He Spoke as One Having Authority:
A Comparative Study Vocal Behaviors

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To speak with authority is to use vocal behaviors in a manner that gets people’s attention and provokes them to listen intently and possibly take action on the message they hear. Scripture documents that Jesus’ used vocal behaviors to establish authority while here on Earth. Jesus’ authoritative speaking ability is one of the many attributes that gave the people assurance that he was the promised Messiah. The people of Israel were looking for a Savior, one they expected to crown as their royal king. God had other plans and he did not send a traditional earthly king like the people had come to expect. God sent Jesus, a seemingly ordinary man who was capable of doing extraordinary things. When Jesus spoke to the multitude, they were mesmerized and motivated to change. The great prophet Isaiah prophesied, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2, NIV).

Although many rejected him, many others, after hearing him speak, believed that he was the promised Messiah. One of the ways that some people discerned that Jesus was the promised Messiah is because of the distinct way that he used vocal behaviors. People were attracted to Jesus because of his confident use of vocal qualities, including the elements of tone, resonance, pitch and vocal rhythm. He was exceedingly articulate, to the degree that even the Jews were impressed, “And the Jews marveled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” (John 7:15, KJV). Mark 4:39 depicts Jesus using his voice to calm a storm, bearing witness that natures elements recognize his voice print, and obey his command (KJV). Matthew describes occasions when Jesus uses vocal cues to reveal his emotional state of mind,
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“After indicating in the beatitudes who it is that will receive comfort and relief as the kingdom is being established (Matt. 5:3–12), Jesus forcefully states that his ministry is abolishing neither the law nor the prophets (Matt. 5:17–19).” (Anders Runesson, 2011).

Jesus vocalizes emotional discontent when he raises his voice to condemn the religious leaders for being hypocrites for as recorded in Tyndale’s Life Application Bible, “Jesus made stinging accusations regarding the leaders’ hunger for more power, money, and status” (Matt. 23:13-36 NIV, p. 1701). His fury is apparent when he accuses the religious leaders and the Pharisees of using the church and its people to gain personal power and exaltation. John 7:37-39 portrays Jesus as crying out emphatically while encouraging the crowd to believe and accept the Holy Spirit (The Message).

“Vocal behavior plays an extremely important role in regulating our interactions with others” (Richmond & McCroskey & Hickson, p.105). Albeit Jesus’ vocal personality was inspired by of the Holy Spirit, it is one of the many, obvious non-verbal communication characteristics that helped him to inspire crowds when he spoke here on Earth. His noticeable vocal characteristics enabled him to draw a multitude of people from amongst Jews and Gentiles, “…because of his authority even some gentiles recognized who Jesus was and submitted themselves” (Runesson, 2011). Jesus’ kind, gentle, even-natured temperament and his persuasive vocal mannerisms allow him to influence “the attitudes, values and beliefs of others” (Richmond et al., p.120). These same vocal qualities enabled Jesus to create a unique voice set, giving people the cues that helped them interpret his teachings with their hearts while letting them know that he was different from any leader or teacher that they had previously encountered. His success with the crowds “stirred up envy, enmity, and confusion” amongst the Jews and Gentiles (Runesson, 2011). When put on trial before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, the high
priests and religious leaders make accusations; Jesus remains silent, exercising the intimidating vocal cue of silence. By ignoring Pilate’s turn-yielding cue, Jesus sends a nonverbal message that leaves Pilate perplexed and feeling as if he has no alternative than to turn Jesus over to the crowd to be tried (Matt. 27:14 & 26, NIV).

The crowd acknowledges Jesus’ vocal competence after witnessing one of his powerful sermons gives this account; “And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not the scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29, NKJV). Tyndale’s Life Application Bible makes the following commentary:

“The teachers of the law (religious scholars) often cited traditions and quoted authorities to support their arguments and interpretations. But Jesus spoke with a new authority – his own. He didn’t need to quote anyone because he was the original Word (John 1:1)” (Tyndale, 1991, p.1661).

Having the competence to use vocal variety effectively is a fundamental attribute for those called to lead God’s people. Jesus’ eloquent speaking ability coupled with his spirit inspired vocal behaviors enabled him to establish an earthly following in spite of the fact that even today some still choose to despise and reject him.

Research

Vocal behavior is a term that incorporates the various paralinguistic behaviors associated with nonverbal communication forms that originate with or are relative to the mouth (Richmond et al., 2012, p. 106). G. L. Trager is given credit with classifying vocal behaviors into three categories; voice set, voice qualities and vocalizations (Richmond et al, 2012, p. 106-107). Research indicates that most mammals are capable of producing some sort of vocalizations to
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communicate or otherwise get attention. Conversely, using the voice to generate effectual communication requires mastery of voice qualities and vocalizations.

Voice set describes the tangible and the intangible components pertaining to a message’s context. In some ways, voice set is much like a movie set in that the listener makes perceptions about the environment, wardrobe, emotional state, state of mind and other personal characteristics of the speaker as they would with a movie set. During face-to-face conversations, the voice set may include the listener’s preconceived notions about the speaker’s physical appearance, clothing, shoes, eyeglasses, and so forth, whereas during a telephone or other non-facing conversation, the listener must use imagination and/or auditory cues to visualize the voice setting. Richmond et al. explains, “voice set is closely related to who the speaker is”;

consequently, the voice set helps the listener to interpret the speaker’s words better (2012). When the president of the United States holds a press conference, attendees are, for the most part are respectful because of the status associated with the voice setting of president.

It would be a rare occasion for one to prefer a monotone speaker more than a prolific one; to that end, good speakers use voice qualities to convey an interesting message and to enlighten the audience. The voice, when used at its optimal potential, is an intriguing communication tool. “It’s been said that language provides the words, but your voice is the music that makes words meaningful” (Guffey, 2000, p. 317). The dimensions of voice qualities include volume, pronunciation, enunciation, articulation, dialect and efficient use of pauses. Voice qualities are the characteristics of the voice that add personality and vocal variety. They help the listener to decide who the speaker is, whether they are sincere or putting on a façade. “What people first notice about your voice is its quality. Is it harsh? Nasal? Thin? Resonant?” (Rozakis, 1995, p. 225). Additionally, Rozakis states that a speaker’s voice should be easy to understand, utilizing a
flexible pitch, force and rate (1995). A strong message, delivered with passion and fervor, is contagious and the audience will detect the speaker’s conviction, “Your ethos as well as your message can be affected by the quality of your voice (Osborn & Osborn, 2000, p. 31).” Powerful speakers know how to incorporate vocal variety into a message by using various vocal cues, including variations in tempo, pitch, volume and pauses to modulate and add inflection. A popular example of a speaker with notable vocal behaviors is Oprah Winfrey, “Oprah Winfrey has cultivated a distinct style of speaking” (Guffey, 2007, p. 317). Speakers with a sense of conviction and a sincere desire to communicate with expression speak with clarity and are spontaneous and stimulating to the audience (Lucas, 2009, p.251).

Last, though not the least of Trager’s categories of vocal behaviors are vocalizations. Vocalizations are audible vocal cues that do not carry the structure of language (Richmond et al., p. 107). Vocal characterizers, vocal qualifiers and vocal segregates make up Trager’s three categories of vocalizations as reported by Richmond (2012). Vocal characterizers are non-language sounds such as laughing, crying, moaning, yawning, muttering, whispering and sighing (Richmond et al., 2012, p.107). Lucille Ball earned a television reputation for sobbing to get her husband Ricky’s attention when she got caught in the act of doing something senseless. Adam Sandler has a reputation for playing roles that require him to utter sarcastic remarks under his breath only having to explain his intentions with tact when the subject overhears his utterings. Vocal qualifiers add emphasis to certain words or phrases within a verbal message, by the use of accenting, pausing silently, or changes in pitch. Motivational speakers have a knack for evoking emotion at certain points in their presentations with the intention of making the audience internalize the message by applying it to a personal experience. Joel Osteen does a magnificent job of creating such empathy within a congregation. Without a doubt, whether a general
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conversation, a speech, a presentation or a sermon, vocalizations occur naturally and an
experienced speakers learn how to modify them to keep the audience captivated. It is especially
important for individuals in leadership roles to master vocal behaviors as, “Modifying behaviors
to make the desired impression on others is the first step to building your credibility (Hackman &

Application

Vocal behavior, and all of its caveats, makes the difference between what listeners absorb
and what they ignore. The voice is the primary instrument for mastering vocal behaviors and the
skills necessary to maximize one's vocal ability are as follows: (Lucas, 2009, p. 248)

- volume control
- pitch
- rate of speech
- effective pauses
- pronunciation
- articulation
- dialect
- vocal variety

If one is to get and keep the attention of the audience, a speaker should use vocal behaviors
suitable for the occasion. Speaking too slowly may cause the listener to lose interest or fall
asleep, while speaking too fast will not allow the listener time to digest the spoken word. Using
inappropriate modulations may also cause the listener to question whether the speaker is nervous
or possibly insincere. The speaker’s tempo sets the mood for the verbal delivery. Resonance and
pitch control coupled with a measure of orotundity will make the message come alive by
stimulating interest, excitement, and enthusiasm.

Although often taken for granted, vocal behavior is an essential element of non-verbal
communication. Vocal behaviors add height and depth to verbal communication. It is to the
speaker what an engine is to an automobile, whereas an automobile without an engine is not of
much value, words without vocal behavior have little meaning and are often misinterpreted. Vocal behavior is personal; no two people are identical in the way they use vocal cues to make their point. If there is power in words, there is even more power in the vocal behaviors surrounding those words. Vocal expression transforms words into meaningful messages that the listener can process and comprehend.

A powerful spirit led leader will learn how to articulate well and will know when to modify the dialect as appropriate for the situation. “People often make judgments about people based on their speech patterns” (Osborn & Osborn, 2000, p. 318). Subsequently, if a leader mispronounces words regularly and is not able articulate, one may perceive a lack of education and assume that the speaker is not qualified to be leader. Winston Churchill a known and respected military leader, stuttered and spoke with a slight lisp (Lucas, 2009, p. 248). He transformed himself into an articulate orator by practicing techniques to overcome his speech impediment. If one is articulate, promotion to positions of leadership and responsibility come easier. With regard to dialect, there is no right or wrong dialect, nevertheless, listeners can relate better to familiar speech patterns (Osborn & Osborn, 2000, p. 318). A good leader knows how to speak to the hearts, minds and souls of followers using vocal behaviors to motivate them to join the crusade.

In conclusion, speaking with authority entails a myriad of communication behaviors. And, whether one serves in a leadership role, or simply desires to communicate competently, with practice, anyone can improve one’s vocal delivery. Jesus persuaded the people to become better servants. He provided the blueprint of what servant leadership should look like by being an empowering, charismatic, and passionate leader. Christians today must learn to mirror similar skills as they go about fulfilling God’s purpose.
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The guidelines that Jesus established in that day are just as powerful and applicable today. Preaching and teaching the Word is God’s will for believers, and he will use leaders who can minister to man in a manner that softens their hearts so that they shall believe and receive. God promised to speak through those called to proclaim his Word, thereby giving them the gift to speak with orotundity, which Richmond et al. (2012) defines as demonstrating robust clarity and strength of voice (p.119). With the help of the Holy Spirit, vocal behaviors provide leaders with the vocal strengths critical for making a difference here on Earth. God’s Word, when spoken with increased orotundity, can change the lives of men.
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References


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