WE MUST LEARN TO SPEAK ENGLISH

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Doing the hard work of learning to communicate appropriately is actually an exacting theological endeavour.
Category: Observations

The culture of the UK has changed dramatically over the last fifty years or so. One aspect of this change is very definitely religious. It's not just that fewer people go to church these days, but we are losing our corporate memory of the stories and vocabulary of the faith. Phrases such as "Good Samaritan" and "scapegoat" have entered the language, but they are completely divorced from their original context. We can complain about religious illiteracy as much as we like, but times have moved on and why should we expect secular people to understand our faith anyway? More to the point, we Christians need to shoulder our degree of responsibility for the way in which Christianity is declining.

One aspect of this shift away from a Christian worldview is the loss of Christian vocabulary in society. We've all heard the story of the small child who wondered why Mary had named her baby a swear word; the only time they'd heard the word "Jesus" was as a curse. Theological words such as redemption and justification are not easily understood in their Christian sense today and even a simple word such as "sin" has a different meaning in the wider culture to the church (a clue; sin is almost always used in a context involving another three letter word beginning with s.).

I've often heard Christians bemoaning the fact that people don't understand "Bible words". The implication often seems to be that people are being deliberately obtuse or anti-Christian in using words in ways that we don't.

The thing is, we are living in a missionary situation and we need to get used to it. The first thing a conscientious missionary does is learn to communicate in the language and culture of the people they are working amongst. If we are to present the Gospel to people in the United Kingdom then we need to learn to do so in the language that they speak and not in our specialised church dialect. We have to learn to communicate the biblical concept of "sin" in terms that people will grasp, rather than expecting them to follow what we mean. This is not about dumbing down the message. Doing the hard work of learning to communicate appropriately is actually an exacting theological endeavour. You have to make sure that you fully understand the concept - atonement, or whatever - and then learn to express it in English. Falling back on familiar vocabulary and then expecting others to do the hard work is a cop out.

Yes, of course, people who become believers will need to appreciate the biblical sense of the words that we use, but this is a project that takes time. There is no vocabulary test that people need to pass before they enter the kingdom and we need to learn to speak to them in ways that they understand.

In passing, I realise that there are languages other than English used on these islands, but I assume

that the principle is true in those, too.