

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS ON THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CURRENT ELCIC DISCUSSIONS

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Nestled among our family cookbooks is a volume entitled *Foods that Harm, Foods that Heal*. So, too, words, names, labels: some can hurt, some can heal. Or mislead and confuse. “Conservative”? “Liberal”? We likely have some idea of what we mean when we apply these labels to others or to ourselves. But your “conservative” may be my “liberal,” and vice-versa. In discussing divisive issues, it’s important to see how words, labels, and names function, and how they can heal or harm.

Names – Now, and Then

Corporations have millions invested in their names, logos, and slogans, part of the “branding” of almost everything today (Klein, 2000). They may invent a character – Betty Crocker, the Glad Man – and that character *is* that company for the general public: friendly, smiling, helpful, or sitting around waiting for a Maytag service call.

Corporations do not want to acquire “a bad name.” Nor do we. Indeed, in our digital age we may worry that our name – or our government or bank numbers – may be stolen and along with it our legal and financial identity, our public “person.” On the other hand, while we anxiously protect our identifying “numbers,” we may at the same time object to being simply “a number” rather than a name – a person. For names are not simply breath and sound, or symbols in black and white on a page. Unless a name deliberately masks the true purpose of a group (an anti-environmental group masquerading under a “green” name, for example), a name represents the essence, the very being, of what is named:

- An illness: if we can name it, we can hope to treat it.
- A thing: “Go to sleep, it’s just a shadow on the wall.”

- A creature: the first human names the animals, according to the nature of each.¹
- A deity: Moses is told that the name of the one he encounters at the burning bush is *YHWH*, that is, “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod. 3.13-14).
- Jacob, “the supplanter” (of his brother Esau, Gen. 25.29-34, 27.36), is re-named Israel, “he strives with God” (Gen. 32.28; cf. 35.10).
- Jesus addresses Simon as Peter, “the rock”(Greek *petra*; Aramaic *kepha*, hence Cephas in John 1.42; 1 Cor. 1.12; 3.22; 9.5; 15.5; Gal. 1.18; 2.9, 11, 14) on which he will build his church (Matt. 16.18-19).

In the Bible names have power. When the authorities come to the garden at night and ask for Jesus, he replies, *Ego eimi* (the Greek translation of the Hebrew name – “I AM” – revealed at the burning bush), and they fall to the ground (John 18.3-6). In the Bible names have power, as is very evident in the accounts of Jesus’ healings (Remus 1997a, pp. 24-25, 99-100). Demons identify Jesus by name or status (Mark 1.24; 3.11; 5.7), thus hoping to gain power over him. But his power overrides theirs, silencing them (Mark 1.23-25, 27, 34; 3.12; 5.7-8; 7.29; 9.25). Jesus’ followers heal in the name of Jesus (Acts 3.1-10; 4.1-22; 9.34). Saul, the persecutor of Jesus’ followers, is called to bring the “name” of Jesus to others (Acts 9.1-18), which includes healing in that name (16.16-18). Those who attempt to use Jesus’ name to their own ends suffer the consequences (19.13-16). An early Christian hymn proclaims that God has given the risen Jesus “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2.9-10) – a confession of faith echoed in the ringing hymn *At the Name of Jesus* (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, no. 179) or *All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name* (*LBW*, nos. 328/329) and many similar hymns. Christian prayer commonly concludes “In the name of Jesus.” For his followers his is a healing name.

For second-century opponents of Jesus’ followers, naming him as a “magician” was a way to discredit him (Celsus in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.6, 28, 68, 71), a charge raised and then stoutly denied some years earlier by Justin Martyr (*I Apology* 30;). The same charge is laid against Jesus’ apostle (*Acts of Thomas* 96, 98, 100-02, 104, 106, 130, 152, 162). Christians in turn label their opponents false prophets and magicians (Acts 13.6) or worse (13.10). Naming is a key element in conflicts between early Christians and their opponents (Smith 1978; Remus 1983, chaps. 4 and 9; 1992, pp. 858-59; 1997b, p. 754).

In these examples names function to set off “my” or “our” group from “your” or “their” group. At an early age we experience the power of names in the schoolyard and schoolroom, on up to high school with its cliques and gangs, and then later in the workplace. Those names may embrace us – make us part of the “in” group – or exclude us, stigmatizing us as not part of that group. As a sect within Judaism, early Christians drew on their Jewish heritage for names or labels that would establish their identity and set the boundaries of who was in and who wasn’t, thus setting themselves off both from other varieties of Judaism and from the wider world

¹ Thus at least Milton’s Adam in *Paradise Lost* (Book 8, lines 342-354), Milton taking his cue from the phrase “after their kinds” in Gen. 1.21, 24-25.

(Remus 2002, pp. 441-442; 2004a, p. 194). Christians saw themselves as

- “The Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14,22; cf. John 14.4-6; Heb. 10.20);
- the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12);
- God’s “assembly,” that is, the “church [*ekklesiā*] of God” (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Tim. 3:5), or simply “the church” (Matt. 16:18; 18:17; etc.);
- “brother” and “sister,” a common term in many New Testament writings;
- “saints” (1 Cor. 1:2; 6:1-2; etc.);
- the chosen and destined ones (John 15:16, 19; Rom. 8:29-30; 1 Thess. 1:4; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:4; Rev. 17:14);
- “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet. 2:9);
- “Christian,” a label evidently first applied to Christians by Gentile outsiders (Acts 11.26; Wilkins 1992) and meaning something like “Christ-devotee” or “Christ-lackey” (Elliott 1990:79; 2000: 791; cf. “Jesus freak” today).

In employing such terms early Christians were adhering to Jewish practice setting off Jews, as God’s special people, from the surrounding culture through labelling of peoples and of practices, placing both of these on a “to avoid” list. In more technical language, such labels and to-be-shunned practices function as boundary markers, social classifiers (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Wilson 1990; Remus 2002, pp. 439-442). Through self-identifiers such as those listed above, New Testament writers keep before their readers how they are different from those “outside” their circle. As well, through “before-and-after” lists, they remind their readers what they were and did before becoming Christians, contrasted with what they are and are to do now.² The catalogues of vices function similarly, contrasting vices with virtues stated or implied.³

Each of these various labels and catalogues of vices can include or exclude, can heal or can harm, depending on how they are used:

- The name of Jesus can be healing, strengthening, comforting. But, to take one signal example of the contrary, with the cross of Jesus emblazoned on their persons and on their flags, the Crusaders (“Calvary Troopers,” so to speak) massacred Jews and Muslims as well as Eastern Christians, in the end even sacking Constantinople, the capital of their

² 1 Thess. 5:4-5; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Pet. 4:3-4. In other early Christian texts: Justin, *I Apology*. 53.5; *2 Apology*. 2.1-7; *Dialogue with Trypho* 63.5; 119.5; 123.5; Tertullian, *The Shows* (*De Spectaculis*) 4; 24; *Acts of Thomas* 12-15).

³ Mark 7.21-22//Matt. 15.19; Rom. 1.29-31; 13.13; 1 Cor. 5.10-11; 6.9-10; 2 Cor. 12.20; Gal. 5.19-21 (virtues, 5.22-23); Eph. 5.3-5; Col. 3.5, 3.8; 1 Tim. 1.9-10; 2 Tim. 3.2-5; 1 Pet. 2.1; 4.3, 15; Rev. 21.8; 22.15. The catalogues derive from Greek philosophy (examples in Malherbe 1986, pp. 138-43) via Judaism (Conzelmann, 1975, pp. 100-01).

Christian brothers and sisters in the Eastern Empire.⁴ Crusaders seem to emerge in every age ready to impose “the right” – their right– on others.

- To think of oneself as “chosen” can be reassuring, but it can also devolve into self-congratulation and smugness, into denying the chosenness of God’s ancient people, the Jews, and into failure to ask, “Chosen for what?”
- The “body of Christ” with its organic imagery of the importance of each of the members, even the “least” of these, is a powerful symbol of how churches and congregations are to function in harmony toward common purposes (1 Cor. 12). Yet, already in Paul’s day some of those thus addressed by Paul failed to “discern the body” of Christ as they ate and drank to satiety, ignoring and excluding the poorer members of the body there assembled (1 Cor. 11.17-34). In current discussions and debates around gays and lesbians in the church we often find ourselves not discerning the body in those Christians who are different from us and/or hold views different from our own.
- “Brothers” and “sisters” is a welcoming word still used in some churches, but welcome may not extend to helping brothers and sisters in need (James 2.1-7) or those who are different from us in colour, age, income, marital status, sexual orientation (to name a few). For millennia, women heard only males addressed when they read, or heard read, the New Testament letters with their “brethren/brothers” references.. Only with newer translations of the New Testament have women finally heard Paul and the other New Testament writers say “brothers and sisters,” a rendering that takes account of the linguistic fact that the Greek word *adelphoi* is found in various ancient writings to mean both “brothers and sisters” (Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich, p. 18, under ἀδελφός, no. 1) and, considering the prominence of women in the early churches and subsequently, surely to be included in those thus addressed.
- The New Testament’s “the church” or “the church of God” and the Apostolic Creed’s confession of “the holy catholic church” bring to mind the church through the centuries and God’s purposes for it, but in practice it can come to mean “my church” as defined by me or my congregation as opposed to God’s church, or my denomination to the exclusion of other denominations.
- “The Way” points to Christ’s unique work and the new way he embodied. But it can also be used arrogantly, flaunting belonging to The Way over against those one deems not to belong.
- “Christian” can mean belonging to and professing Christ. But some take it to apply only to those who have had certain experiences or profess certain doctrines or certain interpretations of various passages of the Bible.

⁴ Runciman 1951, 1952, 1955. The massacre of Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem during the First Crusade was a “bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that recreated the fanaticism of Islam” and stood in the way of Christians and Muslims working together in the East (1951, p.287). Crusaders’ pogroms on their way to the Holy Land played a significant role in subsequent European anti-Semitism and thus ultimately in the troubled situation in today’s Middle East (Armstrong 2001, pp. 71-75; 458-63).

Power-laden Words

Words, especially unexamined words (and slogans), can exercise power over ourselves and others. Some function to define “us” over against “them.” Among these are racial epithets and slurs, which still persist though usually not voiced openly. Slurs against gays and lesbians are not uncommon, however, whether voiced in school or work contexts or inscribed on washroom walls or uttered as prelude to assaulting gays verbally and/or physically.⁵ In church discussions of homosexuality, certain words also surface, exerting an almost hypnotic effect, it seems, something akin to “terminological boobytraps” (Smith 1983) or “the tyranny of terminology” (Remus 1999, p. 264), marking the speakers and/or their group off from persons or groups perceived as “the other.”

Sodomy.⁶ Is it this that brought destruction on Sodom (Gen. 19)? Some say yes (even though no such acts actually took place). Others argue it was inhospitality rooting in a xenophobia – directed both at Lot (19.9) as well as the strangers – which would have been consummated had the men of the town succeeded in gang-raping Lot’s two guests (thus womanizing and humiliating them).⁷ In these discussions little attention is paid to the significant references to “Sodom” in the Bible itself (Remus 2004b); sodomy is never mentioned in any of these passages referring to the two cities.⁸ In the Gospels inhospitality (Matt. 10.14-15 // Luke 10.10-12) and failure to repent (Matt. 11.23-24) are the sins mentioned by Jesus. The term “sodomy” has useful linguistic functions, but its use in connection with the Gen. 19 story is increasingly dubious.

The Hebrew word *toevah* (plural, *toevoth*), translated as “abomination(s)” (King James Version; New Revised Standard Version) or “detestable”/“detestable ways” (New International Version), or variations thereof, occurs in Lev. 18.22 // 20.13 to designate sexual acts between two men, with death as the penalty. However, “abomination” also covers a spectrum of diverse practices and attitudes: sexual intercourse during a woman’s menses (Lev. 18.19); remarriage of a divorced couple (Deut. 24.1-4); shady business practices (Deut. 25.13-16; Prov. 11.1; 20.10); haughtiness, lying, wicked plotting, bearing false witness, sowing of discord, murder (Prov.

⁵ According to the FBI, hate crimes in the U.S. in 2000 numbered 7,489; over half “were racially motivated” with African Americans being targeted more than any other group; six of the 14 murder victims were of gay men, four were of African Americans (*Time*, Dec. 6, 2004, p. 14). A web search of “attacks on gays” clothes these statistics with details from many such assaults.

⁶ That is, same-sex copulation, though the word can also denote “noncoital and especially anal or oral copulation with a member of the opposite sex” (*Merriam-Webster’s Deluxe Dictionary*, 10th Collegiate Edition [1998]).

⁷ See von Rad’s sensitive commentary on the story (1961, pp. 211-16).

⁸ The two possible exceptions (Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2.10) are obscure at best, and if translated fairly literally, as Luther and the King James Version do, say nothing about sodomy. Details in Remus 2004b.

6.16-19); judging falsely (Prov. 17.15); even prayer that is not attuned to God's will (Prov. 28.9) (cf. Anderson 1999). "Abomination" occurs also in Deut. 18.9 and 18.12 to designate a list (18.10-11) of practices often translated as "divination," "sorcery," etc.; but it is difficult if not impossible to find out just what is meant by these words (as is evident at the very least from the translations, which vary from one translator to another) (Remus 1999, pp. 264-66). That means that if today's Jews or Christians are to avoid these "abominable" practices, it is difficult to know just what it is they are to avoid. In Ezek. 18.5-13 lending at interest appears in a long list of sins and is labelled in 18.13 along with these other sins as "abominations." If these prohibitions against lending at interest were observed today by Christians (as they were until modern times), the global economy would grind to a halt.

In these various passages, homosexual acts between males as well as a host of other practices and attitudes are all equally "abominations." But it is only the same-sex acts that are commonly pointed to as an "abomination." Do the others not matter, for example, those concerning money, especially in view of the more than 2,000 references to money and finance in the Bible (according to some counts) compared with the far fewer references to sexual behaviour, whether hetero- or homosexual (and in view of Paul's dictum that whoever does not keep the *whole* law is cursed [Gal. 3.10])? Moreover, the same-sex behaviour labelled "abomination" in the Bible is simply genital, from which many take same-sex "intimacy" to consist solely in that, overlooking the many other ways in which same-sex couples, along with heterosexual couples, find intimacy in sharing the joys and vicissitudes of life together.

Another word prominent in discussions of homosexuality is "nature" (*physis*, Rom. 1.26). Same-sex intercourse is indeed "unnatural" if one considers anatomy and procreation, an argument that grounds much of Robert Gagnon's discussion of same-sex behaviour (2001: 40, 488 et passim). Whether same-sex orientation is a choice one makes is disputed by many, if not most, homosexuals, who see who they are as "natural" for themselves. In other species equipped, like humans, for heterosexual coupling, same-sex behaviour is "natural" for some individuals, domestic and wild, according to various books and articles reporting on scientific research that verifies what farmers and others have long observed.⁹ Choice does not enter into such behaviour; it is in the "nature" of these particular representatives of their species. To paraphrase Hamlet, there are more things in "nature" than are dreamt of in our theologies.

Disputes and Divisions: Words Upon Words

Disputes and divisions in the church are not new, as the New Testament and other early Christian writings attest (Knox 1955; Bauer 1971; Nessian 2004). There are various ways in which these were perceived and concluded, as one may see in the following four examples, chronologically arranged.

⁹ For evidence, type "same-sex behaviour among animals and insects" into a search engine.

1. The status of Gentiles in the early Jesus movement (Galatians 2), ca. 44-48 C.E. Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, brings Titus to Jerusalem as evidence that “a Gentile sinner” (2.15) can be a full member of the Jesus movement without adopting Jewish observances. James, Peter, and John accept Titus as the uncircumcised Gentile follower of Jesus that he is. Ministry to the Gentiles is allotted to Paul and Barnabas, and ministry to Jews to James, Peter, and John. Overall unity is maintained while allowing for differences in practice, that is, local options (fuller treatment in Cole Arnal 2004).
2. Divisions within the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians), 55-56 C.E. Rival groups name Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and Christ as their heads. Paul’s response – Was Christ divided, was Paul crucified for you, did I baptize any of you (1.12-15)? – culminates in his assertion that all should look beyond their divisions to Christ crucified as God’s weakness/power and foolishness/wisdom (1.18-25), what Luther called God *sub contrario* (God under a contrary form) – a theology of the cross and the heart of Luther’s own theology. Following Paul’s dissecting of other divisions in the church comes his compelling portrayal of how all members of the Body in all their diversity are essential to its functioning (chap. 12) and, then, the familiar chapter on love. These appeals by Paul were instrumental in the Corinthian church’s continuing faithful, as is clear from *First Clement*, a letter written to them from Rome around 96 C.E.
3. When talk is futile, stick with certain words and formulas (The Pastoral Letters: 1-2 Timothy; Titus), dated anywhere from ca. 60 C.E. to ca. 130 C.E. Unlike the Paul of the earlier letters, who hesitates not in tackling issues head on, the Paul of the Pastorals advises the letters’ recipients to hold fast to certain words and formulas (1 Tim. 6.3; 2 Tim. 1.13; 4.3; Titus 1.9, 13; 2.1,8) and to avoid word-wars (1 Tim. 6.4; 2 Tim. 2.14) and pointless controversies and those individuals who cause divisions (2 Tim. 2.23; Tit.3.9-10). At the same time, the Pauline message of salvation by grace alone comes through clearly (2 Tim. 1.8-10; Tit. 3.5-7).
4. Listen respectfully, speak out plainly; if there is an impasse, part cordially (Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, A Jew), ca. 155-160 (Remus 1986). In this long piece (142 chapters), likely grounded in actual dialogues of Justin with Jews, Justin and a learned Jew named Trypho debate major and minor differences regarding Jesus and the scriptures and what is the true Judaism. Unlike other similar writings of this sort, Justin’s is respectful of his Jewish opponent, while Trypho responds in kind, even conceding some major issues (e.g., Jesus may be seen as Lord of the Gentiles [chap. 64.1]). For either man to have agreed fully with the other would have required a full-scale conversion and a farewell to their respective faith communities. Their parting is cordial.

Something in each of these scenarios is, or can be, present in discussions of divisive issues, including the current ones in our church. Sometimes the most heated debates are between those with like convictions signalled in words held in common (for example, *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*). One lesson from the Christian ecumenical movement of the twentieth century

has been that, despite differences and divisions, unity of Christians is a given; the task was (and is) to discover and maintain it (Eph. 4.3). The spirit of such dialogue is well expressed in the conclusion to a letter by Philip Gagnon to the *Canada Lutheran* (Dec. 2000, p. 10), reminding us that speech has to do with persons:

I hope that as this issue of homosexuality develops in dialogue that we do so in mutual respect, intellectually as well as emotionally. When we write, dialogue or communicate in any other medium, we should do so while putting ourselves in the other's shoes as the recipient of our communication so that, at the very least, we are speaking the same language in gentleness and deep respect for one another, even as we disagree.

This essay has been about words. However, in my own experience and that of many others, personal acquaintance with those "other" than us in race, ethnic origin, social status, gender, or sexual orientation has mattered more than words about such "others."

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