



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

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*"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy spirit be with you all." 2 Cor. 13:14.*

Language has always been of utmost importance to Christians. That should not be at all surprising since we call ourselves people of the "Word." We seek to understand and appropriate the Word and the words of God. Obviously this necessitates words.

In a larger sense anyone who seeks to put pen to paper, or to use a word processor, becomes a wordsmith, seeking to utilize the power and wonder of language to communicate deeper realities. The most disappointing response for anyone who is seeking to communicate is when his or her words are misunderstood or worse yet, ignored. Thoughtful communication most often depends on the power of words.

Using the exact words to communicate becomes a consistent goal. Changing even a word or a letter can completely alter the meaning. The classic bulletin blooper which seems to make every such list highlights this fact, "The choir will sin during the offering." Words matter. Language is the heart of communication.

One of the realities of the accelerating changes in our world is that language is also undergoing dramatic change. For example, some 60,000 new words were added to the most recent dictionaries. If people from previous generations were to revisit our country, they would hardly recognize our present language.

When I go back to favorite books of the distant past, I quickly become aware of how language has changed. For instance, I recently read the book again entitled Parting the Waters, the story of Martin Luther King Jr. up through 1963. It is staggering to see how language was used as a weapon to demean, deny and destroy other human beings. We still tolerate much too much racial stereotyping but at least the public language has changed. (An official of Minnesota State Government was just forced to resign because he admitted using racist language more than a decade earlier.)

Of course there is no arena of life where language has changed more dramatically than in terms of gender. I still remember the early wedding services where we used the words, "I now pronounce you man and wife." Not man and woman, not husband and wife, but man and wife. Sounds like only the woman was making any com-

mitment to this union. How language has changed. Think about this the next time you are introduced to your "waitstaff" or remember that Lutheran Brotherhood suddenly metamorphized into Thrivent.

Biblically and theologically speaking, words have always been central to our faith and life. Certainly God's truth can be discerned in other venues; art, music, the created world. But John's Gospel highlights the centrality of words when he writes, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."* All of the force of these affirmations are summed up in verse 14 of the same chapter, *"And the Word became a human being and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."* Jesus is the Word. The center of our church is the Word and the Sacraments.

Those who continue to create new translations of the Bible have had to struggle with the changing nature of language. As majestic and lovely the language of the King James Version of the Bible might be, it reflects popular usage in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Hardly relevant to 2004. Some translations have done a better job than others in finding a way to respond to changing language. I like the way the New Revised Standard Version has removed all of the gender classifications whenever possible without changing the meaning of the text. Thus we are all not "sons of God" but rather we are all "children of God."

Of course where this issue of gender language has become the most contentious and has the most at stake is in the language we use for God. Of course all of us know that God is neither male nor female, the Bible tells us that God is spirit, and we worship God in spirit and in truth. We recognize that most of the personal pronouns for God in the Scriptures are male, God is like a father. But we need to also remember that there are descriptions of God as female. God gives birth, God is like a mother hen gathering her chicks, God is like a mother who comforts her children.

Without agreeing with radical feminist theologian Mary Daly who has coined the famous line, "if God is male then the male is God," I think we need to be open to both images of God which are found in the Scriptures,

that God is like a father and God is like a mother.

Language has changed dramatically in the area of ethics and morality, sometimes, as it is said, to protect the guilty. I remember that Psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book a generation ago entitled Whatever Became Of Sin. His thesis, obviously, was not that sin had disappeared but we had changed our language. What we used to call sin or immorality is now often referred to as an "alternative lifestyle." Indecent exposure at a recent Super Bowl is described as a "wardrobe malfunction." Rather than change deplorable or destructive behavior, society is much more willing to just change the descriptive language.

Euphemisms abound. The dictionary describes a euphemism as "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant." One of the most offensive such phrases to me is the popular dictum of "safe sex." We have heard this euphemism so often it has become rooted and grounded in the culture, with hardly a peep of protest. If you practice safe sex, everything will be okay. Safe sex is the answer to ethics, morality and disease.

However, the problem has always been and always will be that sex is never safe. There is no such thing as safe sex. Sex is always risky, always dangerous. For sex involves such messy components as feelings, emotions, commitments, relationships, self esteem, and mutual respect. Sex always has so many unintended consequences. To say one can practice safe sex is an oxymoron, there is no such thing. Some compensate for the vacuousness of that concept with "safer sex." My first question is always, "safer than what?"

Death and dying is a perfect place for euphemisms. Instead of just saying the truth, that someone died, we find all kinds of different words. Think of the words we use instead of death and dying; bit the dust, bought the farm, crossed the river, or the common favorites, passed away or passed on." I personally would rather die than pass away. The funeral industry has encouraged this denial of death, caskets with inner spring mattresses with foam rubber pillows, mortuaries with slumber rooms, some even selling sleeping gowns for burials, or after the work of the funeral director we suddenly realize that the person in the casket is the healthiest looking person in the room. Death is death, not slumbering. The body is "dust to dust," not to be preserved for eternity.

Many of the debates in Lutheranism today are about language. I mention just one of them. Martin Luther either coined or at least advanced the concepts of "the theology

of the cross" and the "theology of glory." He had good reason to do so, the church of his day was corrupt. While the people suffered to eat and stay alive, the church was living in luxury, the hierarchy was glorifying themselves and Rome was trying to build St. Peter's paved with gold. So Luther said that the Christian needs to live under the theology of the cross, which means dying and rising each day with Jesus Christ, which means humility and service. He condemned the glory and ostentatious nature of the priesthood.

Today, however, meanings have shifted. From mainline denominational leaders and theologians, a theology of the cross has come to mean whatever they seem to like and a theology of glory is assigned to that which they do not like or appreciate. So today from some Lutherans we hear attacks of a "theology of glory" directed at evangelism efforts, at any kind of church growth efforts, at building programs, at contemporary Christian music, at successful programs such as Alpha or even thriving congregations. The euphemism that is repeated often is "I would rather be faithful than successful." My first question is always, "Why not be both?"

So we live in an ecclesiastical climate where the apostles on Pentecost who went out and baptized 3,000 people in a single day would be seen as evidencing a "theology of glory," and a congregation which is going down the tubes because of poor leadership or because of a lack of vision as being evidence of a "theology of the cross." It is amazing how we can twist perfectly good words and concepts for our own purposes.

I believe that language and words are among God's greatest gifts. Christians need to hone their language skills, to struggle with the changing nature of language and make sure that we can communicate the Gospel in 2004. As much as some might hope, the church is never going back to 1959, and neither should our language.

For those who are nostalgic, I take leave with some of the most well-known words from the book of James: *Even so faith if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, "Thou hast faith, and I have works; shew me thy faith without works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well; the devils also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead."* I rest my case.