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Communicating the Gospel Without Theological Jargon

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Typical Christian clergy (both academic theologians and parish pastors) use words such as *grace, covenant, redeem, justify,* and *righteousness* almost without having to think about them or even the choice of using them. Such words are part of speaking theologically and are seemingly as natural as being a Christian. Parishioners do not seem to object. In fact, they seem to understand — they do not give the speaker puzzled looks or ask for an explanation. After all, members of nearly every Christian denomination receive instruction in the faith in some fashion, either formally (as in Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, or Eastern Orthodox churches) or through some other means (Bible classes, Sunday schools, and preaching). Many clergymen assume that such catechized Christians are acquainted with theological terms. When Christians hear these terms or read them in their Bibles, pastors expect Christians to understand them.

In short, clergy are assuming five things. First, pastors are assuming that teaching a word's theological definition defines it for life. However, in everyday speach that word carries different meanings for most readers or hearers. Their everyday experience teaches them something different about the meaning of the word. In other words, for most readers a word will carry the meaning or meanings that it has in everyday, common English usage. Many clergy learned specialized meanings for words in the sciences or mathematics as a part of their education. How many have forgotten what those specialized meanings are? Which pastor would like to hazard a guess for the precise legal meaning of insanity, probable cause, or several hundred other terms that are familiar to every attorney and are part of every attorney's specialized vocabulary? Every discipline has jargon (words with specialized meanings often poorly understood by nonspecialists). Christian clergy need to recognize that their jargon does not consist only of Greek and Latin phrases but also of English terms.

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Second, pastors are assuming that because hearers appear to accept the use of a term use, it is well-understood. This is a dangerous assumption, because it may mean that the hearers do not want to appear ignorant and, therefore, do not ask for a definition. This may be especially true for those who once learned these words and do not want to admit that they forgot what they learned. In some cases the hearer may understand something different, but not different enough to prompt a question.

Third, pastors are assuming that people are eager enough to learn the gospel and that they will come to them for an explanation. Perhaps this was never commonly the case, but in the age of electronic media, of newspapers and magazines written on a sixth grade level, and of highly visual, passive forms of communication (such as music videos) this is even less common, even when communicating with highly intelligent and highly educated people.

Fourth, pastors are assuming that those who have not learned the faith previously will learn the theological meaning of these words, especially if pastors explain these words in homiletic and instructional settings. However, can one or two hours a week in church override 166 hours a week away from church (if people are attending church every week)?

Finally, clergy are assuming that the church has the influence to change the language use of society. This may be true in a few very exceptional cases. It may have been true for past generations. However, it is not true today. Well over ninety-nine percent of the English language is unaffected by ecclesiastical innovations. The vocabulary people know is the one they learn at home, in the office, in the shopping malls, and from popular media. Whether clergy like it or not, it is this vocabulary and its meanings that people will apply to theological terms, or if they cannot apply that vocabulary, they will simply fail to understand what they are being told.

All these assumptions add up to a disastrous situation. A pastor uses words intended to communicate basic truths of the Christian faith. However, large numbers of his listeners may misunderstand or fail to understand what he is saying because

they are unfamiliar with certain theological terms.

If theologians' use of theological jargon is a potentially disastrous situation, it is a fatal one for Bible translators. Translators almost never have a chance to explain the meaning of a word to the person who reads the Bible placed in a hotel room by the Gideons. Translators who are attempting to produce Bibles to be read by the general public cannot assume that the person who receives a Bible or a tract containing a Scripture quotation will ever be in church to receive a fuller explanation.

A Survey of Common Theological Terms

To determine what people are hearing when they hear or read theological jargon, God's Word To The Nations Bible Society sent requests to 890 pastors on its mailing list and asked them to administer a survey of theological terms during their Bible classes. A cover letter asked that pastors not review the terms before handing out the survey forms. The survey asked the respondents to define a number of theological terms. The entry for each word in the survey contained a check off box for "I don't know the meaning."

The Bible society received over 2400 completed survey forms. Of these, a few were single forms that the pastors completed themselves. The tabulated survey results do not include these forms. For the purposes of this survey, a correct answer is one that matches the primary meaning conveyed by the underlying Hebrew and Greek words. The category labeled "other" includes definitions that did not correspond to any meaning of the Hebrew or Greek words and was not sufficiently clear enough to correspond to an English meaning as defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary*.[1]

While the results of this survey are enlightening, the respondents were not typical. Because all the respondents attend

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[1]*American Heritage Dictionary*, third edition, version 3.0A (Wordstar International, 1993). The *American Heritage Dictionary* (hereafter abbreviated *AHD*) was chosen because it uses descriptive lexicography. That is, its definitions attempt to define words as they are actually being used by Americans. It avoids prescribing how words ought to be used.

Bible class, the survey results should have resulted in a higher than normal number of correct answers. Nevertheless, the results for the five theological terms are disappointing. Acceptable answers ranged from a high of forty percent (for covenant) to a low of five percent (for grace).

A. Grace

The *AHD* entry for grace reads:

> **grace** *n.* **1.** Seemingly effortless beauty or charm of movement, form, or proportion. See Synonyms at **elegance**. **2.** A characteristic or quality pleasing for its charm or refinement. **3.** A sense of fitness or propriety. **4.a.** A disposition to be generous or helpful; goodwill. **b.** Mercy; clemency. **5.** A favor rendered by one who need not do so; indulgence. **6.** A temporary immunity or exemption; a reprieve

Grace often translates the Greek word χάρις and occasionally translates Hebrew חֵן. χάρις can mean graciousness or attractiveness (*AHD* meanings 1 and 2, the most common English meanings), but most often, like חֵן, means favor or good will (*AHD* meanings 4a and 5).[2] The survey results yielded the following understandings of the English word grace:

other (including attractiveness) 40%

favor/goodwill 5%

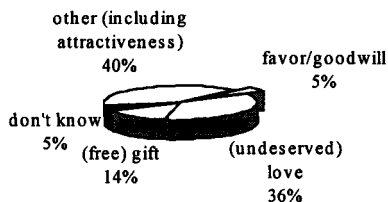don't know 5%

(free) gift 14%

(undeserved) love 36%

Figure 1 — Responses to *Grace*

[2]Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* second edition, translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, edited by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 877-878 (hereafter abbreviated *BAGD*).

The survey suggests that grace is a poor choice to translate χάρις in most instances. Only five percent of the respondents understood the same meaning for grace as the ancient Greek reader of the New Testament would have for the majority of occurrences of χάρις. Moreover, for half of the respondents two widely used, well-intentioned (but erroneous) explanations of grace have displaced what grace should mean: gift and love. χάρις does not mean gift, although, good will and favor can be gifts in some sense. χάρις is not love either. Some Greek words do correspond to the English word love (for example, ἀγάπη, φιλία), but χάρις is not one of them.[3] Interestingly enough, *AHD* does not list either gift or love as meanings for grace. This alone is a lesson in how effective the church is in changing the meaning of words for the language as a whole.

If a Bible translator wishes to convey the meaning of χάρις, grace is a poor choice in most instances. Favor and goodwill might be better choices and are easily understood words.

B. Covenant

AHD's entry for covenant is:

> **cov•e•nant** *n.* **1.** A binding agreement; a compact. See Synonyms at **bargain. 2.** *Law.* **a.** A formal sealed agreement or contract. **b.** A suit to recover damages for violation of such a contract. **3.** In the Bible, God's promise to the human race. **— cov•e•nant** *v.* **cov•e•nant•ed, cov•e•nant•ing, cov•e•nants, —** *tr.* **1.** To promise by or as if by a covenant. See Synonyms at **promise.**

These meanings accord well with the various meanings of בְּרִית in Hebrew. The Hebrew word can be an agreement, a formal sealed agreement, or a promise. Only *AHD* meaning 2b would be inappropriate as a translation for בְּרִית. However, the Greek word διαθήκη cannot mean an agreement arrived at through bargaining. In secular Greek it almost always means *last will and testament,* a use found in only a few New Testament

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[3]Note that in the four column entry for χάρις in *BAGD* (pages 877-878) love does not appear once.

passages.[4] The most prominent use of διαθήκη in the New Testament is *a unilateral pledge or promise* (a meaning derived from the secular use). Note especially the entry in *BAGD* which states: "In the covenants' of God it was God alone who set the conditions; hence covenant can be used to transl. *d.* only when this is kept in mind."[5]

The question, however, is not what the translator or scholar has in mind but what the average reader has in mind. Figure 2 shows what readers have in mind.

other 17%   don't know 15%

agreement 28%   promise/pledge 40%
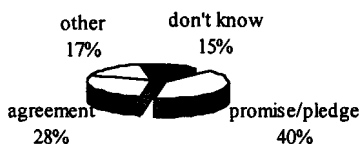
Figure 2 — Responses to *Covenant*

Clearly, a large number of respondents understand a covenant to be a pledge or promise. This coincides with the biblical meaning of διαθήκη, the primary meaning of בְּרִית, and the biblical meaning listed in *AHD*. However, over half do not understand a covenant to be a promise. Over a quarter of the respondents understood a covenant to be an agreement. This should not be surprising, since agreement is the first meaning listed in *AHD*. However, agreement is clearly the wrong meaning of the word for the New Testament and a majority of Old Testament uses.[6] Furthermore, a significant percentage of respondents (15%) admitted that they did not know what covenant meant, making it a bad translation choice in any case.

What are the choices for a Bible translator? Clearly, promise is the easiest word, but it will not work in all cases in the New

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[4]Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:299; *BAGD*, 183.

[5]*BAGD*, 183.

[6]If Jesus said, "This cup is the new agreement in my blood," what were the disciples agreeing to?

Testament, especially when ἐπαγγελία occurs in the same context. In such cases pledge may be the word of choice. In the Old Testament promise is a good choice, especially in translating בְּרִיתִי as *my promise*. Even the Sinai promise is called בְּרִיתִי by God (Jeremiah 31:32). While this בְּרִית required a large number of things by the Israelites, it was not negotiated. God speaks of the Sinai promise as "my promise." However, no matter what the choice for translation in modern English, covenant is not appropriate if the target audience consists of average English speakers.

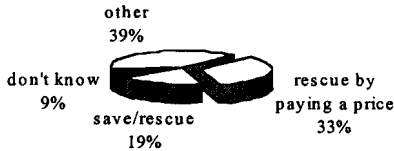### C. Redeem

The *AHD* entry for redeem reads:

> re•deem *tr. v.* re•deemed, re•deem•ing, re•deems. 1. To recover ownership of by paying a specified sum. 2. To pay off (a promissory note, for example). 3. To turn in (coupons, for example) and receive something in exchange. 4. To fulfill (a pledge, for example). 5. To convert into cash: *redeem stocks.* 6. To set free; rescue or ransom. 7. To save from a state of sinfulness and its consequences. See Synonyms at **save(1).**

In English New Testaments redeem is the translation often chosen for the three occurrences of λυτρόω (Luke 24:21; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:18). Other Greek words from the same root are translated similarly (λύτρον — ransom; λύτρωσις — redemption). The basic meaning of λυτρόω is the first meaning of redeem listed in *AHD*.[7] While λυτρόω can take on a generic meaning, such as save or rescue, it does not carry this meaning in its three occurrences in the New Testament. In all three it clearly carries the idea of paying a price to ransom someone.[8] Three other Greek words from the same root occur in New Testament. λύτρον is a price paid to rescue someone (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). λύτρωσις is the act of paying a price to rescue someone (Luke 1:68; 2:38; Hebrews 9:12). Only λυτρωτής (redeemer) could be understood in the generic sense (its only occurrence is Acts 7:35).

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[7] Balz, *Theological Dictionary*, 2:366; *BAGD*, 482-483.

[8] Balz, *Theological Dictionary*, 366; however, *BAGD* disagrees and understands λυτρόω in the generic sense in Titus 2:14; *BAGD*, 483.

Do the words redeem and redemption carry the proper meaning of these Greek words for English readers? The survey results for redeem (Figure 3) imply that they do not.

Figure 3 — Responses to *Redeem*

While one-third of the respondents understood the translators' intended meaning for redeem, two-thirds did not. Of those who did not, nearly one-tenth admitted that they did not know the meaning of redeem. Almost two out of every ten respondents understood redeem in the generic sense (*AHD* meanings 5 and 6), and nearly four out of every ten respondents understood some other meaning (usually a meaning not found in *AHD*).

It is not difficult to understand how the generic meaning of redeem has become the meaning associated with the word for nineteen percent of the respondents. Redeem is seldom used in its primary meaning (*AHD* meaning 1) in modern English. It is much more common to speak of redeeming coupons (*AHD* meaning 3). In that situation the grocer who pays the price for the coupon is not one the one who redeems it. The customer who receives the credit redeems the coupon. Since this is not the meaning of redeem in the Bible, the generic meaning is easily assumed to be the intended meaning. In addition, because pastors often use redeem, redemption, and redeemer without explicit reference to the price that Jesus paid to redeem his people, the generic sense is easily assigned by the hearer to these words. It may be that pastors who use redeem, redemption, and redeemer assume that those who are listening understand the primary meaning of these words without an explicit reference to the paying of a ransom. The challenges that assumption.

For translators of the Bible, redeem is not a good choice. An

accurate translation should not give the reader the impression that the specific meaning contained in the Greek word λυτρόω is the same as the more generic meaning contained in the Greek word σῴζω (to save). There are simple alternatives to redeem, such as *pay a price to rescue* or *pay a price to save*. Similar constructions could be used in place of redemption and redeemer.

D. Justify and Righteousness

Two pivotal words in Paul's letters are δικαιόω and δικαιοσύνη, often translated justify and righteous.[9] These translation choices are problematic because the English words come from different roots (just and right) while the Greek words share the same root (the δικ- stem). While an English reader could understand that justify is connected with justice in some way, the relationship of righteousness to justice is not so apparent. In Greek both words are obviously related to δίκη (justice or the goddess Justice).

The entries for justify and righteous in *AHD* are:

> **just•ti•fy** *v.* **jus•ti•fied, jus•ti•fy•ing, just•ti•fies.** — *tr.*
> **1.** To demonstrate or prove to be just, right, or valid: *justified each budgetary expense as necessary; anger that is justified by the circumstances.* **2.** To declare free of blame; absolve. **3.** *Theology.* To free (a human being) of the guilt and penalty attached to grievous sin. Used only of God. **4.** *Law.* **a.** To demonstrate sufficient legal reason for (an action taken). **b.** To prove to be qualified as a bondsman. **5.** *Printing.* To adjust the spacing within (lines in a document, for example), so that the lines end evenly at a straight margin.

> **right•eous** *adj.* **1.** Morally upright; without guilt or sin: *a righteous woman.* **2.** In accordance with virtue or morality: *a righteous judgment.* **3.** Morally justifiable: *righteous anger.* See Synonyms at **moral.**

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[9]Of the 91 occurrences of δικαιοσύνη, 57 are in Paul's letters (33 in Romans). Likewise, of the 39 occurrences of δικαιόω, 25 are in Paul's letters (15 in Romans).

Some of the meanings of justify listed in *AHD* match the possible meanings of δικαιόω. Meaning 1, which is essentially the same as 4a, does occasionally occur in the New Testament (Luke 10:29). However, the primary meaning of δικαιόω in the New Testament is closer to meanings 2 and 3. δικαιόω, and its Hebrew counterpart הִצְדִּיק, would be better defined as "being approved or acquitted by a judge." When God is the subject of δικαιόω, it signifies that as a judge he acquits a person of wrongs and grants the court's approval to them.[10] Balz and Schneider state, "Every NT use of δικαιόω has a forensic/juridical stamp: 'justification' and 'vindication' result from judgment."[11] However, that is not the meaning most English readers apply to justify (see Figure 4).

other
37%

grant
approval/acquit
10%

don't know
21%

prove to be right
or valid
32%
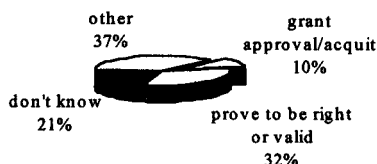
Figure 4 — Responses to *Justify*

Only ten percent of the respondents understood justify the way translators intended. Almost one-third of them understood justify in its most common use in contemporary English, as in the phrase *justify one's actions*. Justify can even take on the meaning *to give excuses*. Certainly, Paul does not mean that God proves what we have done is right when He justifies us. He does mean that we have been granted his approval and acquitted of our wrongs because of what Jesus has done for us.

The case for translating δικαιοσύνη is not as simple as δικαιόω. δικαιοσύνη and its Hebrew counterpart צְדָקָה can mean to be morally right, without guilt or sin (*AHD* meaning 1; God is often described as righteous). δικαιοσύνη can also be an attribute of people whose lives are moral (*AHD* meaning 2; see

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[10]Balz, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:331; *BAGD*, 197-198.
[11]Balz, *Theological Dictionary*, 1:331.

Titus 3:5). However, in the New Testament moral has to be understood as a morality that is approved by God, not a humanly devised morality. Finally, δικαιοσύνη most often means the approval God grants because of Christ. This last meaning of δικαιοσύνη, which is not a meaning associated with the English word righteousness (see *AHD*), is the crucial one for understanding Paul. Figure 5 shows how the survey respondents understood righteousness.

other
56%

God's approval
5%

don't know
15%

what is right or correct
24%
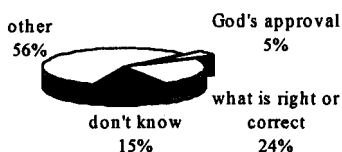
Figure 5 — Responses to *Righteousness*

Only one respondent in twenty understood righteousness correctly. Well over half could not identify any biblical or English meaning of righteousness, while fifteen percent admitted that they did not know what righteousness meant.

The data indicates that the noun righteousness and the adjective righteous (for δίκαιος or צַדִּיק) are words to be avoided when possible by translators. A substitute may not be available when δίκαιος or צַדִּיק are attributes of God. However, when translating δικαιόω, δικαιοσύνη, and δίκαιος as they apply to humans, it would be best to avoid the traditional translations of these words. δικαιόω could be translated acquit or approve. Both would be acceptable, but considering the American system of jurisprudence, approve may be the better option. Under American jurisprudence acquittal does not necessarily mean that a person did not commit a crime. It may mean that there was not enough evidence to convict, which is not what δικαιόω means. Approval has a positive sense in legal situations, such as when administrative judges approve plans or courses of action. δικαιοσύνη could be translated approval. δίκαιος could be translated *having (God's) approval*. These translations better

communicate what the Greek (or in some cases Hebrew) text is saying, and they have the added advantage of sharing the same English root.

Why Theological Jargon Persists in English Bible Translations

Why have recent translations of the Bible chosen to retain theological jargon? For example, grace appears in the following translations: *New American Bible, New American Standard Version, New International Version, New Jerusalem Version, New King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, Today's English Version.* Surely, the translators knew that in contemporary English at least some theological terms such as grace and justify can mean vastly different things than they are intended to mean.

One reason for the reluctance to use anything other than traditional theological terms is tradition. Most English translations are the heirs of William Tyndale's work. Certainly, translations such as *New King James, New American Standard,* and *New Revised Standard* are consciously in the King James tradition, which is itself often no more than a revision of Tyndale's trailblazing translation. Other translations, such as *New American* or *New Jerusalem* are not in that tradition by choice, but the influence is there to some degree. The only major, widely available translations that consciously stand outside the Tyndale tradition are efforts undertaken in the last forty years by the American Bible Society: *Today's English Version* and the recently released *Contemporary English Version.* Over the past four-and-a-half centuries, the Tyndale tradition became standard theological usage to the point where theological jargon became a necessity to maintain some sort of continuity with past theological discussions.

Another reason for the use of theological jargon in modern English translations is convenience. Theologians sometimes condense an entire paragraph (or paragraphs) of meaning into single words such as grace, justify, and covenant. Moreover, most major English translations are products of academicians. The reason for this is obvious: academicians are intimately acquainted with the biblical languages. However, academicians are the least

likely to accept and make themselves comfortable with the vocabulary needs of a lay readership that stretches across the age and educational spectrum. Academicians often attempt to familiarize the reader with the harder vocabulary by using it. The survey indicates that has not worked.

It is more convenient for these academicians to place theological shorthand into the text. Condensing a paragraph or more of theological thought into one phrase or word saves time and effort. On the one hand, a single jargon word can often substitute for a natural English equivalent translation that would consist of several words, a phrase, or even a clause. On the other hand, one English word, although it may mean almost nothing to the average reader, can translate a word that has a range of meanings in Hebrew or Greek. Covenant can conveniently translate בְּרִית. The alternative is to translate it contextually by a variety of terms such as treaty, alliance, contract, agreement, pledge, or promise. Covenant gives the translation a certain consistency, but at what price? When readers read Genesis 21:27 (*NRSV*), "So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant," they are supposed to understand covenant as a mutually negotiated agreement. The same readers are supposed to read Genesis 17:10 (*NRSV*), "This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep" and understand covenant as a promise by God with conditions. If Abraham fails to keep the conditions (circumcision), the promise is void. Again, the same readers are supposed to read Numbers 25:12 (*NRSV*), "Therefore, say, 'I hereby grant him my covenant of peace,'" and understand covenant as a simple promise.

A final reason that many translations maintain theological jargon is denominational tradition. A translator can feel comfortable translating χάρις as grace and not having to place its meaning into the text. In the context of the text being translated, the translator knows that Roman Catholics may well assign one meaning to it, Lutherans another, and Reformed still another, although none of the abstract denominational meanings may correspond to the contextual meaning of χάρις.

All of these reasons add up to translation decisions that

produce English Bibles for academically trained clergy. However, most Bible readers are not clergy or academicians. Most readers are average English speakers, many with no college education, with no knowledge of the biblical languages, and with no desire to learn them. If a Bible is to communicate the gospel clearly to most readers (the readers that English Bible translations assume to be their audience), then translators need to make different translation decisions.

Conclusion

Jargon is not a problem for those within a discipline when they communicate to others within that same discipline. Such technical terms are an aid in communication when both the speaker/writer and hearer/reader understand that they are shorthand for larger concepts. However, jargon is easily misunderstood or not understood by nonspecialists. Bible translation is mainly for the benefit of nonspecialists. Bible translators producing English translations need to be aware that words that have been assumed to be basic to communicating the gospel are poorly understood or even unintelligible to most readers. However, Bible translators are not the only ones who have the responsibility to communicate the gospel clearly. Pastors and other theologians need to be aware that some of their cherished vocabulary is not communicating the Good News clearly or effectively. If they are not communicating the Good News clearly, then the laity who learn from their example (including their vocabulary example) are even less likely to be able to communicate the Good News to others. Perhaps one factor that contributes to lay people's reluctance to explain the gospel to others is that they do not feel they possess the necessary vocabulary or that they do not understand the words well enough to explain them. To enable lay Christians to feel comfortable while speaking to others about Jesus and his work, pastors need to reassess their vocabulary. They should adopt words and phrases that more clearly communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ in plain, jargon-free English.[12]