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Love Through Spoken Word

JASON BEMBRY

The importance of communication in marriage has long been recognized by many.¹ It is imperative that wives and husbands speak to one another concerning their feelings, needs, wants, frustrations and desires. Conveying love through the spoken word is a vital component of marital discourse. Yet numerous obstacles contribute to limited dialogue between marriage partners. In this article I would like to suggest that the Song of Songs has something to say to us regarding the importance of verbalizing love, showing our appreciation and devotion to our spouses.

I must admit at the outset that the main point of this article was given to me by Douglas Stuart, one of my Old Testament professors at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.² Stuart encouraged his students to appreciate the way the Song of Songs portrays love as verbal, love mediated through the spoken word. I would like to build upon Stuart's basic point by observing some aspects of the love language of the Song of Songs and by gleaning some insights from counselors, sociolinguists and anthropologists.

There have been numerous works dedicated to the importance of expressing love language in marriage and dating relationships and inherent problems that attend these acts. Deborah Tannen has provided an explanation for the difference between male and female conversation in public and private settings. She notes that men will often speak more in a public setting but less in a private one, while the opposite tends to be true of many women. Tannen observes that discourse for women is a means for establishing connections and negotiating relationships while men use the spoken word primarily to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. Such an assessment helps to explain why many wives complain that their husbands, who may talk a lot to other people, do not converse sufficiently with them. If Tannen is correct, men will generally talk more when they are in situations where they feel their status must be maintained. Since private conversations with their wives tends not to be this kind of situation, husbands will feel less inclined to converse in that particular milieu.³ Such distinction between genders constitutes an obstacle to loving discourse. Yet husbands and wives who are aware of these gender-based impulses can be more equipped to understand each other better and act accordingly as they navigate through the obstacles to healthy marital dialogue.

At a more popular level Gary Chapman speaks of five love languages that can be divided into several subcategories that he refers to as "dialects."⁴ Under the heading "Words of Affirmation" Chapman includes

1. H. J. Locke, G. Sabagh and M. Thomes, "Correlates of Primary Communication and Empathy," *Research Studies in the State College of Washington* 24 (1956): 118. See Patricia Noller, *Intimate Relationships; Development, Dynamics, and Deterioration* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 149.

2. Stuart's work on this subject has not been published. I conversed with him prior to writing this piece and his idea appears here with his permission.

3. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1990), 76-86.

4. Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1995), 49. Chapman's work has been criticized for being too reductionistic and facile to account for the complexity of human interaction. While I lack the professional experience to assess his work fully, I suspect that such criticism is valid. Even so, while Chapman's bigger project may need further nuance, his stress on the importance of communication in general and verbal compliments in particular is helpful.

verbal compliments, encouraging words and kind words. By verbal compliments Chapman means speaking words that praise one's spouse in various ways for their looks, their creativity and their intelligence. Encouraging words are used to lift up one's husband or wife in ways that they—and not the speaker—choose. In his discussion of “kind words” Chapman addresses the nonverbal aspect of communicated love language, stressing the importance of the way these words are spoken. That is, the manner in which love is communicated verbally is a vital component of loving discourse. When we turn to the text of Song of Songs 5.10–16, we see the type of language included under verbal compliments. Note the words of the woman as she speaks a loving description of her male lover:

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
 distinguished among ten thousand
 His head is premium gold
 His locks are piled up, dark like a raven
 His eyes are like doves on a water course, bathed in milk filled to the brim
 His cheeks are like garden terraces of spice, distant towers
 His lips are lilies dripping, overflowing myrrh
 His arms are rods of gold filled with gems
 His body is carved ivory covered in sapphires
 His legs are columns of alabaster, founded upon gold pedestals
 His appearance is like Lebanon, prized like cedars
 His mouth/speech is candy, completely desirable
 This is my lover; this is my friend O Daughters of Jerusalem.⁵

The woman here celebrates aloud the physical qualities of her man, from head to toe. The comparisons she makes with his body are drawn from all things valuable in the ancient world. Some of the items she speaks of, like gold, sapphires and ivory, need no explanation. Cedars from Lebanon were renowned for their value as were myrrh and spices.

The man of the Song also praises his lover in Song of Songs 6.4–9a. In this text he says:

My friend, you are beautiful like Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem
 Awesome as ensigns
 Divert your eyes from me, for they stir me up
 Your hair is like a flock of goats that descends from Gilead
 Your teeth are like a flock of ewe lambs that come up from washing all of which have twins,
 none of which are bereaved
 Your cheeks are like a halved pomegranate from behind your veil
 There are sixty queens and eighty concubines and young women without number
 My dove, my perfect one she is the one, she is the one to her mother, spotless to the one who bore her.

The man here compares his beloved to two cities and perhaps a military group. The simile of Tirzah and Jerusalem probably bespeak grandeur and elegance since both of these places were capitals (Tirzah in the northern kingdom of Israel and Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah) at some time.⁶ The image of ensigns, while not as clear as the other comparisons in the poem, refers to the emotion one feels in the presence of a large army arrayed with ensigns. The reference probably indicates an awe-inspiring perspective that would be consistent with a feeling of being overwhelmed with the presence of such a force. Comparing her hair with a flock moving down a hill probably illustrates the way her hair spills down over

5. The translation of the Hebrew is my own.

6. Tirzah was a temporary capital early in the divided monarchy that eventually gave way to the new location of Samaria in Omri's day (ninth century). Since the name Tirzah is related to the Hebrew root “to be pleased with,” it makes a fitting comparison in this context.

her shoulders when she turns her head. The symmetry of her teeth is probably being indicated in comparison with the group of twin goats. The rosininess of a pomegranate both inside and outside is used to indicate the healthy hue of the woman's cheeks.

Clearly the love language employed here by the man and woman illustrate verbal compliments given to each other. Such affirmation is an important mode of communication in a marriage. This is especially true in our culture, where the ideal bodies constantly set forth in advertisements and other media can instill a negative self-image in those who feel they can never measure up to such standards.⁷ In a similar vein, infelicitous childhood labels are often hard to remove for many people, and in such situations positive verbal affirmation becomes one tool in the process of dismantling those negative self-images.

Yet there is more to say regarding the particulars of these two texts. I find it interesting, for example, that in both sections the speaking lover moves from second person address to third person. The compliments given to the lover constitute the bulk of each poetic section. Yet at the end of each, others are told about the beauty of the beloved. In the first piece the woman addresses the "daughters of Jerusalem" as she boasts of her lover's qualities. We may even imagine it to be a public proclamation of sorts. At the very least we can say she is speaking her love for her man to a group of listeners. So in her poetry the third person address is explicit since it does, after all, answer the question raised by the daughters of Jerusalem in verse 9 "How is your lover any different from others . . . that you thus entreat us?" While the man's section follows a similar pattern, his audience in verses 8–9 is not explicit. So his third person address remains ambiguous. Even so, in the literary world of the poetry, the hearers/readers of the text are probably imagined to be the audience of the poem. In any case these two love poems accomplish two things; they portray two lovers speaking complimentary love language to each other and to others about their respective loves.

As noted earlier, Chapman speaks of the importance of speaking praise personally to one's spouse. Yet he also encourages his readers to speak these complimentary words about their spouse to others.⁸ Affirmation is something that all people need for a healthy psyche. Spouses need to hear verbal compliments from their partner, face to face and through a third party. Such discourse, both public and private, may not come naturally to some, especially men. Tannen's work suggests that most men will find conversation in general and loving language in particular not a part of their natural interaction with their spouse. Knowing the different gender perspectives can help spouses appreciate their own needs and those of their spouses so as to prevent the differences from being an obstacle to healthy relationships. The inclusion of the Song of Songs in the biblical canon provides a model for doing so.

Of course the Song of Songs is not a marriage enrichment manual and I do not suggest reading it as an exhaustive treatise on maintaining a healthy marriage or finding a godly mate. It is, after all, love poetry from the ancient Near East full of double entendre, celebrating love between a man and a woman, not explicitly linked with the unique revelation of Yahweh to his people Israel.⁹ In this sense the Song of Songs is like much of the biblical wisdom literature that is more general in its outlook (again, not explicitly linked with the exclusive revelation of Yahweh).¹⁰ The biblical writers brought it into the canon to speak to the concept of love between women and men, giving voice to the interplay between lovers. So while the Song of Songs has much to teach us, it is not intended to answer every question about intimate relationships. Clearly love is more than verbalizing compliments, and of course, such spoken words must be congruous

7. Clifford and Joyce Penner, *The Gift of Sex* (Waco, TX: Word, 1981), 51.

8. Chapman, *The Five Love Languages*, 49.

9. In my opinion the traditional way of reading the Song of Songs as an allegorical text on God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the church is misguided and driven in many cases by a desire to elevate the text out of the seemingly lowbrow world of sexuality and romance.

10. Such an explicit connection between Yahwistic faith and wisdom is made by the later writers of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon.

with nonverbal cues and bolstered by loving deeds.¹¹ So in this sense, the Song of Songs becomes one voice among many in the Bible that seek to bear witness to the ways of God. In keeping with this understanding, contemporary English speakers need not adopt the love language of our two lovers in this text in a wooden fashion. Referring to flocks of goats to describe your spouse's hair may not convey the same compliment that it would have in ancient Israel.

The Song of Songs has much to teach us. As love poetry from the ancient world we can hear two lovers sharing their feelings of desire for one another. As a portion of the word of God we can also see that this interchange has something to say to us today as God's people, made in his image yet affected by our human limitations. We can learn the importance of overcoming the obstacles to loving language, whether cultural or individual, as we engage this dialogical landscape in the Song of Songs. This biblical book demonstrates the power of verbalized love, compliments shared between the man and woman, sometimes face to face and sometimes to others about their beloved. It calls us to do the same with our spouses, celebrating with spoken word the wonderland that is their body and spirit in a loving, godly relationship—the relationship our Creator desires for married people.

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11. Giving compliments can be a risky endeavor, as Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet point out. See their book, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 151. They note that women tend to compliment and receive compliments with greater frequency than men. Women may give more compliments to other women as a way to strengthen solidarity. Men may believe that giving compliments to women is more about asserting their (the men's) own authority to evaluate the other. Such may explain the greater frequency of the male lover's compliments to the female in the Song of Songs.