



**Furnishing Our Moral Imagination:
A Round Table Conversation on Words, Images, and Faith Formation**
October 21, 2026

Jennifer Watley Maxell: Hello everyone. This is Jennifer Watley Maxell, and I am so excited to be here with our friends Elizabeth Lynn and Andrew Yeager and Marthame Sanders. Everybody, could you just take a minute before we dive in and tell a little bit about yourselves and your context?

Andrew Yeager: I'm Andrew Yeager. I am the managing editor at WBHM in Birmingham, Alabama. We're the public radio station in Birmingham. And I have spent my career in journalism. In terms of faith background, I grew up in the Lutheran church. My grandfather was a Lutheran minister, and now attend an Episcopal church, one that's, uh, very much in the reformational side of the Episcopal church.

Elizabeth Lynn: I'm Elizabeth Lynn. I'm reaching you from Charlottesville, Virginia. I have worked in the field of civic conversation, and in that spirit, I write with Mark Ramsey a mostly weekly blog for the Ministry Collaborative called Digging a Deeper Well, where we put forward potential resources for reflective conversation for church boards.

Marthame Sanders: Marthame Sanders. I am an ordained minister based in Atlanta, and most of my work over the last 10 years has been in the area of production, and I am usually behind the mic, not in front of the mic, on this very podcast.

Jennifer: We are having a discussion about faith formation and the ways we get information affects our faith formation. We've been looking at the fact that people are reading less in our society. We just read a *New York Times* article that was saying that there was a professor who was saying that maybe we don't need to be writing the way we have, and holding writing as this barometer for critical engagement and critical thinking. And it really got me thinking about the ways that we as people of faith are affected by those. And then you add on all of that the whole proliferation of AI, and the fact that people are going to AI to think through sermon writing, and to think through sermon prep, and to get answers for life...it's this whole big soup that we're looking at. And for me in particular, what does this mean when we look at our ethical and moral formation? Andrew, I know you had some thoughts about that.

Andrew: I was looking at recent research that Reuters did about news consumption habits, really around the world. And one of the things they found was that, yes, some people, not a lot, but some people right now are going to AI to get their news or ask about news topics. They're certainly going to influencers on social media. But what they're also finding is that while that may be the first step, that might be the gateway, what many people do after that is they go back to the legacy media. They go back to their traditional news sources to, sort of, figure out what the real story is, or get the facts, as it were. And it may be a little bit of a stretch, but when I think about it in a religious context and in a social context, there is this cacophony of voices out there telling us things, many of them in conflict with each other.

But I do wonder if there's an opportunity for the church and for religious institutions to, kind of, be that backstop, that place where people can go for more grounded answers that are thought through and reasoned and have stood this test of time. It may be a little Pollyanna-ish, but I wonder if that is a role that the church can play in this moment, and that people, at least some people, are receptive to.

Marthame: Andrew, that's interesting to me. So for 30 years, I have been hearing and witnessing that we are shifting away from a culture that focuses on word to a culture that focuses on image. And I'm of two minds about that. The mind that I am supportive of that is the fact that we are acknowledging that we communicate more by what we see than by what we say: the visual cues, everything that we do with body language, all of that outweighs what we say with words. At the same time, words have this huge impact. And I think there is something for us as people of faith in the acknowledgment that Jesus is the Word made flesh. So there is this spoken word, but there is this embodiment.

And so, as an inheritor of the white Presbyterian tradition, I have seen an overemphasis on the spoken and written word, and have seen a correction away from that, which is helpful. At the same time, I am also concerned about a possible over-correction into a place where that spoken word doesn't have as much meaning as it should.

Elizabeth: My own background is in, particularly in facilitation of conversation among people who are engaged in some kind of common work, often common work with a, sort of, a meaning orientation, people engaged in service, giving, ministry. And so I think a lot about how important conversation is. One of the data points that grabbed my attention is a study showing that Americans are using fewer spoken words. We're talking spoken words only here. It's a pretty significant drop of about 25% over the last 10 or 15 years. Where are those words dropping out? Well, they're dropping out in our informal conversation, often with people we don't know, folks that we might ordinarily speak to, just in passing on the street, but now we have our headphones on, and we look down rather than at them. But it is an interesting trend. We're using fewer words.

I'm going to make a stand for the value of words. I'm going to kind of put aside the value of images right now, but words both establish a relationship with another person when you're speaking to them, and they also furnish our attention to the world. So, it's great if we can look at the world and pick up visual clues, but language helps us interpret and describe what we're seeing. And if our vocabulary for that shrinks so that we have less conceptual furnishment for the way we're seeing the world and talking to others about it, that is a real danger. And I think that goes to Jen's point about the moral risk in this moment.

Just to give a quick example, there's been a case in the public eye, a case of horrific accused sexual assault at Cornell University. David French wrote two pieces in the *New York Times* over the last few weeks reflecting on this case. And he talked about how in conversations about sexual activity, particularly on college campuses, we have had a legal standard of consent, but we have not been talking about a moral standard. And so he says quite simply, "Let's talk about care." And then he digs into the word "care" and what that means. This really made me think about the power of words as concepts that furnish our imagination for how we should be in the world in relationship to one another. And if we're not talking about the standard of care and the way we care for one another, if we're talking only about the, sort of, legal standard of consent, all sorts of dimensions of human interaction disappear. So words are incredibly important. They're incredibly important in furnishing our moral imagination for how we should live with one another.

Jennifer: Yeah. It's interesting that you say that, um, Elizabeth. I am a member of the AME Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, and we are a Black church. And the Black church in America comes out of an oral tradition, because when Black people were brought to these shores, many of us, our ancestors did not have the benefit of written word and written communication, and we did not know the language, and we did not understand the language to which we were brought, but we already had

faith formation in terms of spirituality. And so I think the privileging of written words in particular, words in general, is a very westernized concept — which is not to say that it's invaluable or wrong. I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying that, in my mind, word and image are very much married and you really can't separate one out from the other.

And I think you just made a great example of that. If you're using words, but there is no image to associate those words with, there's no meaning. And so, for example, the introduction of "care" to the conversation is not just a word. It is, as you said, an embodiment. There is an image of that. As soon as you say embodiment, something pops into your mind, and that is an image. And so when we talk about being formed as moral beings, I think it is not an either/or conversation. I think it is really the question of how is the way, I think, we are using our words.

You know, when kids are little and you're trying to get them to be able to emote and communicate, you always tell them, "Use your words, use your words, use your feeling words, use your thinking words." The purpose of the word is to communicate a state that is already there. It is not the words for words' sake. And I think the problem is not that we're not communicating with our neighbor, it's that we don't even recognize our neighbor anymore. We don't even give credence to the fact that another human being is in our presence, and that human, because they are human, deserves interaction. They deserve an acknowledgment of their humanity. That Word made flesh part that is so unique to our faith, that's not something that belongs to anybody but the faith realm. And I think, sometimes, we take for granted the power of that when it comes to our value to society and the world.

Andrew: One of my favorite classes in college was communication theory, and I'm coming back to one of those theories. It was called Coordinated Management of Meaning. Basically, the idea of it is that, when we communicate, it's not just a simple transmission from a sender and a receiver, but that it is a process, an active process where we together shape our meaning and shape our reality that we share. The reason that came to mind is because it's been well-documented how we are more siloed in social life. The algorithms on social media feed people different realities of the world.

And I'm thinking, to that idea of ethical, and the moral framework that we're working in, is that if we're not talking with each other, whether through images or whether through words, we're not collectively engaging in that process to create that moral framework, or spread that moral framework, whether it's within the church or within the larger community. And so, that thought comes to mind with this larger question of, what happens if we are talking with each other less and using 25% fewer words? Without that engagement, those silos become reinforced, and we don't have a collective framework that we can all share in.

Elizabeth: Yes, and disagree about, but at least engage in, and have a conversation about. Jen, your invocation of embodiment is very helpful to me. The spoken word and the storied word, the word embodied in people's stories and lives, is such a crucial way to bring together the Word made flesh. I just was reading Genesis, because I'm going to be leading a conversation about something related to that in a Bible study class at our church later today, and just dwelling in the stories of the people of Israel. It's all story. I mean, "In the beginning was the Word," but it's the Word made flesh and embodied in the stories of people living together, fighting, arguing, communicating in a variety of ways, sometimes through words, and sometimes through other means. So the communication piece feels really crucial, and the story embodiment feels crucial as well. And I know, Andrew, that relates a lot to your work in broadcasting.

Andrew: It does, but I'm just thinking about...we had an event here in Birmingham recently where former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi came to the city to speak on a panel with healthcare advocates, and they talked about the issues of rising healthcare prices and cuts to healthcare, all the policy stuff. But the intention of the panel was to highlight the experience and stories of people who are caught in this dysfunctional system. And they said, "Those voices need to be elevated within this debate." And you're exactly right when you talk about the Bible. Like, so much of the Bible is stories. I mean, what is, what is a parable but a story with a message? And so I do think that when we leave those stories behind in favor of facts and figures and "empirical knowledge", we're missing something that almost doesn't make us human. It's letting the human element go aside.

Marthame: Yeah, this conversation is so good, and I'm loving it, because it's reminding me of what we've learned from the world of linguistics. Words shape culture. Spoken word, written word, shapes culture big time. There's a difference between words being a gatekeeper, who is allowed to read, who is not allowed to read, who's allowed to be literate, who's not allowed to be literate, and words being an invitation to a broader culture. So, in languages where words are gendered, so...Spanish has, every noun has a gender. It's either a feminine noun or a masculine noun. Words that have gendered language, there's tons of evidence that they have more gender division and even gender bias, and that gender neu...languages that are gender neutral have less of that. Anyone who has learned another language will recognize their own mentality kind of shift, and even their personality a little bit as they speak, because they're taking on the embodiment of that language. I think all of that speaks to the power and importance of words. And the more words we use and the younger we use words, the better our success by a lot of different metrics.

I think for me, it's got to come into the context of everything else we're saying of this. It's got to be holistic, to use an overused word. It can't just be spoken. It's got to be all of that, but it can't not be spoken at the same time. It can't not be read at the same time. The value of in-person — back to that embodiment piece — we are recording this in four different locations in different parts of the United States, and the technology allows us to do that. Being in the same room with each other is a whole different ballgame, because it is an embodied experience. There's a lot more going on than just the words we are saying. But when we lose those words, we lose something that is core to ourselves. And I feel like this conversation is pulling those two pieces together in a good way.