

“Duane Litfin’s *Word versus Deed* addresses a topic of perennial importance for the church and pressing relevance for our own generation. Litfin is thoroughly convinced—on the basis of Scripture—that the gospel cannot be preached merely with deeds but must be proclaimed with words. He uses his extensive background in rhetoric and theology to explain why this is so and then employs his wisdom as a pastor to show the proper relationship between gospel words and gospel-worthy deeds in Christian life and witness.”

Philip Ryken, President, Wheaton College

“Duane Litfin has written a book that needs to find its way into every preacher’s briefcase or backpack—and quickly. With care and candor, he reminds us all of the Bible’s priority of verbal proclamation. Evenhanded and deeply biblical, *Word versus Deed* does indeed reset the biblical balance. I am very thankful for this book, and you will be, too.”

Al Mohler, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Today, as powerful voices inside and outside the church are insisting that the gospel is best proclaimed by deeds rather than words, Duane Litfin provides a wholly biblical answer that establishes the full primacy of proclamation together with the role of deeds in demonstrating the gospel to a watching world. Litfin’s answer is finely wrought and judiciously reasoned as he travels the ladder of abstraction and the range of biblical revelation in respect to the preaching of the gospel. And it is utterly compelling. *Word versus Deed* is sure to be read, reread, and much discussed. This is a wise and timely book that brings biblical clarity to a life-and-death debate.”

R. Kent Hughes, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church,
Wheaton, Illinois

“With interpretive skill and theological insight, Duane Litfin has given us a masterful treatment of the Bible’s teaching regarding the necessity of gospel proclamation and the importance of good works. Litfin’s thoughtful exegesis and pastoral wisdom provide helpful guidance that enables Christ followers to handle the difficult challenges associated with the themes of ‘word’ and ‘deed’ with greater responsibility. I am hopeful that this readable volume will point pastors, teachers, and church leaders toward a more informed understanding of God’s Word—resulting in faithful living *and* convictional proclamation.”

David S. Dockery, President, Union University

“Many people like to make us pick between word and deed as the best way to reflect our Christian call. It is choice we need not make. In a book that shows how both word and deed are important and necessary, Duane Litfin also reminds us how important having the Word is. It is a needed reminder that allows us to reflect on how to live our Christian lives in balance, both proclaiming and reflecting the truth that God is at work among us.”

Darrell L. Bock, Research Professor of New Testament Studies,
Dallas Theological Seminary; author of over 30 books

“Getting the pendulum of truth to cease its drift from side to side is a perpetual challenge. For many decades in the not-too-distant past, the gospel was a proclamational priority with little emphasis on the gospel’s call to feed the hungry, care for the poor, and break the bonds of oppression. The social gospel was what those ‘liberals’ did. Many of us have now lived long enough to watch the pendulum swing to the opposite extreme with the deeds of the gospel being seemingly sufficient. Thankfully, my friend Duane Litfin has articulately and persuasively brought these issues of the gospel into balance. His fresh, intriguing treatment of key passages and his usual precision in developing an argument make a much needed contribution that leads us to empower the gospel with both word and deed.”

Joseph M. Stowell, President, Cornerstone University

“There must be a sharp distinction between the gospel—the message about what God has done in Jesus, supremely in his death and resurrection—and how the Christian acts as an implication of the gospel. This book is a positive, helpful articulation of the importance of maintaining the distinction between the gospel preached (word) and the gospel lived (deed).”

Ben Peays, Executive Director, The Gospel Coalition

WORD
VS
DEED

WORD DEED

WORD VERSUS DEED

RESETTING THE SCALES TO A BIBLICAL BALANCE

DUANE LITFIN

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Word versus Deed: Resetting the Scales to a Biblical Balance

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jon McGrath, Simplified Studio

First printing 2012

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-3112-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3113-2

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3114-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3115-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Litfin, A. Duane.

Word versus deed : resetting the scales to a biblical balance /

Duane Litfin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3112-5 (tp)

1. Communication—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2.

Christian life. I. Title.

BV4597.53.C64L58 2012

248.4—dc23

2011051831

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To all those faithful disciples at Wheaton College—students,
staff, faculty, board, alumni—who have encouraged
and instructed me by their balanced commitment
to both word and deed in serving Jesus Christ.

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything
in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks
to God the Father through him.

—Colossians 3:17

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INTRODUCTION

WORDS OR DEEDS?

Preach the gospel at all times.
Use words if necessary.

—Anonymous

The goal of this book is simple enough: to offer thoughtful Christians some help in thinking biblically about the enduring question of *word* versus *deed* in their Christian calling.¹

The issue here, of course, is one of balance. How are Christians to think about the relative roles of *word* and *deed* in what Christ has called his people to be and do? The church has often gotten this balance wrong over the centuries, and if much of the current dialog on the subject is any measure, our own generation may be following suit. This book is about seeking a proper *biblical* balance between these two dimensions of the Christian's calling, which is to say, it's about setting the scales to a balance that is true to the Scriptures.

This sounds simple. But finding and maintaining a biblical balance on such a complex subject is anything but easy. It's like walking a tightrope. There is only one path that will keep us upright and moving forward, but there are many ways to fall to one side or the other.

Misguided claims in the historic "word versus deed" debate abound. On the surface some of them sound plausible,

and all the more so as they are often-repeated. But left unchallenged these mistaken notions, like winds aloft, jostle and buffet us, making it difficult to keep our thinking and behavior balanced. Only by measuring these notions against the Scriptures can we resist their buffeting and maintain the equilibrium the Lord intends for his church.

MISGUIDED NOTIONS

What sort of misguided notions do we have in mind? Here's a prominent example.

It would be hard to overstate how often we hear these days, expressed with passion and hearty approval, the famous dictum attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." In this saying, the "word versus deed" question rears its head, stressing in this instance how important it is for Christians to "preach the gospel" with their actions. According to this way of thinking, deeds may trump words when it comes to communicating the gospel. Let the gospel be seen rather than spoken, it is said. Words may serve a useful backup role, to be used as needed, but our actions must take center stage if we are to make a difference in the world.

At first blush this sounds right. Except that it isn't.

First, according to those who know about such things, St. Francis never uttered this saying. The Franciscans are a religious order founded by St. Francis. They are experts on his life and teaching, and it is they who insist that, after diligent research, they can find no record of St. Francis ever expressing this maxim. It appears nowhere in his writings or even in his early biographies. No one can find any record of this saying within two centuries of Francis's death.²

More importantly, however, if we accept this dictum at face value, we open ourselves to confusion. It's simply not possible to preach the gospel without words. The gospel is

inherently a *verbal* thing, and preaching the gospel is inherently a *verbal* behavior. Thus the implication of this saying—that we are daily “preaching the gospel” with our deeds—is seriously misguided. It’s a mistake which, as we shall see, can lead to a range of unfortunate results.

A LIGHTER TOUCH

But perhaps we should lighten up, we may say. Let’s treat this saying a bit more delicately. Let us view it merely as an *aphorism* and avoid pressing its language too literally. According to this reading, the saying is merely a rhetorical trope designed to emphasize the importance of backing up our gospel words with Christ-following lives.

This, of course, is an immensely important and thoroughly biblical idea. If this is all our maxim is affirming we should deem it very useful indeed. But, unfortunately, this is not all it’s affirming. Many seem to want to treat it much more literally, precisely because they see no difficulty in doing so. They will insist that the gospel can indeed be preached without words. Sometimes this is referred to as an “incarnational” approach to evangelism, whereby we “preach the gospel” by incarnating it in the world. You can preach the gospel with words, it is said, and you can preach the gospel with your actions. In fact, between the two our actions may be the more important because they speak louder than our words. Some even assert that without the actions to back them up, the words can have little impact.

What should we make of this claim? Can we or can we not “preach the gospel” with our actions? Who’s right, and does it really matter?

As it happens, it matters a great deal. The stakes are surprisingly high in how we decide this question. So we need to be careful to test our answer against the Scriptures.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

If you believe the gospel can be preached without words, this book is for you. I hope to challenge your thinking and lay out a more fully biblical way of thinking about the issue. On the other hand, if you believe the gospel cannot be preached without words, this book is also for you. My goal is to support you in that conviction and explore with you the implications of your claim.

This effort will take us into some interesting and important territory. What after all is the gospel, and what is evangelism? What is the role of our deeds in fulfilling Christ's calling? How is Scripture being used and misused in this discussion, and how do these mistakes wind up distorting our understanding of the relevant issues, not to mention our behavior? These are the sorts of questions this book attempts to address.

As I have said, the stakes in this discussion are higher than one might guess. This is not some esoteric debate reserved for theologians or technical Bible scholars. Faithful obedience to Jesus Christ is what we're after, and that applies to all who call him Lord. Such obedience must by definition begin with clear thinking about what Jesus is calling us to be and do, for if we do not understand our calling, what are the chances we will fulfill it? This is what's on the line in our discussion.

THINKING BIBLICALLY

Our goal in this book is to think biblically about the issues of "word versus deed" in the Christian's calling. But even as I write this sentence I'm aware that not all will consider this a worthy or even achievable goal.

First, there are those who, to put it mildly, demonstrate little confidence in the Scriptures. In his *Letters from the Earth*, Mark Twain said of the Bible, "It is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched

history; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies.” From today’s popular atheists one can hear similar sentiments. We would not expect such critics to be much interested in thinking *biblically*.

There are others who will cite the Bible when it says something of which they approve but who are also not the least inclined to treat it as an authoritative word from God. They quote the Bible the way we might quote Shakespeare, because they find something there particularly apt and well put. But they do not come to the Scriptures for divine direction.

Then there are those who view the Bible as a loose collection of religious writings produced by scores of authors and editors over hundreds of years. As such, the biblical writings lack coherence. Hence the notion of something being “biblical,” in any sense that requires a Bible that speaks with a unified voice, is misguided. The Bible manifests no such unified voice, they will argue. It speaks with many voices and says a variety of different, often contradictory things. There is therefore no such thing as a coherent “biblical” viewpoint to discover.

Still others wish to view the Scriptures in a more positive light, but they nonetheless do not look to the Bible for the sort of direction we have in mind in this book—or, at least, they are disinclined to discover that direction by searching out the details of the biblical text. Their strategy is less exegetical than theological, or even philosophical. They prefer to extrapolate the Bible’s relevance from its grand, mountaintop themes: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Exploring the full range of what the Bible actually says about a question such as ours appears to hold little interest for these thinkers. They may even dismiss such efforts as an exercise in proof-texting.

OUR WORKING ASSUMPTION

So let it be said at the outset that our working assumption in this book is the historic claim that the Bible, in its entirety, is

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God's inscripturated Word. It is therefore unified, consistent, and authoritative. Through all its manifest variety of voices, topics, and types of literature, it evinces an underlying coherence

Scripture is the fundamental source for one's speaking with a Christian voice and acting out of Christian conviction.

—Nicholas Wolterstorff

attributable to its ultimate source—it is *God's* Word. Its writings (the *graphe*) were “out-breathed” by God and are therefore profitable “for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” with a view to equipping us thoroughly “for every good work” (2 Tim.

3:16–17 NIV). With generations of Christians who have gone before, we therefore look to the Bible as our “only rule of faith and practice.” It speaks to us reliably not only of the grand mountaintop themes of the Christian *faith*—a point on which I not only concur but will insist—but also of more specific issues of our Christian *practice*. It thus provides us “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), including counsel toward a balanced understanding of the church's calling.

With this assumption in place, we want to inquire about what the Bible has to say on the important subject of word versus deed. We will explore the full range of this biblical counsel, yet we will also work to avoid the pitfalls of claiming the Bible's authority for what it does not, in fact, teach. Faithful students of Scripture must do no less.

HANDLING THE TEXT

It is not uncommon, unfortunately, to find the Bible handled rather loosely in the “word versus deed” discussion, even by those who consider themselves its friends. Wishing to enlist its authority for their cause, they seem unconcerned about bending its unwary texts to their own purposes.

Such cavalier treatments of Scripture are puzzling. If we

do not consider the Bible to be normative and authoritative, why cite it at all? Leave it out of the discussion. But if we do consider it to be God’s authoritative Word, it would seem we should place the highest premium on handling its texts with integrity, making every effort, to the best of our ability as fallible interpreters, to understand and represent them aright. The alternative, we were long ago warned, bears serious consequences:

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, declares the LORD. (Jer. 23:28–31)

In this book we draw upon the entire Bible—Law, Prophets, Wisdom, Gospels (both the Synoptics and John), Epistles (both Pauline and general), even apocalyptic. We will range widely throughout the Scriptures, assuming we will find there a complex and multidimensional but also coherent and, in the end, unified witness on our important topic. This also means, of course, that we will incur a special obligation to avoid “proof-texting” in our discussion; that is, we must avoid decontextualizing passages of the Bible in such a way as to distort or misrepresent their meaning.

Context is always a critical issue in the study of Scripture. Any fair use of a passage of the Bible must give due consideration to the natural habitat from which it is drawn. Without that, the biblical text can easily be put to purposes its divine and human authors never envisioned. This, in turn, is a sure-fire way to lose the balance between word and deed that Christ desires for his church. In the latter chapters of this book we

will explore some key biblical passages that are especially ill-treated in this discussion, ill-treated precisely by failing to give their context its due.

A DIFFICULT BALANCE

The unhappy truth is that Christians have often found the “word versus deed” balance difficult to set and maintain, especially over the last two centuries of American history.

Prior to the Civil War many American Christians had achieved a certain even-handedness in their understanding of “word versus deed.” They were actively spreading the gospel across the expanding nation (word), but they were also committed to the social dimensions of their calling (deed). They spent themselves and their resources in the building of hospitals and orphanages; they embraced the burgeoning Sunday school movement as a way of ministering to poor and disenfranchised children; strong abolitionist convictions and efforts flourished among them.

But as the nineteenth century unfolded, another trend was also developing. The growing encroachments of liberal theology continued to leach the theological substance from the gospel. As the authority and reliability of the Bible came under fire, core teachings of historic Christianity began to melt away. The supernatural claims of the gospel were repudiated or reinterpreted, leaving behind not much more than a social ethic. Hence the rise of the so-called social gospel in the mainline churches. The gospel, according to this line of revisionist thinking, was not about abstract theological affirmations or distant questions of history, much less pie-in-the-sky visions of the future. It was about demonstrating mercy and justice to one’s fellow man in the here and now. Thus did the pendulum swing away from word to deed.

Reacting to this trend in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the rising fundamentalist movement set itself to

champion the theological core of the Christian faith. These forebears of modern evangelicals stressed what they believed were the historic fundamentals of that faith, such things as the authority and trustworthiness of the Scriptures, the virgin birth of Jesus, his substitutionary atonement on the cross, his bodily resurrection from the grave, and his imminent return. At the center of it all they stressed the crucial importance of a personal response of faith to the verbal witness of the good news of the gospel.

Unfortunately, along with their faithfulness to the preached Word, many of these early fundamentalists made the mistake of deserting the social dimensions of the church's mission, not entirely, but to a degree that distinguished them from their theological forbears. Many of them simply abdicated social concerns to those they believed had forfeited the theological core of the gospel. In contrast to the liberal social gospel, theirs became what some have called a "lifeboat theology." Their task, as they saw it, was to rescue from this dying world as many souls as possible through the promulgation of the good news about Jesus. Thus did these early fundamentalists, in their neglect of the important social dimensions of the church's calling, shift the pendulum to the other extreme—away from deed to word.

Their task, as they saw it, was to rescue from this dying world as many souls as possible through the promulgation of the good news about Jesus.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the pendulum began to swing back toward a more biblical balance. By 1947 Carl F. H. Henry's book *The Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism* signaled a new day, at least for evangelicals. In this book Henry chided his fellow fundamentalists/evangelicals (the terms were in many ways interchangeable at the time) for their blind spots and failures in

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the realm of social engagement, yet without denigrating the central role of the verbal witness. Other important voices chimed in, and as the twentieth century waxed and then began to wane, evangelical social (not to mention political) engagement developed anew. By the end of the twentieth century the old lifeboat theology had almost disappeared among evangelicals. They were showing promise of having rediscovered something of the balance between word and deed called for in Bible.

But even as the twentieth century was ending and a new century dawning, indications that the pendulum might be

The gospel is inherently a *verbal* thing, and preaching the gospel is inherently a *verbal* behavior. If the gospel is to be preached at all, it must be put into words.

swinging again in the opposite direction began to appear. New voices and new trends emerged to emphasize the church's social responsibilities, often at the expense of its verbal witness. With the rise of so-called post-modernity, the cultural environment was shifting. A confidence in language came to be viewed

as an outmoded feature of modernity. *Logocentric* (that is, being too word centered) became a derogatory term. Increasingly experience, actions, and images were valorized, while the verbal dimensions of the church's calling were played down or even disparaged. Rising generations of young Christians seemed to think that the verbal expression of the gospel could almost be dispensed with. They grew increasingly passionate about the mercy and justice dimensions of the church's calling, but they seemed ever more relaxed about, oblivious to, suspicious of, or even hostile toward the church's verbal witness. "Deeds, not creeds" became a familiar slogan.

TODAY'S ENVIRONMENT

Such a quick survey of necessity fails the complex trends just described, but perhaps it can be allowed to serve our present point: it has been difficult through the years for the church to find and maintain its balance on the respective roles of word and deed in its mission. Over time the pendulum has sometimes swung too far in one direction or the other. It may be doing so again in our generation.

Ours is an environment highly susceptible to the mistaken notion that the church's verbal witness may be optional. The temptations of our day are seductive. Verbal behavior in general has fallen on hard postmodern times. The world will often applaud our feeding the hungry and healing the sick, but it will not applaud the word of the cross. The gospel of Jesus Christ represents a line in the sand. Jesus is the "stone of stumbling," the "rock of offense" who scandalizes the world (1 Pet. 2:6–8).

The sensibilities of our cultural moment thus combine with our natural inclination to avoid the stigma and rejection associated with Jesus. Together they conspire to shuttle us toward good deeds at the expense of gospel words. The result is inevitable: our verbal witness begins to suffer a benign neglect. We come to find comfort in the notion that our deeds matter more than our words; indeed, that our deeds can *substitute* for our words. Not to worry, we seem to say, we're preaching the gospel every day. We're just doing it with our actions.

This may be a comforting notion but it's also dangerously misleading. However important our actions may be (and, as we shall see, they are very important indeed), and whatever else they may be doing (which subject we will also explore), those actions are not "preaching the gospel." Despite the fact that so many today seem to think otherwise, one simply cannot preach the gospel without words. Let us say it again: the

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gospel is inherently a *verbal* thing, and preaching the gospel is inherently a *verbal* behavior. If the gospel is to be preached at all, it must be put into words.

These are strong claims. They fly in the face of a good deal of current popular thinking. Can such claims stand the light of examination? We shall see, for an examination of these claims is precisely what follows.

PART 1

**THE IMPORTANCE
OF OUR WORDS**

CHAPTER ONE

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

We respond to gestures with an extreme alertness and, one might almost say, in accordance with an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known to none, and understood by all.

—Edward Sapir, 1949

If we are to sort our way through the “word versus deed” debate, the first thing we require, even before we turn to the Scriptures, is an appropriate framework for our thinking, one that will help us make sense of the issues rather than confuse them. This chapter is designed to provide that framework.

The categories we require are these: *verbal communication* and *nonverbal communication*. We have been using the terms *word* and *deed*, and it will be immediately apparent that these correspond directly to the terms *verbal* and *nonverbal*. The difference in both cases focuses on whether we are using words.

Both verbal and nonverbal communication have been the subject of almost three millennia of fascinating and useful study, so we may ask ourselves what insights this work might contribute to our discussion. If we can pause for a moment and focus on this question, much of what follows will fall into place.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR WORDS

VERBAL VERSUS NONVERBAL

The term *verbal communication* refers to all those ways we communicate using a linguistic code. We call the various linguistic codes “languages.” English, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, Japanese, Urdu, Swahili, Portuguese: all such languages are linguistic codes. Each of these codes has its own grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. These are the features we study when we try to master a new language.

Notice that the distinction here is not whether we are making sounds. That’s *vocal* versus *nonvocal*. For instance, writing is a form of verbal behavior because it uses the verbal code, but it’s soundless. Conversely, grunting is vocal (that is,

Too often, the nonverbal component of interpersonal interchanges has received only passing reference or has been ignored entirely. Such oversight can lead to some erroneous conclusions about the interpersonal communication process.

—Judee K. Burgoon

acoustically conveyed) but not verbal. The verbal/nonverbal distinction has to do not with whether we are making sounds but whether we are using a linguistic code (language, words) for our communication.

If verbal communication depends upon words, the term *nonverbal communication* refers to all those ways we communicate without words. Verbal codes are notoriously complicated, as anyone who has tried to learn a language can testify, but the nonverbal codes are in some ways still more complex. There are no books of formal grammar for the nonverbal codes; nor, most likely, can there ever be. The nonverbal dimensions of our communication are too subtle and contextual to be captured so concisely. They are supremely nuanced and difficult

to master. That's why long after having mastered a new language, fluent speakers are often still giving off nonverbal mis-cues, picked up only by native speakers.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Humans communicate nonverbally in a variety of ways. We do not require for our purposes a detailed survey, but the following are some of the more obvious ways humans engage one another nonverbally:

- *Facial expression*: Think of a smile, a frown, a look of concentration, or contentment. The face is perhaps the most expressive part of the body, followed by the hands.
- *Gestures*: Waving, or pointing, or thrusting out the palm of the hand to halt someone are common nonverbal cues. Consider how effective speakers use gestures to enhance their messages. Some nationalities are known for “talking with their hands” while speaking. Others tend to limit their gestures.
- *Head position*: Head position tends to correlate with perceived status. Deference is communicated with a lowered head position, while a high head position communicates the reverse. Hence the notion of “looking down our nose” at someone.
- *Eye behavior*: Think of staring, rolling the eyes, winking, or refusing to make eye contact. Consider how subtly the eyes can express dreaminess, sadness, or interest.
- *Vocal inflection* (often called “paralanguage”): Imagine two husbands saying to their wives, “You look great.” The one expresses himself enthusiastically, while the other uses a sarcastic “tone of voice.” The contrasting vocal inflections enable the same three words to express opposite messages.
- *Touch behavior*: Touching, or the lack of it, tends to express relationship. The amount of touching, the location of the touch, the

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age and genders involved—these and many other touch factors communicate volumes.

- *Physical appearance and dress*: How we dress and groom ourselves communicate more than we realize. We are constantly reading one another's appearance. Studies show that the conclusions people draw about strangers, based solely on appearance, are often surprisingly uniform and accurate.
- *Posture*: The popular term *body language* includes several of the above dimensions, but posture is one of its key elements. Consider how one's body position can communicate confidence or fear, formality or informality, interest or indifference.
- *Use of space* (sometimes called "proxemics"): We often use space to express, for instance, our emotional connections to others. Think of the closeness that informs everyone a young couple is newly married, or the distant demeanor, the standoffishness, of strangers or enemies.
- *Surroundings*: Consider how much we quickly conclude about others when we catch a glimpse of the condition of their car, or their desktop, or their clothes closet. How we order our surroundings is one of the ways we communicate with those around us.
- *Actions*: We are constantly assessing one another on the basis of behavior. Actions are not self-contained; humans draw inferences about what they cannot see from the conduct they do see. We "read" other people's actions for their meaning, just as they do ours.

If verbal and nonverbal communication can be distinguished in theory, it's also true that in everyday practice they tend to occur in concert. And we are usually glad when they do. Writing typically strips out the nonverbal dimension, leaving us having to read between the lines for the information usually carried at the nonverbal level. Interestingly, in our digital age so-called emoticons—for example, :-) for happy;

:(for sad; (*_*) for surprised—have been devised to offset some of this loss. Telephone conversations enable some of the vocal inflection to come through, but all the visual cues are lacking. Video conferences or meetings using Internet services such as Skype add some of the visual information, especially facial expression, but even here many of the other nonverbal cues available in face-to-face settings are lacking. Typically our interpersonal communication works best when both the verbal and nonverbal codes are fully available to work together.

The relationship between the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of our communication is itself a fascinating and complicated subject. These two communication channels work together in a variety of important ways:

- *Repeating*: A woman forcefully points to the door and says, “Get out!” The nonverbal dimension of her communication is repeating the verbal dimension. Either might have stood on its own, but in combination her message is strengthened.
- *Complementing*: When a speaker, describing the open plain he had seen, uses wide gestures with his hands and arms, he is using a nonverbal channel to enhance the verbal. The broad gestures alone would convey little, but when combined with the verbal description the gestures serve a complementing function.
- *Substituting*: When asked if you will be attending the party you simply shrug your shoulders. You might have replied, “I’m not sure,” but instead you allow this common nonverbal gesture to convey your meaning.
- *Contradicting*: We typically try to coordinate our verbal and nonverbal messages. You can experience this by trying a simple exercise: Say “yes” out loud while shaking your head “no.” It requires a bit of concentration because we are so used to coordinating our verbal and nonverbal messages. But sometimes the opposite occurs: our verbal and nonverbal messages

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contradict one another. For example, nervous gestures or tell-tale facial cues may alert us that someone is lying.

- *Regulating:* We often use nonverbal cues to regulate the flow of verbal communication. For instance, we may use eye behavior (catching someone's eye) to initiate the flow of verbal communication. Or we do the reverse: we use so-called exit cues (such as checking our watch) to terminate a conversation.

Human communication is an endlessly fascinating subject, and the verbal/nonverbal distinction is only one way of analyzing it. But these are the two categories that are most relevant to our present discussion. What can we learn from even this quick summary? The following insights are especially pertinent.

One cannot not communicate. We are constantly communicating with one another, if not verbally, then nonverbally. If we say, "I will simply remain still and say nothing," our very stillness and silence are communicating.

The power of the nonverbal aspects of our interpersonal communication lies in their ability to express the affective dimension of our messages.

We tend to grant nonverbal messages more credence. When they contradict, we tend to believe nonverbal messages over verbal messages because the nonverbal dimensions of our communication are much more difficult to control. This is the working premise of lie detector

tests. It's relatively easy for those attached to a lie detector (polygraph) machine to deceive with their words, but the nonverbal indicators the machine is measuring (blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, galvanic skin response) give them away. We can control our conscious words far more easily than we can control our often unconscious nonverbal messages, many of which we may not even be aware we are sending.

That's why when we must choose between conflicting messages, we tend to believe the nonverbal over the verbal. Hence the old adage, "Your actions speak so loud I can't hear what you say."

Nonverbal channels are especially effective in communicating attitudes, moods, feelings, and relationships. The power of the nonverbal aspects of our interpersonal communication lies in their ability to express the affective dimension of our messages. Whatever a speaker may be saying verbally, how she *feels* about her subject matter, or about her hearers, or even about herself is what tends to come across nonverbally. Without these sorts of affective cues, interpersonal messages often lack depth and dimension. But with them our communication achieves a greater richness. That's why when it's unavailable to us, as in reading a written message, we tend to feel the loss of the nonverbal dimension. We normally value and even depend upon the kinds of personal information nonverbal channels so effectively convey.

Nonverbal channels are inadequate for conveying cognitive content. If nonverbal channels are extremely effective in communicating moods, feelings, relationships, or attitudes, by the same token they are largely incapable of conveying cognitive, abstract, or historical information.

This is easily demonstrated. Imagine you have been assigned the task of communicating the following idea to a particular individual: Aristotle tutored Alexander the Great at the Macedonian court between 342 and c. 339 BC. Unfortunately, you discover that your pupil has no previous knowledge of either Aristotle or Alexander, what a tutor is, what Macedonia is, who Christ was, or consequently, what BC means. What's more, as if your task were not difficult enough, you do not have the verbal code available to you. Your pupil does not speak your language and you do not speak hers. In other words, you cannot use words to express your ideas. All

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you have available are nonverbal channels of communication. How would you go about your task?

You can see immediately that your assignment would be impossible. You cannot communicate this type of content nonverbally. What facial expressions, or gestures, or eye behavior, or actions could express information about Alexander or Macedonia? The nonverbal code is simply incapable of bearing this sort of content. What you require is the verbal code—words and sentences and paragraphs—to convey your meaning. Without them your task is not doable.

Verbal behavior is neither unimportant nor dispensable. God's revelation came to us, after all, not only in the living Word, Jesus Christ, but in the written Word, the Scriptures.

But wait. Perhaps with enough time, one might say, you could use pictures, or perhaps mime, to communicate these ideas. But that won't work either. The more abstract the information, the more impossible your task. It would be a slog, but let us suppose you might eventually be able to use these channels to make slight progress in explaining what it means to be a tutor. But how could you ever explain who Aristotle was, or what BC means?

Mime artists intentionally forego the use of the verbal code, using only nonverbal channels to communicate their messages. But notice what they communicate and what they cannot communicate. Much of their art depends on the strengths of the nonverbal code (expressing sadness or happiness, for instance), and the rest depends on reminding observers, by acting, what the observers already know, either from experience or from what they have previously learned via the verbal code (e.g., in school). Without such props, not even the

most gifted mime could explain to your pupil through actions alone who Aristotle was. Nonverbal channels cannot bear this kind of informational weight. Their usefulness lies elsewhere. If our goal is to express cognitive, abstract, or historical content, the verbal code is required. Words and sentences are simply indispensable.

INVALUABLE WORDS

We live in a day, as we have said, when the nonverbal dimensions of human communication (images, gestures, actions) are sometimes valorized at the expense of the verbal dimension. Visual media such as movies, YouTube, or video games are massively popular, while wordy endeavors such as poetry or newspapers have fallen on hard times. The tendency to trust and depend on language is sometimes denigrated, not seldom, we might note, by authors using words to do so.

Such critiques are not without their value. Yet Christians should resist acquiescing too quickly to these trends. Verbal behavior is neither unimportant nor dispensable. God's revelation came to us, after all, not only in the living Word, Jesus Christ, but in the written Word, the Scriptures. What's more, the use of the verbal code lies at the heart of what it means to be human, so much so that we can scarcely imagine life and society without it. We require language to speak of other people, places, and times (e.g., Aristotle, Alexander, ancient Greece); or to make statements that can be proven true or false ("My insurance company is the largest in the world"); or to express infinitely useful abstractions such as "chairs," "Democrats," "historians," or "polynomial equations." We use words to express the relative worth of something ("She makes the best coffee") or to describe the nature of something else ("Wheaton is a liberal arts college"). We use the verbal code to express policies ("Copies must be paid for in advance at the front desk") or to urge actions ("Jobs and employment

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should be the nation's first priority"). And most wonderful of all, each of these verbal functions can be combined to produce complex analyses, explanations, and arguments. The ability to use words lies at the center of what it means to be human. To devalue the one is to devalue the other.

So what does all of this mean for our "word versus deed" debate? Read on.