Thinking About our Words

Catherine Sinclair

Have you ever been in the position of trying to share your faith with another person and you keep running up against language you don't want to use? You feel the heat start to rise in your cheeks and your brain is working in overdrive to wind its way through the best way to describe your beliefs. You analyze the words coming into your mind with fresh objectivity and feel the cognitive dissonance between the faith you are trying to share and the words in your toolbox.

Jesus said to his disciples, *Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15).* But it is hard to teach and preach this message of grace, love, service and salvation if you are feeling hampered by stagnated language within your religious culture. Paul wrote, *We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited (2Cor 6:3).*

Is it possible that sometimes the language we use, model and teach is creating stumbling blocks for ourselves and our membership?

We all have our own relationship to language and our spiritual communities. For my part, the lexicon of words linked to my faith journey comes from growing up in Anglican and Evangelical Christian circles, and my connection to the Christadelphians as a young adult. There are notable moments in each setting where I have felt that religious language has actually run contrary to the message of Christ.

My youth group once attended a presentation by a visiting Evangelical preacher. Used to the more tempered language of the Anglican church, I was quite shocked by his fire-and-brimstone messaging. Even as a teenager, it was obvious to me that by emphasizing concepts of damnation and hell, he was using fear as a motivator for following Christ. This didn't sit well with my understanding of God's love. A similar jarring feeling came over me when I first heard the Christadelphian term "The Truth." If the Christadelphian with whom I was speaking had *it*, then did that make *my* relationship with God and understanding of *my* salvation "The False?"

Christadelphian culture is my spiritual family now, and the Bible study, fellowship, care and love that I have experienced have helped me grow in my walk with the Lord. I care about this community and it is painful to see us perpetuate barriers in our path towards the Lord. So let's look at a few tendencies that could be reexamined within our Christadelphian cultural context. These include some linguistic trends, including words, phrases and translation choices, that if avoided, could help to foster a more inclusive and welcoming environment so that we can boast in our salvation and share its blessings both in our community and beyond.

Communication with others

Within our culture, there is often a divisive mentality of "us" versus "them"; those who are "inside" and those who are "outside" our Faith. I'd like to highlight two ways that we encourage this, and discuss a few drawbacks. First, many Christadelphians are trained in a combative methodology of sharing their faith, encouraged to focus more on what they *don't* believe than on what they do. Secondly, this often includes the common use of the word, "The Truth."

So normalized is the term "The Truth" in our culture that it appears neutral, when in fact it can actually be quite alienating to those on the outside. Though used ubiquitously to refer to the Bible's message of our hope in Christ, when used in conversation with other believers, it instantly can create a "you have nothing to offer me" dynamic. By implying that the truth is one definitive thing, it infers by negation that the other person has not got it. The term therefore comes across as arrogant and exclusionary, and runs contrary to the wisdom of Proverbs 3:34, also quoted in James, that *God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble (James 4:6)*. We can be confident in our hope and Biblical understanding, but it is important to use language that leaves room for other people's ideas and conversation. An alternative expression for "The Truth" could be as simple as "the message as I understand it."

"The Truth" is often part of a wider debate-style conversation that we encourage in our members, including the youth that we train up and new members. The downside to using combative methods of argument with other Christians is that it separates us from potential connection. As followers of Christ diminish rapidly in number across denominations, finding other believers is indeed rare, and much can be shared. A combative tone puts everyone on the defensive, encourages a moral-high-ground positioning, and therefore preliminarily hijacks the potential of wonderful, God-based relationships for people with future spouses and friends. In

this world where belief in God is rare, wouldn't it be more productive to encourage each other to discover and relish the commonalities we have with other Christians? Rather than encouraging a fear of the unknown, if we trust in God, we can remain secure in our faith and celebrate a mutual love of God. 1John 4:18 says, *The one who fears is not made perfect in love*. Not every detail of any Bible follower's understanding of their faith in Christ and God is going to be exactly the same. So by emphasizing and seeing commonalities with other Christians, we can see and understand that we are all on a journey to salvation and working within the contexts that we know.

Welcoming guests

When I first began attending a Christadelphian meeting, every week the presider would welcome me publicly, and state that I was "here to witness what we do." Well-intended as a welcome, my non-membership status was publicly pointed out on a weekly basis. The term "witness" implies that the person is not part of what is happening, but is merely watching. While this may be true, what is to be gained by so overtly calling out this dichotomy of who is "in" and who is "out"? Jesus welcomed *all* to his table, as described in Matthew 9:9-13, when he dined with Matthew the tax collector and a plethora of "sinners," regardless of their status. Every meeting is unique in the way it seeks to welcome guests, but I would suggest leaving the well-meaning overtures as private interactions or sticking to generic group welcomes, rather than public announcements pointing out individuals, particularly if the non-member has begun to attend regularly.

Insincere inclusivity

Using the term "everyone" or "anyone" when it is not accurate is noticeable. For example, a presider may ask the room "would anyone like to offer a prayer for the wine this morning?" when they are actually looking *specifically* for a baptised brother. In an instant, the personhood of any woman or unbaptised person present is negated. The norm for most Christadelphian meetings is to operate with gender-segregated roles. That is to say, there are some areas of participation from which women, in particular, are excluded. Therefore, it is particularly obvious to women in the group when the generalized term "anyone" is used in reference to requesting participation in a particular task from which they may not, in fact, participate. Encouraging

specificity in this is a good gut-check too. For example, if the idea of instead saying out loud "would any baptized brother like to offer a prayer for the wine this morning?" feels awkward, then perhaps it's a sign this should be prayerfully and Biblically rethought and investigated within a contemporary context. Furthermore, the word "everyone" is often used in the sentence "everyone has their role" which can also be demeaning to those who feel that they cannot fulfill their gifts due to gendered restrictions.

Patriarchal words

People are ever-increasingly sensitive to patriarchal linguistic terms. In the recent past in English, patriarchal linguistic strategies were more the norm, such as subsuming women's names under their husbands as in "Mr. and Mrs. John Smith," or using masculine terms as the universal such as "mankind." This is swiftly changing, as words such as "policeman" are replaced by "police officer" and the like. Within religious circles, therefore, it follows suit that a term such as "Brethren," an old English word rooted in the masculine concept of "brothers" but meaning a whole body of believers, is no longer representative of members of all genders. Likewise "fraternal," another word rooted in the male term "brother", is no longer an appropriate word to use to refer to fellowship between believers. Rather than using such patriarchal language, which comes across as very old fashioned and out-of-touch, we can simply begin to replace them with more neutral terms such as "members," "believers," or "followers of Christ" — which are all terms drawn from Scripture and are already in frequent use among many ecclesias.

Binary language

Binary language is another linguistic element of English that is beginning to fall out of use. Though this linguistic categorization of humans into "male" or "female" is entrenched into many languages, including English, it is increasingly being rejected particularly in situations where there is no actual foundational reason for this to be identified. By eliminating this, it allows for individuality and for room for those who may feel gender is irrelevant for a variety of reasons, including physical, psychological or philosophical. While unpacking this larger issue deserves its own article, for our purposes here, let's look at the use of the words "sister" and "brother" to refer to fellow baptised believers. Using these words not only compartmentalizes baptised people, but also continues to exclude non-baptised members, singling them out as not part of the "club."

Like reconsidering the terms "brethren" and "fraternal," we may wish to move along towards non-gendered terms such as "people," "community," "members," "friends," and all the other more neutral options in this vein. In each case, we have to weigh the impact. Does it really take away something to remove the gendered specification of our relationship to one another? Is there another way to say this that is more inclusive? If we are hung up on being exclusive, or the other words do not seem as palatable, we need to ask ourselves: why is it important to me to be exclusive and is exclusivity something Christ considers important?

Purposeful choice and trigger words

Scripture is the inspired Word of God, but just because a word is in a particular English translation of the Bible, doesn't mean it is appropriate for use in a contemporary setting. One Sunday morning, I witnessed the unfortunate choice of someone reading Leviticus 15 in its entirety. Not only was it not related to the talk given, its central subject of male sexuality and bodily cleanliness had every teenager in the room disappearing further into their seats in mortification every time the words "seed" and "issue" were uttered, over and over again. This was an unfortunate alienation of all the young people in the room, and even had the adults snickering. Needless to say, no one was paying attention to the solemnity of the exhortation or bread and wine after that.

While that is a humorous example, there can be more serious effects of poor choice of Biblical passages. Current social practice dictates that we should be aware of "trigger words," or words that could cause harm. While this could seem trendy or worldly, in fact, it is Biblical. God calls us to *care* for one another and put us together as a body so that *its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it (1Cor 12:24-26)*. Words in the Bible that refer to colonial oppression, slavery, sexual assault and violence should never be chosen for public reading without extreme caution as to the purpose it serves. Such sensitive topics do exist in the Bible's pages, but speakers and presiders need to judge really carefully the merit of bringing them forward in a public setting to illustrate a point, and ask themselves, would this passage be better served as a quiet and deep study in another context to serve a greater goal? The key rule of thumb while exercising trigger-word caution is to think of the effect and imagine proactively that there likely are people in the audience, members and non-members alike, who have been affected by such actions. Even though concepts are in the Bible, we still have to look at

the passages we are pulling with the utmost sensitivity to their application in the contemporary context.

Biblical translations

The words "thou," "art," and "thy" are no longer in regular use in the contemporary English language outside the context of history and poetry. As such, the use of the King James Bible, or even the New King James Version, regularly used in Christadelphian meetings, is something that should be reconsidered. Many fans of this 1611 translation hail this version for its poetry — and rightly so. Meant to be read out loud, it echoes the structure and verse of the literary era of Shakespeare. Authorized by James I of England and VI of Scotland, and created by a committee of 54 translators, they aimed for a simplicity of message and an inspiring loftiness of the English language.

While once revered as the best English translation, it is now noted as problematic for two key linguistic reasons. First, it carries the biases of the cultural norms of the Elizabethan age when it was translated — from downplaying descriptor words for early church women's roles to perpetuating the use of patriarchal words like "brethren." Secondly, its poetic but archaic language is inaccessible to even many native English speakers, and most definitely exclusionary to all English language students, therefore discourages diversity of cultural backgrounds.

With the increasing populations of Christadelphians coming from Middle Eastern and African countries — many of whom are learning the basics of English — we should use the most clear and understandable English Bible translations available. We should explore the beauty of Biblical translations in other languages too, depending on the reader, using the skills of translators and not privileging the English version either. When reading in English, there are certainly moments to bring out the beautiful words of the KJV, but persisting in its regular use reveals a blindness to the communal and inclusive purpose of reading the Bible in a group setting in the first place.

Biblical principles

It is no secret that there is a decline in the Christadelphian body's overall membership, regular attendance, and youth engagement, particularly in North America and in the British Commonwealth. This is not unique to the Christadelphians, as the next generations of the

general population of these countries become exponentially disinterested in organized religion in general. Some scratch their heads and wonder what is going on? For others, it is more obvious: we are in danger of being out-of-touch.

Out-of-touch language employed in a religious setting is notable. Our youth, particularly, are often more in tune than their elders in common and current use of terms, and they are noticing and listening. Sometimes the use of old terminology is purposely and deliberately chosen for a reason. In other cases, old terminology is used indiscriminately with little consideration of impact within a contemporary context. This is when these word choices begin to reveal a level of ignorance — no matter how well-meaning — which ultimately contributes to a dissolution of trust between the body and its members. Some are able to maintain a relationship with God despite this, but not all. It can indeed become a stumbling block for many, separating them from the hope they have in Christ.

Whether questioning cultural Christadelphian terms such as "The Truth" and "brethren," use of Biblical translations, or remaining aware of Biblical word choice for public use, these all reflect on our community. Our youth, in particular, are educated with increasingly inclusive language in mind; encouraged to use words that promote acceptance of others' differences and foster feelings of safety from primary school onwards. These new societal linguistic norms are rooted in greater social justice philosophies, which arguably bring us *closer* to Biblical principles of love for one's neighbor. If our youth are hearing words at church that actually conflict with these positive societal shifts, then we risk sending our young people into the world conflicted. They may begin to separate their "church life" from their "real life," which is not something we would ever want to see. Moreover, if our youth mimic some of our old terminology and methods, they risk being labeled as homophobic, fundamentalist, closed-minded or worse. This is no burden that we should be putting on any of our young people, considering the Bible does not preach a message of judgment and division. Jesus said, *A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another (John 13:34)*. Is it *love* when we use terms that make people uncomfortable, that seed division, or that create feelings of exclusion? If youth begin to recognize in our language harmful racial, cultural or gender biases, they will leave.

It is not a fair choice when there is a better choice. We should not be afraid to adopt some of these societal linguistic shifts if we can identify that the underlying motivation for their development is underpinned by the basic Biblical principles of *love* and *care for others*. In this way,

we can ensure that Christ's message of love and salvation are *included* as the root of such positive societal changes, and even leading the way the world moves forward. In other words, thoughtfully adopting language that is inclusive actually brings us *closer* to the Bible's message.

We can do this. The language choices made by Sunday morning exhorters, presiders, readers, those offering prayers, Sunday School teachers and CYC instructors can keep in step with evolving societally-accepted use when based in the Biblical principles of love and inclusion. It is our responsibility to hear one another, listen to ideas, educate ourselves and make choices in our guidance, teaching and delivery of the message in the most thoughtful, prayerful and sensitive ways that we can. Let's help our young people and members to build up their linguistic toolboxes full of words that encourage, bring together and foster love and acceptance, so that instead of fumbling, we can all feel bolstered by and proud of our faith communities and our ability to articulately express our faith to others.