

Circumlocution

“Circumlocution” is a word with which I am familiar, but is certainly not from the part of my vocabulary I typically use. Nonetheless, I am reminded of the proverb of Solomon about using the right *word* in the right *way* at the right *time*. He wrote, *“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances,”* Proverbs 25:11. I’m not claiming that “circumlocution” is that right *word*, or that this is necessarily the right *time* or *way* to produce the effect of *“apples of gold in settings of silver”* either. But I do think “circumlocution” is a word we need to consider.

Dwight D. Eisenhower is attributed with the following quote: “An ‘intellectual’ is a man who takes more words than necessary to tell more than he knows.” We preachers, unfortunately, often fall into this category; but we are not alone in it. Most of us, especially when faced with a difficult situation or question, do a verbal waltz around the issue without ever really stepping on, let alone in, it. This is “circumlocution” exactly.

“Circumlocution” is the combination of two words: ***circum*** means *round* or *around*, as “circa” before a date means that it is *around* that date; and ***locution*** has to do with speech. It is from the Latin word *loqui*, which means *to speak*. Hence, “elocution” has to do with how one speaks. Now, if we put ***circum*** (*around*) together with ***locution*** (*speech*) we get ***circumlocution***. Literally, it is “**talking around**” an issue, usually without ever really addressing it, much less addressing it directly.

Perhaps an example will help to illustrate. Husbands, if your wife asks, “Does this outfit make me look fat?” **and it does**, what do you say? You probably do that earlier-mentioned verbal waltz around the subject and say anything and everything you can without really ever answering the question. Or, you just go ahead and get the black eye and/or several days of “the silent treatment”- depending, of course, on your wife’s regard for brutal honesty.

But “circumlocution” has a more spiritual point I’d like you to consider. If your spiritual brother is “*caught in a trespass*,” Galatians 6:1a, or “*sins*,” Matthew 18:15, do you go and talk “**to**” him, or just practice circumlocution by talking “**around**” the issue to everyone else? Or, even if you do go to your brother, do you address your concerns over his soul directly, or talk **around** it to such an extent that he doesn’t even really know what you said, much less why you said it? When trying to “*restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness*,” Galatians 6:1b, or “*win back*” your brother, he has to know what he’s done wrong. Such is the essential nature of *reproof* of Matthew 18:15ff. Talking around the issue without really addressing it, which is “circumlocution,” doesn’t do anyone any good.

However, a final point seems necessary: The goal of avoiding circumlocution in no wise provides an excuse to be rude, unkind, or ungracious in words or deeds. Remember, the goal is to “*win back*” your brother! It’s easy to tell someone they’re “wrong” if you don’t care about them becoming “right.” But, if you really care about their soul, and thus care about them correcting their sin, chose your words judiciously. Paul put it this way to the Colossians, “*Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person*,” Colossians 4:6. A good “rule of thumb” (“rule of tongue” is perhaps better) in approaching someone about their sin is this: Speak to them *where*, *when*, and *how* you would want them to tell you about your sin if/when the situation was reversed. And of course, it always helps if you’re not guilty of the same thing, or worse, yourself, Matthew 7:1-5! Now, let’s see if we all can avoid “circumlocution,” unless your wife asks you THAT question... then it might be just the ticket! (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)