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MIND YOUR LANGUAGE!

By David Phipps

Words matter! I always thought that it was Karl Marx who said that if he was given twenty-six lead soldiers (meaning the blocks used in printing the alphabet), he would conquer the world, but, apparently it is a much older saying than that. The Americans claim it for Benjamin Franklin, and some think that comes from an earlier French saying. Be that as it may, words do matter because we generally think in words, and the words we use often determine the way in which we think. Language goes quite a long way to determine national differences.

Not very long ago, several countries called themselves “The People’s Democratic Republic of X.” When we saw that, we knew that often the country was neither the people’s, nor democratic. It was usually a nasty dictatorship. The term didn’t fool many people, but it put a respectable gloss upon unpleasant facts.

George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* has a brilliant satire upon this use of language. In the book the ruling party, Ingsoc [English Socialism], has replaced Standard English with Newspeak. Orwell writes

“The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that... a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings”.

This fact that words and their nuances matter was one of the reasons why Tyndale gave his life to translate the Bible into English. He not only wanted to put it into the hands of the boy behind the plough, but he also wanted to correct some blatant errors in the Latin Vulgate. He pointed out one glaring error in his *Obedience of a Christian Man*: “*Penance is a word of their own forging to deceive us withal, as many other are.... Of repentance they have made penance, to blind the people and to make them think that they must take pain and do some holy deeds to make satisfaction for their sins, namely such as they enjoin them.*”

This can be seen easily from Acts 2:38. There is no point in quoting the Vulgate unless we want to go into exegesis of the Latin, but fortunately the Roman Catholics translated the Vulgate into English a few decades after Tyndale in their Douay-Rheims Bible. There you read: “*Peter said to them: Do penance: and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins. And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.*” As we know, the NIV translates it (more accurately): “*And Peter replied, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” The Vulgate version does exactly what Tyndale said, and taken repentance, which is internal and moral, changed it into “do penance,” put it into the hands of the church and turn it into the whole rigmarole of confession and saying Hail Marys!

I have just used the words “Roman Catholic.” It’s very difficult to know what to call those in communion with the Pope, because “catholic” is another of those contentious words. I know people who are uneasy about saying in the creed that they believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church, because “catholic” can be taken to mean “Roman.” This ought not to be the case.

The word comes from a perfectly respectable Greek word meaning “universal,” but the Romans have hijacked it, and used it to reinforce their claim to be the church – the whole universal church – with the rest of us somehow hangers-on on the fringe. I know that they have softened their rhetoric of late, but the changes are only superficial – they still believe what they have always believed.

Maybe those that don’t like using the word “catholic” in the creed could mutter “universal” under their breath, but this would not deal with the problem of those who have not been initiated into these things and misunderstand. Maybe we should face the fact that, as far as the world is concerned, this word has been stolen, let it go, and just use “universal.”

I once had an argument with an Anglo-Catholic rural dean, who objected because I said that Methodists were a part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. They couldn’t be, he said, because they didn’t have bishops. I find it strange when you can use the word “universal” to try to exclude people. The true church consists of all those who have been justified and given new life in Christ. Church polity does not come into it!

Actually, the term “Roman Catholic” is itself a contradiction – either they are Roman or they are catholic (universal), but they can’t be both! If they are either, they aren’t the other. The Reformers used to call them Papists, but they take offence at that (even though it is true), so, if we don’t want to be rude, we have trouble giving them a title.

Again, there is the word “altar.” Only this morning I heard the BBC referring to the “high altar in Coventry Cathedral.” It’s only the media, and some ignorant Anglicans who ought to know better, who use the word of Church of England buildings. An altar is a place where sacrifices are made. It is therefore logical for Roman Catholics to have altars because they believe that they are joining in, or re-presenting, or offering, the sacrifice Christ made on the Cross, but those of us who prefer to be Biblical know that what we are doing is having a fellowship meal, so we have a table.

Maybe we think that this hardly matters, but our forefathers did not think like that. In 1616, William Laud, later to become Archbishop of Canterbury and have his head chopped off, became Dean of Gloucester. Almost the first thing he did was to move the communion table from the middle of the choir, and stand it altar-wise against the east wall. I’ll let Bishop Ryle finish the story:

“Miles Smith, the Bishop of Gloucester, a holy and learned man, and one of the leading translators of the Authorised version of the Bible, was more offended by the change than any one, and declared, if it was carried into effect, he would never enter the Cathedral again. But none of these things moved Laud; in spite of Bishop and people the table was moved. The Dean had his own way. The Bishop was publicly set at nought, and never entered his own Cathedral again, though living within fifty yards of it, until the day of his death, in 1624.”

I have been called over-fussy, pedantic, and probably other things out of my hearing, but I am convinced that words matter because words express truth, and the truth matters. If we use the wrong words, we leave ourselves open to believing the wrong things.

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