

Verbal Manipulation

During my high school years in New Jersey, it was a common speech pattern to end declarative sentences with “I swear to God” or “I swear on my dead muthuh’s grave.” Presumably, this was a way of saying: “At this particular moment, I am not lying about these particular facts.” But I think that at a deeper level, it was a way of saying: “If you disbelieve what I just said, I will take it as a personal insult to me and my God/dead muthuh.” In other words, they were using language to manipulate others.

Jesus teaches us to just say what we have to say, and let our statement stand on its own merits (Matt 5.33-37). We see this acted out in 1 Corinthians 3.1-9. Paul has just finished telling us that, when he first went to Corinth, he had refused to manipulate people with “wise and persuasive words,” choosing instead to speak the gospel plainly and let it work on its own power (1 Cor 2.4). But the Corinthians have gone on to manipulate each other by invoking famous names to bolster their own various points of view: “I belong to Paul,” and “I belong to Apollos” (3.4). But Paul reminds them how he and Apollos actually worked among them. “Paul planted. Apollos watered. But God gave the growth” (3.6). They spoke the truth, but they never had to engineer the effect their words would have on people. They let God take care of the results. And as far as we know, the topic of Paul’s dead muthuh never even came up.

~ John Stonecypher