

Vocabulary Adaptations

If I were the creator of a comic strip, I think I would have fun with words. Picture the man, while reading to his wife about a *terrific* tornado, glancing up at her, and blurting out, "Hey, you look *terrific* in your new dress!" Or, "I am *nauseated*. I am offended that you consider me to be *nauseous*!" And Gay is not the most popular name for little girls now.

Words are tricky, adapting new meanings like a chameleon changing colors. Many are commonly misused. If we give a modern or adapted meaning to a word in the Scriptures, we will misunderstand the message. For that reason, it is good that we use modern language translations and make use of dictionaries of Bible words.

Here, in topical manner, we will review a potpourri of commonly used words and terms whose meanings we have distorted. While the use of many of them may not be a trap-door to hell, I think you will agree that we express misunderstandings that develop into misleading trends. So, let's look at a few of them.

In a pitch to gain subscriptions, one journal claims to cover "the continuing story of our **entire brotherhood**." Such a use of the term *brotherhood* is so common among us that readers who are of the Churches of Christ may detect nothing amiss with the expression. We understand that it is meant to include only those in our congregations. The journal does not cover the continuing story of those in the Christian Church, Assembly of God, Baptist Church, or any other group. The implication is clear that persons in groups other than the Church of Christ are not brothers in Christ. That use of the term is an effort in a less glaring manner to reinforce the concept that we are the only brothers in Christ. Whether we declare that everybody else is going to hell or just imply that we are the entire brotherhood, the abhorrent, sectarian message is the same. When Peter exhorted disciples to "Love the brotherhood," (1 Peter 2:17), he did not imply that they were all in a separated group with a distinguishing name.

A similar term is **our fellowship**. Fellowship is a state created by God. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9). It is not something we do or extend primarily. All who are in fellowship with God are in fellowship with one another. We cannot withdraw the fellowship of another person from God, so if we can withdraw fellowship, we are necessarily withdrawing from God who is the center and creator of fellowship. When we speak of *our fellowship*, it is commonly understood to mean those in the Church of Christ who are not in a state of brotherhood with others. It is judgmental, exclusive, and misconceived.

Many have been rejected in our congregations being accused of **walking disorderly**. That may mean that they were judged guilty of inconsistent attendance to assemblies, teaching some variation from the unwritten creed of the group, accepting others across party lines, or anything else the group might oppose. The "adjustable wrench" to manipulate this is 2 Thessalonians 3:14, (context 3:6-15) in older versions of the Scriptures. Newer versions indicate clearly that Paul was telling them to refuse to be *enablers* to the *freeloaders* taking advantage of their benevolence. It is hard to read *withdrawal of fellowship* for any reason into that passage. Let us learn to be honest and just even with the reprehensible characters who may be among us.

"Are you a **member of the church**?" you may ask me. My answer: no, not really! We who "speak where the Bible speaks" may be surprised to learn that the Scriptures do not speak of *members of the church*, a term commonly used among us. Why not? The church is not an entity in which we seek membership but it is a spiritual state of justification. The church is the *ekklesia*, those "called out" into salvation thus comprising God's saved assembly or congregation. Salvation is not found in joining an organization or becoming a part of one. Salvation is a state of justification rather than membership in a group. We are *the saved*, and the saved do not have members. The church is the sum of those added by the Lord through his saving them (Acts 2:36-47).

It is true that we are described as members of the one body (1 Cor. 12:12-31). In speaking of the interdependent working relationship of disciples, they are depicted figuratively as a body, and this figure applies to the universal congregation rather than a local one.

We speak of **placing membership**. That is a no-brainer term we invented to substitute for **joining the church**. Having made our congregations into organized systems, we do join them, for a person can be a member of an organization.

In the above, I have used the word **church** as it is commonly used both in versions of the Bible and our vocabulary. However, the word *church* should not even be in our Scriptures! The word *ekklesia*, meaning "called out" into an assembly or congregation, is grossly rendered "church" in the translations. I say *rendered* for it is not a *translation* of the word. The Greek word *kuriakos* from which *church* is derived is not even used in the New Testament Scriptures in relation to God's people. So when we speak of **church members**, we are doubly misguided!

With that in mind, think of what misconceptions are expressed by such terms as a *Church of Christ member*, *Church of Christ school*, *Church of Christ publication*, *Church of Christ wedding*, etc. How ill-conceived and sectarian is such a statement as "I am Church of Christ!"

What of our claim that *Church of Christ* is the Scriptural name for us as a group? The Scriptures give no proper name for us to wear corporately. If one is appropriate to wear, it could not derive from *kuriakos* but from *ekklesia* for reasons stated above.

Some congregations advertise that they are a **Bible Believing Church**. Now ain't that nice! Have you ever known of a Christian group that does not believe the Bible?

Another claims to be a **New Testament church**. If that means to be a group who has accepted and lives in accordance to the new covenant of grace, that is fine, though other churches make that claim also. But if that is a claim that the saved assembly of God was produced by the New Testament Scriptures, that is off base. Through the gospel God initiated his saved congregation in Christ a full generation before any portion of the New Testament Scriptures were written and several generations before the canon was compiled.

For many years I taught that we are a **restoration of the New Testament church**. I had been taught that the congregation of God had fallen away totally, ceasing to exist, and was restored in our Movement at some indefinite point in the 1800's. In spite of my restoration indoctrination I should have had enough insight to realize that we at no time had a King with no kingdom, a Head without a body, or a Savior with none saved. A total defeat for centuries until the Stone-Campbell Movement in America!

The pioneers of our movement set about to **reform** the existing community of disciples rather than to **restore** a non-existent one. Their efforts of **restoration** were like those of Paul who wrote epistles intended to correct flaws and misdirection among existing disciples.

The epistles do not use the terms **one, true church** or a **loyal church**. Those are terms used by partisans today to communicate to their own sectarian group the state of their exclusiveness.

We deplore the **divided church**. Yet, the one body cannot be divided so that there are two, or even fractions of one. "There is one body" (Eph. 4:4) – not "should be one body." Jesus prayed that we might all be one, and his prayer was fulfilled, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." (1 Cor. 12:12). We may fight and separate from each other in local groups, but we are all still in the one body, just as siblings may fight and reject each other while still in their father's family. Only the father can disinherit, and he refuses our judgment as a basis for that.

Many times we have heard someone relate how that a certain person served in a certain group for many years before being **converted to the church**, meaning the Church of Christ, of course. The big question is whether the person was converted to Christ or to a group. Had he not accepted Christ many years previous to his change of groups? We older ones are familiar with those sermons, tracts, and books explaining, "Why I Am A Member of the Church of Christ" by which we hoped to convert people from other churches to ours. Too much of what we have called evangelism has not been to bring people to Christ but to bring them to our own splinter group of the Churches of Christ. Yes, we have converted many of them to the church instead of the savior!

Then we dolefully relate that some brother has **quit the church** rather than saying he turned away from serving God. The unfaithful disciple often has been said to be **out of duty** because he no longer "goes to church" or does "church work." Nowadays, the absentee from assemblies is said to be **out of the will of God** – whatever that means.

"You must **give sacrificially**," the brother urges in his effort to boost the contributions to the budgeted program of the congregation. In fact, he may lay a little guilt on you so you will **really sacrifice**. After all, it is God's work, and this is your way to **give to the Lord**. Don't rob God of tithes and offerings! The **portion you return to the Lord** must be generous. If you give out of abundance, or if it costs you nothing, you are not sacrificing.

What a misleading vocabulary we have developed in promoting our projects! Although Paul does use the term *giving* in regard to the one-time collection for the poor in Jerusalem and support for his evangelism sent from Philippi, that term is never used in regard to a budget, a treasury, or a sustained program of a congregation. The generous sharing in the Jerusalem congregation was to care for the needs of the poor. In spite of that, our whole concept nowadays is that all *giving* is money given to the treasury of the church. The non-scriptural treasury is supposed to be the **Lord's money** to be distinguished from your personal bank account which is your money. That compartmentalizes religion with a portion dedicated to God and the remainder dedicated to self.

Let's review some basics here. Paul commended the Macedonians for giving money beyond their means into the collection for the poor disciples in Judea. The key: *they first gave themselves*. When we give ourselves to the Lord, it means just that. We are *set apart for the Lord* -- sanctified, holy, dedicated, consecrated, saints. Not partly. Without this holiness, no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Peter emphasizes this saintliness in us, exhorting, "...as he who called you is holy, *be holy yourselves in all your conduct*, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15f). In dedicating ourselves to God we offer our whole being to him as a sacrifice. The word *sacrifice* means *to offer, to make an offering*. The concept of pain, self-privation, or impoverishment is not in the word! Any offering, whether it be a song, a prayer, a fortune, a dollar, or a cup of cold water is a sacrifice.

It is not too surprising that the erroneous concept of meritorious suffering has been attached to the term *sacrifice* describing our service. But we offer sheaves, not lambs. Man cannot offer sacrifices of merit or atonement; he can only bring offerings of praise and thanksgiving.

Now let us look at Romans 12:1-2 again: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a *living sacrifice, holy* and acceptable to God, which is *your spiritual worship*." What part of us is left out? All that we are, all that we have, all that we can do, all that we can become is a living offering to God – dedicated, sanctified, holy.

If we begin to think of "portions" being "returned to the Lord" in the Sunday morning collection, we have missed the whole concept. *Giving to the Lord becomes living for the Lord, and living for the Lord becomes giving to the Lord*. It is whole-life giving, sacrifice, and worship. That includes all that we do as his indwelt temples.

Working at your job, paying your rent, buying your son a bicycle, teaching your son, giving food to hungry people, encouraging the depressed person, caring for your own emotional needs, going to school, singing both spiritual and secular songs, and giving to aid evangelism are all manifestations of the living sacrifice which is your whole-life spiritual service. Passing up opportunities to relieve human needs in order to be able to *give* into the church treasury misses the true meaning of giving (Read Mark 7:9-13). All that is encompassed in *Christian living is Christian sacrifice*. Love, however, rather than selfishness, is the motivation for Christian living.

In what we hope is corrective direction in this writing, we are not denying that one may rightly give to the support of an organized group. In entrusting us as stewards of his endowments, God leaves it to our own loving discernment as to how best to apportion what he has put in our hands and within our power.

"Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb. 12:15-16).

We all know that to be **saved** and to be in the state of **salvation** means to be delivered from sin and its consequences. This is the meaning in Matthew 1:21, Mark 16:15-16, and many other references. But that is not always the meaning! The word also is used many times to mean one is preserved from danger. Noah was saved from drowning in the ark (1 Peter 3:21; 2 Peter 2:5). Peter, when sinking called out for Jesus to save him from drowning (Matt. 14:30). There was an impending judgment on the Jewish nation that Jesus wished to save his disciples from which is the context of Matthew 10:22; 24:13. In this context in (Matt. 24:22) of the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus added, "And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved." With this same meaning in his sermon on Pentecost, Peter exhorted them, "Save yourselves from this crooked (corrupt NIV) generation." With that destructive day drawing near, Paul assures, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed" (Rom. 13:11) The meaning of many other passages is missed if we limit the meaning of *saved* to deliverance from sin.

We have had it impressed upon us that no man can be **righteous** except by imputation of the righteousness of Christ, crediting man's faith for righteousness. It is true that no person can be righteous enough or do right works sufficient to merit salvation, but that does not mean that a person cannot conduct himself uprightly and that he receives no favor from God for his righteousness.

Jesus spoke of "all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah" (Matt. 23:35). It is recorded that "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. --- Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:7-8; 7:1). "Enoch walked with God" (Gen. 5:24) which evidently put him in Noah's category of righteous men. Peter emphasizes the Lot was a righteous man (2 Peter 2:7-9). There are many other applicable references.

If those persons were only accounted righteous, why would it not say that? If they were accounted righteous because of their faith, then what was new about Abraham's justification? If they were accounted as justified before Christ's atonement, with whose righteousness were they credited, and why would Christ's death be necessary?

Can man be righteous (just) enough to gain God's attention and favor? Yes. Noah did (Gen. 6:7-8). Hear Paul concerning Gentiles: "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 2:13-16). James also assures us, "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (James 5:16).

From all of this, we conclude that, even though man can do no works of righteousness meriting salvation, his righteous life can gain attention and favor of God.

This has grown too long; yet there are many other examples illustrating how easily we develop inaccurate meanings in our vocabulary causing us to misunderstand certain texts. In a living language words tend to adapt to current thinking. A man's hair grows so slowly the difference may not be evident each day, but if allowed to go unclipped, it changes his entire facial features. So it is with the gradual change in meaning of words. If we let then go unnoticed, the entire meaning can change. []