

On Meaning in Words

You know, I wonder why they don't revise the ritual. There is so much in it that is vague, obscure, and so many useless and unnecessary words and all; know what I mean? It would be so much clearer if – er – you know, if it were clearer.”

“I suppose,” the Old Tiler answered the New Brother, “that you think you could do a good job of revision?”

“You bet I could. Why, there are words the I never heard of until I became a Mason, and lots of places that the words could be changed and be more easily understood and read more like regular language, if you know what I mean.”

“You don't seem to be able to say just what you mean,” objected the Old Tiler. “Suppose you give me an instance.”

“Well,” said the New Brother, “let me see. Er – ah – well, I don't just remember exactly how it goes, but there is a place where it say, ‘justice is that standard or boundary of right which enables us to render every man his just due with out distinction.’ Now, ‘justice’ isn't a standard or a boundary. It's a sentiment. It's just as true to say that ‘right’ is bounded by ‘truth’ or ‘toleration’ or ‘mercy’ as it is to say it is bounded by ‘justice.’ And to say that by justice we render men their just dues is like saying that by right we render men their right dues, and you can't explain a word with itself. If you understand what I mean ---“

“Oh, I understand what I think you mean,” answered the Old Tiler. “But I don't think you say what you mean. No one ever does say what they mean. No matter how carefully anyone tries, they say one thing and mean something else.”

“Oh, nonsense. Why, everyone says what the mean when they stop to think about it.”

“Is that so?” asked the old Tiler, astonished. “Well, what do we have a Supreme Court for?”

“To interpret the laws; what's that got to do with it?”

“If the men who made the laws said what they meant, why do we have to have a Supreme Court to tell us what the men who framed the laws intended when they passed them? The Constitution of the United States is a plain and simple document, and yet someone is forever raising the question as to whether some law is constitutional or not. If I Say to you, ‘Boy, you are mistaken,’ you think you know what I mean, but I haven't said it; I have said something else. I have called you ‘boy’ when I know you must be a man or you couldn't be a Mason and I have stated that you are mistaken, when what I really mean is that it is my opinion that you are mistaken, but that, having lived a long time I know quite well it may be I who am mistaken. You gather what I mean from custom, knowledge of men and my tone of voice; but you don't get my real meaning from what I say.

“At the peace conference a lot of men tried to say a lot of things and the whole world has spent all its time since trying to find out what they did mean. We write books about what it means. A

political platform is supposed to be simple and understandable, but it never means what it says as we all find out the day after election.

“Now, you object to some words in the ritual. But I say you can’t frame that sentence so it reads any more plainly; the meaning is there and you know the meaning when you hear it. If that is true, then it doesn’t make any difference whether the words are the best words or not. Go read your Bible. I can find you 1,000 verses which don’t say what they mean but the meaning of which you cannot mistake. ‘Suffer little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.’ Do you think heaven is nothing but children? Do you think He wanted only small children and no big ones? Can they only get to heaven by coming to Him, and He dead to this earth 1,900 years? But you know what He meant when He said it; He meant that children were not to be kept from Him, and that the innocence and the sweetness and the beauty of childhood was ‘of the kingdom of heaven.’

“Now, boy – I should say brother – if He spoke in parables and hidden meanings and found it better to address a world so they listened to the thought rather than the words why should not Masonry do the same? And if you say, ‘Well, but let’s make it better now that we know,’ I ask you if you think you could rewrite the Bible so that it was more beautiful. Personally, I think, ‘In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you,’ is the most beautiful verse in the Bible, but that’s a matter of taste. If you said, ‘My Father has a house! It has many dwelling places in it. If the facts were otherwise I would have said so long ago.’ Would you better His words? You certainly wouldn’t better His meaning.

“Now, my son – I mean, my brother – the words of the ritual of Masonry may not always be the most aptly chosen, there may be many places where a doctor of philology and a competent searcher of the book of synonyms could make it seem plainer. But that any such changes and substitutions would make its meaning plainer, its truth plainer, its teachings plainer, I very much doubt.”

“But it’s so hard to memorize,” protested the New Brother weakly.

“So is a piano hard to play but I never heard of a musician wanting to take off a few keys to make it easier,” answered the Old Tiler. “Allow me to suggest that you go way back and sit down. Get me?”

“I understand what you mean, even if you don’t say it,” smiled the New Brother. “And you can go plumb to thunder?”

“You’re quite welcome,” answered the Old Tiler, taking the meaning and not the words to answer.

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