

Sloppy Terminology Means Sloppy Theology

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Anyone who knows me for very long hears my mouth say something different than what is in my brain. I once told my wife I had to “go shake a tower” when what I meant was that I had to “go take a shower.” Sometimes my mouth seems to have a mind of it’s own. Those are “slips of the tongue” and once the laughter dies down, no harm is done. Too often in the Church we have “slips of the tongue” in our terminology that are either the result of bad traditions or we are simply not using the correct language. Either reason may lead others, or even ourselves, to believe things that simply are not true.

The Church has become extremely tolerant of sloppy terminology and sloppy theology. I hear it almost everywhere I go, everything I read, people I speak with, etc. I am not talking about major issues, necessarily. Although you can hear some out-and-out heresy in some of our pulpits, that is not what I am talking about. This article deals with some sloppy terminology that good-hearted people use from time to time. Nevertheless, just because we may not be discussing major heresies does not mean that it is not an important matter.

The Church of Christ/Christian Church used to be known as “A People of the Book.” Now the Church of Christ/Christian Church asks, “What book do you mean?” My proposition is that due to the use of sloppy terminology we have allowed a great deal of bad doctrine, a.k.a., sloppy theology, to make it’s way into the Church. Or it could be that due to weak teaching and weak preaching, a.k.a., sloppy theology, we have begun using sloppy terminology because the Church no longer knows what the correct terminology is? Either way, we’ve grown sloppy. What follow are just a few examples of this sloppiness.

The term “Pastor” is back in vogue, it seems. Many preachers are claiming the title “Pastor” in many of our Churches. Why is that? The term “Pastor” is only used one time in the New Testament in Ephesians 4:11, and that is a poor translation of the Greek word poimen, which gets translated everywhere else in the New Testament as “Shepherd.” “Pastor” is a term reserved for the Elders in the Church. The preacher is supposed to be the Evangelist. Although there are several areas in which the offices of Elders and Evangelist overlap, nonetheless, they are two separate offices with their own distinctive qualifications and responsibilities.

As an Evangelist, if someone were to call me “pastor” I would not jump down his or her throat. But as soon as the proper opportunity presented itself I would explain why they should not call me the “pastor”, and I have done so many times and have yet to offend anyone. Usually they are grateful and proceed to tell me that no one has ever explained that to them. Why aren’t our Churches teaching these basic terms to her people? We have grown sloppy!

How about the term “Church?” Is the Church a building? It is if you listen to people talk. “Let’s meet at the church” or “How many people does your church hold?” And so it goes. Why is it that so often we are more concerned about the paint on the walls of a building than we are about lost souls? Could it be because we know that Christ died for the Church? And since the Church is a building we better make sure the air conditioning works properly. After all, Christ died for the Church so it better be taken care of or we will have to stand before God. Right? Does this sound as silly to you reading it as it does to me as I type it? Unfortunately, the term “Church” is used for the Greek word ekklesia. A proper translation would be “Assembly” or “Congregation.” It literally means the “called out ones.” We need to make sure we remember for whom Christ died. It was not for a building. It was for the Body of Believers. We have grown sloppy!

One of my pet-peeves is the term “Worship.” Since when is Christianity to only worship for an hour on Sunday mornings? Evidently, many Churches only worship one hour - It says so in their bulletins: “Sunday School: 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. – Worship: 10 a.m. to 11 a.m.” Some Churches evidently worship for only a small part of that one hour. They have “Worship Leaders” that come out and all they do is sing and lead singing until the preaching starts. Is that all there is to worship? Paul writes in Romans 12:1-2 “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of **worship**. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”¹

¹ All Scripture is from the NASB

This sounds like a lot more than just a few minutes on Sunday morning. It also includes much more than singing. We have grown sloppy!

A couple of other terms we need to pay attention to are “Minister” and “board.” Are not all Christians ministers? As I read bulletins and newsletters, most Churches only have one minister. No wonder the Church is not growing like it did in the first century. We read in Acts that all Christians went about proclaiming the word of the Gospel; they were all ministers. Nowadays, we call the Evangelist “The Minister” and now it is his job to do all the proclaiming. The Scriptures are also very clear about Church leadership, but because of the sloppiness that has crept in, we view leadership as a “board” instead of Elders and Evangelist working together as a team. A traditional board in the Christian Church / Church of Christ consists of Elders and deacons. Can anyone show me in the Scriptures where deacons have any kind of authority in the Church? Aren’t they servants? If so, why are they meeting with Elders making binding decisions for the Church? In many boards, the Preacher has no voice except as an advisor. The Scriptures teach it is the job of the Evangelist to put the Church in order (Titus 1:5). If he has no voice, how is he to fulfill his ministry? Could it be that we have allowed our traditions to outvote the Word of God? Maybe we should pay a little more attention to Matthew 15:1-9, because we have grown sloppy!

Lastly, Church leaders often speak of “hiring” a preacher. Moreover, many Churches demonstrate the attitude that the Preacher works for them. I once had an elder in a larger Church in Ohio tell me that the Church is just like a business. It must make money so it can expand and venture out into new areas. The Evangelist was the CEO of the corporation. I read many terms used in Scripture concerning the Church - Kingdom of God, Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, but I never read where it was a business. This Elder had his facts wrong. But in many Churches, the Evangelist works for the people of the congregation. Congregations look for Preachers who will proclaim what they want to hear rather than the Word of God. He was hired to fill a perceived need. This reminds me of something Paul wrote to the young Evangelist, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (II Tim. 4:3-4). The Evangelist works for God. A Church does not “pay” the Evangelist, they simply make sure he is cared for properly. The Church gives their tithes and offerings to God, and from THAT the Evangelist is paid. There are way too many horror stories from Preachers who had a congregation that felt he worked for them instead of God.

Does sloppy terminology lead to sloppy theology or does sloppy theology lead to sloppy terminology? Whichever way it goes, the two are forever intertwined. Where there is one the other will inevitably be found. The Church is in trouble. Her people have grown sloppy. We are no longer a “People of the Book.” So what’s the answer? That’s simple: Get back to the Book. And for those that may have forgotten what Book I mean, I refer to the Bible, the only Book that matters. So after reading this, get your Bible, blow off the dust, and get right with the word. If you do not believe me, then listen to Jesus, “But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Mt. 12:36-37).