

With this essay by [Eric Springsted](#) the Institute continues a new series begun in September 2016 that will appear monthly (the second Wednesday of the month), with contributions from members of the [Company of Teachers](#) designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce and circulate these pieces as you see fit.

## Words Matter

No one can be unaware of the events of the last two weeks. Within days of his inauguration, the new president managed to create a constitutional crisis or two, leave himself wide open to charges of conflict of interest, reverse America's reputation as a place where the tired and poor are welcomed, invent the alternative fact, make our allies worry more about us than the Russians or Chinese, and generally run the government in such a way, as David Brooks opined, that we would call amateurish except that would reflect badly on amateurs. The Reformed tradition has a lot to say about welcoming the stranger, about uprightness in business dealings, about the righteous duties of the magistrate. But tempting as it may be to comment on the obvious, I want to comment on two things that I think are even more basic to us in the Reformed tradition, and that have a great deal to do with what is going on. These are two matters that have always seemed to me to be "habits of the heart" of Reformed existence. Each begins in an important theological matter of identity, but each also spreads itself broadly in all that we do. A lot stands on them.

The first is the centrality of the Word. This centrality of the Word is Calvin, but it also goes back to Augustine and to St. Paul. What it means is this: we participate in God's very life by our participation in the divine Word. By the Spirit it dwells in us. It does so by our hearing it read and preached, and partaking of it in the sacraments, which Augustine called "a visible Word." Augustine also talked about how the Word in the process of our growing in faith becomes our "inner word," the word behind all our spoken words. Words are thus important to us in a very broad as well as narrow sense. The Word is behind our words, and our words are for the service of the Word. What we say makes a difference, how we say it does, too. Augustine even went so far as to argue that we should never lie, because that would be to misuse words, and that would be to betray the Word from whence they come and which they are meant to serve.

The second is our form of government, which is really an articulation of our spirituality. In the Reformed tradition, a presbyterian form of government is not simply an expedience. It is linked to the important Reformed doctrine of effective calling. God not only calls us, but leads us to work out our salvation. This is vital to a sense of vocation, and to how we understand the idea of the priesthood of all believers. It is also linked to the church, the community in which our calling is practiced. That is also to say that one's calling is not a lonely, individual effort. It is exercised within a body. My calling is linked to yours, both are part of the whole. Thus our form of government is not a matter of checks and balances. It is a matter of shared vocations. We each need to practice our own calling with integrity; both our lives and the lives of others depend on it. We need to respect the callings of others, too.

Now, I do not think that it is very hard to imagine how the centrality of the Word and our sense of calling are joined in some very quotidian ways. Words are how we relate to each other. How we use them goes to the heart of our respect for others, both as people and as people who have vocations. Our community is built up, and functions well insofar as these two things go together. It is our institutional strength.

Alright. That is who *we* are, at least ideally, although it is often hard to maintain these links even within our own tradition. We live in an individualistic culture that particularly makes it difficult to get across all that is involved in our sense of shared vocations. Insofar as that is true, it is not always easy to get across how important the integrity and communal nature of words is to us, either. But it isn't just us in the Reformed tradition. If there is anything that we have added as salt and light to the general culture, specifically to the value of its democracy, it is that we – and others of similar mind – have given it something beyond the vacuities that individualism leads to. We have contributed to the strength of the institutions of democracy by bringing a sense of respect for truth, integrity, responsibility and respect for others' callings. That makes for a vital, flourishing community. Democracy is not an episodic exercise. It depends not only for its functioning on all sorts of institutions that not only need respect but that also have to be rewarding in some sense for life, rewarding so that we do not simply use our life together to pursue our private advantage.

Those institutions only work, however, when there is a sense of respect for the work of others and when there is a concern for truth. When words are used to lie, or to obfuscate or to continually put spin on events, whole institutions die. People don't discriminate; their use of words is constant according to habit. One philosopher, who was active in the French Resistance during World War II, knew the great social risk that the resistance was taking by its continual need to deceive, because people after the war would not easily give up the practice. The aftermath of more than one revolution or struggle for freedom has proved her right. Institutions in this way are very easy to destroy; they take generations to build. A historian once pointed out that after World War II, the German language was not fit to use because it had been lied in so often.

That is what concerns me more than anything else about the last two weeks. Words are worth nothing, or they are used as bombs. Each morning we are treated to a grammatical voiding of the president's mind that is a flood of lies, disrespect, bragging, and bullying. He is entitled to his opinion, I suppose. But words here are not being used to create, or to converse, or to learn, or to build. The longer that goes on, and the greater the taste we develop for using words that way, the faster our institutions, right, left, and center will come down. We will not get them back easily.

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February 2017