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Reach Yourself: Why Christians Need to Hear Contemporary Language in the Church

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Advocates argue back and forth about the importance of making some part of worship, or all of worship, more "contemporary." In most cases, the debate has to do with music; but often they also disagree about our preaching, praying, and the way we otherwise talk in worship. Proponents issue impassioned pleas for us to use language that is relevant to the outsider, the unbeliever, the unchurched. The rhetoric we use is not understandable to "GenXers" or "busters" or whatever term is in vogue.

This is an important debate, but what seems to be missing from consideration is that the demographic labels we are using are labels that apply to Christians and non-Christians alike. *We* are Xers and busters and whatever else. We need to reach those people, because we need to reach *ourselves*, for we are those people.

Discussions about antiquated language and "Shakespearian" English ("Thee," "Thou," "-eth" endings, and so on) are relevant but secondary to the even more basic concern that should worry us. The more fundamental problem is that we use words on Sunday that originally had a great many uses on other days of the week. Though we preach that God is a real person who relates to us and communicates with us, to the extent that our language about him has nothing in common

with our relating to or communicating with other persons, we weaken our credibility. Persons form societies made up of their relationships. The more we cut God off from our normal speech in society, the more we lead people to believe that he is not really a person. And thus we invariably weaken our own faith in God because every Sunday we proclaim his irrelevance.

Over and over again the same thing happens: Joe Christian goes to church once or twice a week. Perhaps he attends a very doctrinally oriented congregation where he hears much about God's sovereignty, justification, imputation, and their importance to salvation. Maybe he is part of a church that emphasizes sanctification and promotes a second work of grace. Maybe he is involved in some other group in the evangelical tradition. What remains the same in almost every circumstance is that Joe Christian speaks an entirely alien language on those one or two days a week. The rest of the time he never speaks of sovereignty or sanctification. He may speak of many things, including ultimate issues of justice, right, and wrong. But he won't do it with much of the vocabulary that he uses in church.

There are reasons to use specialized language. Eskimos, I have heard, utilize several words for what most of us simply call "snow." Engineers, physicists, and doctors all have their own needful and exacting terminology. All of this can be used to justify the patterns of speech we find in our churches. Sometimes the justification is even satisfying—but not always, and not nearly as much as we would like to think.

When we use special language in certain situations, we are assuming something about the nature of reality. Doctors use specialized medical jargon in certain circumstances, such as diagnosing appendicitis, asking a nurse for assistance during surgery, or developing a treatment regimen for a cancer patient. But when they go to buy happy meals at McDonalds for their children, or open a new account at a bank, or close on a house, that language isn't commonly used because it is not relevant to those situations.

By our Christian speech on Sunday, we may well be publicly declaring that God is not relevant to the rest of life.

Of course, there should be *some* distinction between church on Sunday and everyday life. There is also good reason for specialized language to help with theological reflection. But we have often gone far beyond such needs. Our words are insulation to keep God safely contained somewhere outside the vast majority of our lives. We need to use more common words, or to demystify special words, so that they are understandable to ourselves, let alone to anyone else.

Here are a few terms we can think about.

WORSHIP

Let me start with a basic word, one we cannot do without: *worship*. Here, one would think, is a specialized term that should have legitimate use only in religious contexts. But, in fact, the word is understandable today only because it was a common word used for showing respect or for offering oneself. "With my body I thee worship," used to be what a groom would say to his bride in the wedding ceremony. The word was used in a variety of relationships. And that is precisely why it was a meaningful term to use for Christian public assemblies. God is a real person whom we serve and who serves us. He is not entirely unlike a spouse, a ruler, or a servant.

And the less common a term becomes, the more useless it becomes for Christian living. We Christians *worship* the true *God*. We would be completely unable to confront our culture with the gospel if we claimed to *worship* the true *blarp*. Much less would we be able to do so if we claimed to *ableck* the true *blarp*. We can only present the antithesis between lost humanity and the holy God precisely to the extent that we share a common ground being made in his image. Only to the extent that people everywhere still have some idea of what "worship" is, and what "God" means, can we speak of worshiping him.

But more than that, without this common language, we wouldn't even know what we were saying. Our "terms" would not represent any real understanding. We need, at the very

least, to be able to understand the gospel and live it for ourselves. The more we use specialized rhetoric, the more we are prone to use words exclusively as identity markers, taking pride in the sounds we make rather than in apprehending reality by them.

Worship remains a useful term to the extent that we have a shared memory of the practices, and the significances of those practices, that the term has covered. The more it becomes specialized to the church, the less it is able to communicate. I wonder sometimes if debates over worship are hampered, at least in part, by an increasing inability to understand what the word means.

PRAYER

Parallel to worship is the shift in the use of the word *pray*. As a convinced Protestant, I'm opposed to "praying to the saints." But the offense has been greatly increased by the fact that the term, *pray*, has come to mean something that happens *only* between a human and God. Originally, however, "I pray thee" meant simply "I ask you," and it could be said to anyone, God or man alike. This doesn't justify attempting to contact the dead, but it does show that the term was never meant to attribute deity to the departed spirits of believers.

What happens as the word *prayer* becomes so specialized that it refers only to God? John Knox, the Scottish Reformation leader, defined prayer as "earnest and familiar talking with God." I question whether many people today would include talking as part of their definition. I have read one contemporary novel where a man "prayed" for another by visualizing him as a cat and imagined stroking his fur. That may be extreme, but it does point to the fact that people forget that praying is *talking to someone*, not visualizing or exercising psychic power. God wants us to talk to him the same way that we talk to all other people. Yes, it is true that it is possible to pray silently, but it may not be the best way to do so in all cases. It is quite easy to lose track of the difference between praying and thinking about praying, or imagining one is praying. Prayer can only drift into meditative "quiet times," which,

while perhaps quite valuable in themselves, are not identical to, nor a decent substitute for, earnest and familiar talking with God.

A misinterpretation of Paul's exhortation to pray without ceasing increases this confusion. Some now argue that Paul wants a 24/7 "prayerful attitude." But that cannot possibly be the case. If I ask you to pray because my son has been diagnosed with leukemia, I am not interested in some sort of inclusion of that thought in an "attitude" you possess while reading email, watching the new Fantastic Four movie, or sleeping at night. I want you to earnestly and familiarly beg God to have mercy on my child. The apostle Paul is exhorting us to pray *regularly* without skipping our daily times set apart for talking with God.

Terms like *worship* and *prayer* need to be used frequently in the church. My only concern is that these things be explained and embodied in practices so that we know what we are talking about. Worship is related to what we do when we give our wives gifts for Mother's Day or celebrate a parent's birthday. Prayer occurs on a human level when I ask my boss for a raise.

While we may think we are making God more special by using terminology that is not used for any other personal relationships, I suspect we are actually denying his reality.

REDEEM, REDEEMER, REDEMPTION

Does anyone talk this way outside of pawnshop culture?

When we speak of redemption, we are speaking in regards to God's purchase of us by the price of his Son. It is a word that is, in our vocabulary, closely associated with substitutionary atonement—a precious and indispensable element of the faith. Yet, when Stephen preached that Moses was Israel's "redeemer" (Acts 7:35), he plainly means that he was to be Israel's *liberator*. The fact is, redemption does not always emphasize the price paid as much as the results obtained: namely freedom and liberation. In some cases, the Bible actually emphasizes that *no* price was paid. Thus in Isaiah 52:3, God promises his people, "you shall be redeemed without money." Reminding them of

Egypt and promising them deliverance from Assyria, God points out that he originally redeemed Israel by destroying Egypt's power, and that now he will bring them back from exile by changing the hearts of their rulers.

The apostle Paul declares to Titus that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." Thus he insists that Christ has *freed* us from a life of sin. It is important for us to realize why the two men on the road to Emmaus were wrong to think that Jesus' death disproved their hope "that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). Nevertheless, we still need, at the least, to maintain some idea of how they were using the word in conformity to the biblical witness. They wanted Jesus to liberate Israel.

The gospel tells us that sin is a comprehensive force in our lives, putting us at enmity with the King of the universe. It entails slavery in every area of life. The gospel also tells us that God has dealt with sin—with all of it. While only beginning in this life, our being rescued by Jesus begins with freedom from the guilt of sin but is not limited to that. It is all-inclusive. It involves liberation from *everything* that would harm us. We have plenty of examples in Scripture of the saints expecting God's redemption to involve liberation from every problem, whether political, economic, domestic, or spiritual—whether important or seemingly trivial.

A word that has come to have such narrow connotations (to "religion" to the "inner self") needs to be broadened. One way to do that is to explain that it is quite commonly a functional synonym for liberation—and to demonstrate this by commonly using these synonymous expressions. Christ is our comprehensive liberator, both in this life and in the next. It is important for us to preach about the price Jesus paid by his shed blood, but we need also to make clear the vastness of what Christ accomplishes by that sacrifice.

SAVE, SAVIOR, SALVATION

I don't see why we ever use this word group when *deliver*, *deliverer*, and *deliverance*—or *rescue* and *rescuer*—are so much

less anemic in their connotations. While many people will tell you what the word means if you ask pointed questions, most apply the term only to a small area of individual, personal preference in life called "religion" or "spirituality." But in the Bible, salvation is something a judge and his army accomplish for you when they drive out the foreign soldiers who were occupying your homes and plundering your property and substance.

Not long ago that there was a widespread debate within evangelical culture whether or not one had to "accept Jesus as Lord" in addition to "accepting him as Savior." The debate might have been avoided entirely if the argument had been framed in terms of whether (1) to accept Jesus either as Lord or as Deliverer, or (2) to accept him either as Lord or as Conqueror. Even we modern democrats know that kings often gained their kingdoms by rescuing a people from their oppressors. Jesus is Lord because he has accomplished our salvation, and he is Savior because he has conquered death and has been elevated to God's right hand as Lord of the world.

I recently had the hair-raising experience of being in a lecture where the speaker declared to loud approbation in the audience that the announcement that Jesus is Lord couldn't be considered "good news." We have the erroneous notion that a "lord" is essentially one who makes demands and punishes infractions. But in most of world history, whether pagan or Jewish or Christian, your lord promised to protect you, to deliver you, to save you. Thus the apostle Paul makes the confession of Jesus' Lordship the *content* of saving faith, arguing specifically that *because* Jesus is now Lord of all, everyone can turn to him and expect salvation from him when they entrust themselves to him: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him" (Romans 10:12 in context).

Jesus is our deliverer. Let's not limit his victory or lordship by relying exclusively on a word that has become so narrow that it virtually implies that most of life has no use for salvation.

JUSTIFY, JUSTIFICATION

Here we have a great deal more material in modern culture to work with. Courtroom dramas make for popular fare in American culture, and we are commissioned to spread a story that (as in all four inspired versions) climaxes in a courtroom drama and a verdict. According to Paul, when Jesus was raised from death by God's Spirit (Romans 8), he was "vindicated by the Spirit" (1 Timothy 3:16). The ESV follows the practice of most versions here by translating as "vindicated" a word that everywhere else is interpreted as "justified." I think *justification* is also a fine term, but people need to be reminded that this is not a word that refers to some sort of esoteric transition. It simply means to be declared in the right with someone—a civil court, your neighbors, God, spouse, or business community. Just as Jesus was vindicated from his death sentence by resurrection, so all who belong to him are out from under any condemnation. We are vindicated by faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

In addition to vindication, it would help for our speech to be sprinkled with other judicial terms like "acquittal" or "exoneration." These cover the negative aspect of justification in dealing with every accusation against us. But the word also has constructive connotations to do with our having been given a positive standing: "advancement," "elevation," "promotion," and "exaltation" are all possibilities. The same apostle who wrote that we have been justified by faith also wrote that we have been "raised with him through faith" (Colossians 2:13).

CHURCH

When we read about the life of Solomon, we learn that he built for God a temple, and for himself a palace. These two structures were constructed side by side, so that the modern reader can easily see in the arrangement an image of "church and state." But if one reads the Hebrew, this symmetry gets compromised. The temple is not a temple, but a palace. God's building goes by the same name as Solomon's building. What

we have is a case of a great King or emperor living in a palace who has under him a vice-regent who rules on his behalf. The palace and the "temple" are not perfectly identical, of course, because one belongs to God and the other to Solomon. But plainly both are kings, Solomon's authority being derivative from that of the greater king.

In the book of Acts we find a similar comparison. Bible scholar Peter Leithart has pointed out that the Greek word translated as "church" was also used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to the political assembly of a city. Luke exploits this when there is a riot against Paul in Ephesus, referring to the rioting mob as this "assembly"—a "church" (Acts 19:32). The point is that God's people, with Christ in their midst, constitute a different assembly—an alternative community. I think that referring to a church as a "town hall" would be more confusing than helpful, but that sort of name does capture something of the biblical data.

Everyone realizes that Christians are part of a community or subculture. The problem is that this is seen as nothing more than a gathering of shared preferences, like a motorcycle club or a group of backgammon fans. But the sort of communities to which the Bible compares the church are families, nations, kingdoms, and cities. The church is just as much a social reality as France, the United States Air Force, gypsies, or the state of Nebraska. The fact that we use a word that has no secular meaning obscures the objective reality of God's kingdom.

OUTREACH IS INREACH

Reaching outsiders and making the gospel understandable to them has an immediate benefit in making it understandable to *us* as well. We are reaching out to our Monday-through-Saturday selves. In preaching and teaching we should remember to speak in a way that is "ordinary" precisely so that the extraordinary claims of the gospel are realized.

Perhaps not all of the above suggestions are best. Some may think these ideas go too far, and others that they don't go far enough. As with anything else worth doing, the devil is in the details. But while I certainly hope there is further discussion

on *how* to proclaim the gospel—not only to all people, but also to our whole selves—I hope there can be widespread agreement *that* we must proclaim the gospel in this fashion.

In considering issues like contemporary language in worship, some think they are deciding between a highly trained and committed Christian congregation and one that is insufferably shallow because it is trying to reach those without any religious background. But we may in fact be deciding between narrowing into a community where pride in terminology has replaced any actual impact those words might have, as opposed to a church where God is truly real, seven days a week, in both the workplace and in the home.

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