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Modern day Tower of Babel

Steve Bakke  May 3, 2022



Our world is full of chaos, confusion, and division. And it's getting worse. I've been searching for a way to address a topic I think about often, but on which I've seldom offered my thoughts. I'm referring to our deteriorating "common language."

I came upon an article that described social media in terms of the Tower of Babel. I liked it, but even that excellent equivalency sells short the modern relevance of the Tower of Babel event.

According to Genesis 11, citizens of the world saw themselves as sophisticated and self-righteous. Steeped in their collective arrogance they decided to build a tower to heaven "to make a name for ourselves." God rejected their ideas, confused their language, and spread them over the face of the earth.

Does Babel have something to say about modern man's arrogance in applying their knowledge and technology to control our world? Alternatively, is it communicating God's willingness to intervene in human affairs – even divisively? Maybe it's just an attempt to explain a great mystery of that time in history. Perhaps all of those have relevance today.

The word "Babel" is derived from the root meaning "to confuse." The biblical account tells of a time when people's words and language became confused. Words have the ability, through effective communication, to help the world move in unison, in the right direction. We haven't kept our common language dependably consistent, "whence cometh" a modern Babel – chaos, manipulation, and division.

Our language deterioration seems closely related to another modern phenomenon commonly referred to as "moral relativism." If you ask whether an activity is right or wrong, guided by moral relativism, the answer has become, "Well, that depends," which begs the question, "Depends on what?" To which no ready answer is given.

A manifestation of this showed up in the recent Supreme Court approval hearings for Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson. She was asked to define the term “woman.” She deferred. Simple words are for communicating, sending accurate messages, or so we thought.

More than ever in our history, definitions have become similar to the “moral relativism” concept I mentioned above. Attempts to find a definition too often end up with “that depends.” Who would have guessed simple and clear words like “woman” or “man” would develop ambiguous definitions?

Similarly, consider the bitter arguments occurring regarding claims of systemic racism, or the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools. Important language surrounding that debate has been introduced in which some participants have redefined the meaning of words critical to effectively discussing the issues.

Leaders of the CRT and “antiracism” movements, such as Professor Ibram X. Kendi, author of “How to be an Antiracist,” often seem to be talking a different language. For example, Kendi’s definitions for “racism,” “antiracism,” and “equity” can be confusing.

Open Kendi’s book and you’ll find a mini glossary before most chapters. This is presented to introduce his personal definition for words and phrases, many of which are quite common, but with different traditional definitions. The revised language for his theories is better described as his “lexicon.” No wonder those involved in this debate talk past each other. They’re using different dictionaries. The result is obvious confusion, if not outright chaos.

The bottom line is that our common language has lost part of its usefulness. Some of the loss was contrived by opportunists. The breakdown of our language has led to manipulation, often related to political and public policy issues. People deserve the truth, not vague, nuanced, or misleading information. We’re entitled to accurate facts for arriving at objective conclusions.

Successful cultures demand effective communication. Language must be able to clearly convey context and perspectives. Words should convey important emotions and opinions. Watered down language and vague or ambiguous meaning for words too often elicit no more reaction than an old fashioned “cuss” word. We’re rapidly moving in that direction.

We are indeed experiencing a modern day “Babel effect” – chaos and confusion. Let’s return to the days when the word “woman” didn’t convey an abstract concept.