, code-talk is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is a tool of false teachers as old as humanity itself. When Satan lured Eve with the prospect of the forbidden fruit making her “wise like God,” his words were only true in a very limited, technical sense and did not at all mean what she thought they meant (**Gen. 3:5-7,22**). Isaiah pronounced woe upon “those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (5:20). Jesus said, “For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (**Jn. 3:20**). False teachers in the first century parlayed the spiritual enslavement of sin as “freedom” (**1 Pet. 2:16; 2 Pet. 2:19**).

As a first example of a code word, everyone thinks he knows that the familiar word “inform” simply means “to tell or impart knowledge to.” Yet, it has become a distinctive part of “liberal lingo” and has come to mean the virtual opposite of what it once meant. In fact, to the discerning, “inform” is a foremost example of the “double-speak” in which code-talkers excel. In the mouths of academics, this otherwise simple word actually means something more like “to disinform or make ignorant.” This is because, to liberal code-users, “inform” means that one’s environment or experiences have left him with a rather jaundiced view of matters or even certain Scriptures. It means that they have given a person a slanted perception. Hence, of the late liberal theologian, Krister Stendahl, it is said, “His illness informed his later reading of religious texts ... .” (Biblical Archaeology Review, Sept./Oct. 2008, pg. 16). While it may be granted that illness can result in a more appreciative evaluation of certain Biblical passages, this is almost nothing like the radical take on the Scriptures it produced in Stendahl, as a further reading of his obituary reveals: “The Christian Bible includes sayings that have caused much pain, both to Jews and to women. Thus I have felt called to seek forms of interpretation which can counteract such undesirable side effects of the Holy Scriptures.” Thus, it would much more truthfully be said that his illness “darkened” rather than “informed” his reading of the Bible.

Another expression which sometimes needs deciphering is “justification by faith.” When Evangelicals speak of “justification by faith,” what they really mean is “justification by faith *alone*.” This is evident from the fact that Evangelicals go back-and-forth between these two expressions as if they were equivalent and interchangeable. R. C. Sproul, in his book, Faith Alone, represents it most forthrightly. He quotes John Calvin as having said, “Let it therefore remain settled ... that we are justified in no other way than by faith, or, which comes to the same thing, that we are justified by faith alone” (pg. 173). Since justification by faith is such an eminently Biblical truth and expression, those who are unaware of Evangelical equivocation in its use might find themselves holding a worthless deed to the Brooklyn Bridge rather than the “ticket to heaven” they thought they had.

Now, the addition of the one word, “alone,” is very significant, and Evangelicals know this. Otherwise, they would not insert or delete it as it serves their purpose to do so. When Evangelicals wish to make clear their point that works of obedience are not conditions of salvation, they insert it; on the other

hand, when they have occasion to shroud this idea under the cloak of Biblical legitimacy, they delete it (and use the Biblical expression).

The answer as to why Evangelicals resort to such equivocation is nothing more profound than this: while the New Testament teaches justification by faith, which includes obedience (**Rom. 5:1; 1:5; 16:26**), it opposes justification by faith *alone*, which excludes obedience (**Jas. 2:14-26**). Thus, to avoid exposure and embarrassment, Evangelicals retreat to the idea that the two expressions mean the same. As strange as it might sound to those who do not dwell in the domain of double-speak, it is not really hard to believe that opposite expressions mean the same to those who want to believe it enough. Yet, to repeat the admonition of the one who denied justification by faith alone: “Do not be deceived ...” (**Jas. 1:16; 2:24**). Words are meaningless if users have the option of making them mean whatever they arbitrarily choose to make them mean.

Another example of religious code is “led by the Spirit” (or some comparable expression). Again, this formulation has the appeal of sounding Scriptural (**cf. Matt. 4:1; Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18**), but it means entirely something else to some people than others might think. When Christians are led by the Spirit, they mean that they pay close attention to what the Scriptures, which are inspired by the Holy Spirit, say (**cf. Psalms 95:7; Hebrews 3:7; 4:7**).

However, when charismatics use the same expression, it becomes code, effectively meaning something like “to get in touch with one’s feelings and impulses” and interpret them as attempts by the Holy Spirit to sway thinking and actions. For example, Harold S. Martin said, “People have often said to me concerning some kind of teaching that they may have heard on the radio or read in books or heard from a pulpit — ‘There was just something about it that didn’t seem right to me.’ They were not always able to give a clear theological explanation of what was wrong, but they knew something about it didn’t sound right. This was the Spirit of God making them sensitive to that which was false and counterfeit. And this is a second test by which we can tell whether a teaching is true or false. How does the teaching in question accord with the inner conviction the Holy Spirit produces in your heart? Does it ‘ring a bell?’” (“Three Ways to Discern the Truth,” pg. 3, Bible Helps booklet no. 207). Since this concept elevates subjective feelings as a judge over God’s word, it is every bit as dangerous as it is ridiculous. Yet, it is not just common thinking, it is *standard* thinking, in the denominational world.

Again, in giving instruction as to how to perform liturgical dancing, Diane J. Wawrejko said, “Be extremely sensitive to the Holy Spirit” (Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology, Vol. One: Word and Worship, pg. 255). Perhaps it is safe to presume she did not mean to perform pirouettes while perusing the Bible.

“Grace” is a wonderful concept and cornerstone of the gospel, but it has so often been abused by code-talkers that its use fires the reflexes of those who have witnessed its misuse. It is difficult to find a better definition of “grace” than “the unmerited favor of God,” but there will probably always be those who wish to hijack this beautiful term and turn it into a code word which relaxes the need to take sin seriously. Indeed, by the time Paul’s opponents got through redefining “grace,” it meant something more like “sin with impunity” (**Rom. 3:8; 6:1,2,15**). Likewise, on the lips those who are left hanging on from the old “grace-fellowship movement,” it becomes code for “tolerance of sin” in the interest of a wider inclusiveness.

This writer had occasion to meet with another church while vacationing. It so happened that the adult class that Sunday morning had progressed in its study of Mark’s gospel to the story of Jesus’ response to John’s complaint against the one casting out demons in His name without following Him (9:38ff). It also happened that the teacher of the class was one of whose liberal leanings he had heard for years. No error deemed sufficiently conspicuous to draw a rebuke was spoken, but in the teacher’s mouth the text

became code to introduce the church to the concept of a “broader fellowship.” After the passage of a decade or so, this brother emerged from the shadows to take a more open and definite stand in defense of exactly that error.

A final example of a code word is “law,” or its equivalents. When code-talkers use this word, they speak as if it were something bad or at least try to misrepresent and diminish what the Bible says about it. One way they might do this is by equivocating between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ, as if no distinction were worth noting (**1 Cor. 9:20,21; cf. Gal. 5:4; 6:2**). By the time the code-talkers get finished with their semantic refurbishment of “law,” it has been downgraded to mean something like “guidelines,” “good advice,” “helpful suggestions,” or even “preferences.”

Nathan Williams’ article, “Is Philemon a Useful Letter?” is a classic case of code-talk. It begins: “I’ll tell you the problem with Philemon. It’s not that it’s so short. After all, we don’t mind brevity. The problem is it contains nothing controversial or “doctrinal” or “church-related” (except that there were churches meeting in houses).” Thus, Nathan indulges his penchant for code not more than a few lines into the article. When he says Philemon “contains nothing controversial ... (except that there were churches meeting in houses),” none but the unenlightened fails to see that he is using code to give a nod to “the house-church movement,” which involves so much more than a church simply meeting in a private dwelling. Otherwise, it would be pointless to suggest that churches meeting in houses, per se, would be controversial, doctrinal, or church-related.

Furthermore, at the opposite end of his article, Nathan says, “If you read your Bible for the sole purpose of figuring out God’s rules for us in the church, Philemon will leave you a bit dry. It may seem like fluff ... extra stuff. But if you read your Bible to learn God’s heart and discover the truly important things, Philemon will leap out as an indispensable how-to guide explaining how to speak to another brother, how to sensitively discuss difficult personal matters, and how to view brothers and sisters in Christ who belong to different social classes” (received in the author’s email January 23, 2014).

Nathan contrasts reading the Bible “for the sole purpose of figuring out God’s rules” and reading it “to learn God’s heart and discover the truly important things.” This implies that God’s rules are not the truly important things. Anyone who thinks otherwise simply has not cracked his code. When some people inveigh against the conception of the Bible as a set of “God’s rules,” or speak out against “legalism,” it is important to understand that this is really code for the idea that strict obedience to the Bible is not necessary. Denial of this only exemplifies one of the important purposes of code-talk. It allows its users to plant ideas while, at the same time, giving them deniability.

It is in the very nature of “code-talk” that it is not the “smoking gun” some would like to have, but by the time the “smoking gun” is found, it is too late. It has already gone off, and that means somebody has been wounded or killed.

Christians must be proactive in their opposition to evil by being knowledgeable of, and alert to, the “code talk” used by false teachers. It was Paul’s desire that Satan not be able to take advantage of people by virtue of their ignorance of his schemes (**2 Cor. 2:11**). After all, the “light” with which Satan enshrouds himself includes the false *words* with which he exploits them (**2 Cor. 11:13,14; 2 Pet. 2:3**).