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A COMMUNICATION PRIMER FOR ASPIRING DISCIPLES

**To be read by those seriously interested in communicating
the gospel in this third millennium**

In an essay to church leaders, C. S. Lewis suggested that in attempts to reach their countrymen with the gospel, they should realize “these people are likely to (1) be very skeptical about history, (2) distrust ancient texts, and (3) have almost no sense of sin.” In a following lecture he listed Christian terms to which secularists give a different meaning. Anyone seriously interested in communicating the gospel meaningfully should study them with care and prayer.

• **Atonement.** Does not really exist in a spoken modern English,

though it would be recognized as “a religious word.” Insofar as it conveys any meaning to the uneducated, I think it means *compensation*. No one word will express to them what Christians mean by *atonement*: You must paraphrase.

• **Being.** (Noun) Never means merely “entity” in popular speech. Often it means what we should call a “personal being” (e.g., a man said to me, “I believe in the Holy Ghost but I don’t think He is a being!”).

• **Catholic.** Means papistical.

• **Charity.** Means (1) alms, (2) a “charitable organization,” or much

more rarely, (3) indulgence (i.e., a “charitable” attitude toward a person is conceived as one that denies or condones his or her sins, not as one that loves the sinner in spite of them).

• **Christian.** Has come to include almost no idea of *belief*. Usually a vague term of approval. The question “What do you call a Christian?” has been asked of me again and again. The answer they *wish* to receive is “A Christian is a decent chap who’s unselfish, etc.”

• **Church.** Means (1) a sacred building, (2) the clergy. Does not suggest to them the “company of all faithful people” (a phrase that occurs in the prayer of “Thanksgiving” at the end of the service of Holy Communion). Generally used in a bad sense. Direct defense of the church is part of our duty, but use of the word *church* where there is no time to defend it alienates sympathy and should be avoided where possible.

• **Creative.** Now means merely “talented,” “original.” The idea of Creation in the theological sense is absent from their minds.

• **Creature** means “beast,” “irrational mind.” Such an expression as “We are only creatures” would almost certainly be misunderstood.

• **Crucifixion, Cross, etc.** Centuries of hymnody and religious cant have so exhausted these words that they now very faintly—if at all—convey

the idea of execution by torture. It is better to paraphrase; and, for the same reason, to say *flogged* for New Testament *scourged* (Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1).

• **Dogma.** Used by people only in a bad sense to mean “unproved assertion delivered in an arrogant manner.”

• **Immaculate Conception.** In the mouth of an uneducated speaker, *always* means *virgin birth*.

• **Morality.** Means *chastity*.

• **Personal.** I had argued for at least 10 minutes with a man about the existence of a “personal devil” before I discovered that *personal* meant to him *corporeal*. I suspect this of being widespread. When they say they don’t believe in a “personal” God, they may often mean only that they are not anthropomorphists.

• **Potential.** When used at all is used in an engineering sense; *never* means “possible.”

• **Primitive.** Means “crude,” “clumsy,” “unfinished,” “inefficient.” “Primitive Christianity” would not mean to them at all what it does to you.

• **Sacrifice.** Has no association with temple or altar. They are familiar with this word only in the journalistic sense (“The nation must be prepared for heavy sacrifices”).

• **Spiritual.** Means primarily *immaterial, incorporeal*, but with serious confusions from the Christian uses of *pneuma* (which means

“spirit,” as in 1 Corinthians 14:12). Hence the idea that whatever is “spiritual” (in the sense of “non-sensuous”) is somehow *better* than anything sensuous: e.g., they don’t really believe that envy could be as bad as drunkenness.

• **Vulgarity.** Usually means obscenity or “smut.” There are bad confusions (and not only in uneducated minds) between: (1) the obscene or lascivious: what is calculated to provoke lust; (2) the indecorous: what offends against good taste or propriety; (3) the vulgar proper: what is

socially “low.” “Good” people tend to think (2) as sinful as (1) with the result that others feel (1) to be just as innocent as (2).

To conclude—you must translate every bit of your theology into the vernacular. . . . It is also of the greatest service to your own thought. . . . Power to translate is the test of having really understood one’s own meaning. A passage from some theological work for translation into the vernacular ought to be a compulsory paper in every ordination examination. □

THE REASON RELIGIONS DIE

“**T**hornton Wilder suggested many years ago that it may be that the reason religions die is that their words wear out. Certainly the great Christian words are becoming threadbare. With us charity now typically means patronage of the poor by the well-off. Love means what goes on between the movies stars off and on the screen. Service equals unpleasant menial duties. Redemption is the process by which you get value for the green stamps. Gospel is slang for truth. Grace is a girl’s name. And faith is believing what’s not so.”—*Eugene Carson Blake, in an essay entitled, “Christian Culture Requires a Two-Way Conversation.”*