

# RIGHT or WRONG? Words matter

January 27, 2011

**Words matter. So, I felt put off when speakers at a Baptist meeting filled the air with ministerial jargon, insider language, clichés and sexist comments. Can such misuse of language help explain the decline in church attendance and Christian commitment?**

Words can bless or curse, edify or tear down, illumine or obscure. I understand how language heard at this conference can be confusing and even offensive, particularly if you try to listen to it from the perspective of a nonbeliever. This question touches two different, yet related, areas—religious jargon and sexist comments.

“When I was 12 years old, I walked the aisle at my church. The preacher took me by the hand and led me in the Sinner’s Prayer. I accepted Christ and was washed in the blood of the lamb. Now, I’m glory-bound forever.” It’s easy to fall into the habit of using religious jargon such as this. It is part of our Baptist and conservative evangelical subculture, and it serves as a kind of shorthand. Yet it’s incomprehensible to nonbelievers, and it makes us appear as if we’re members of an exclusive club. I don’t think people who use such language intend to exclude others. They merely don’t think of the fact outsiders don’t understand what they’re saying.

We believers need to remember our jargon and clichés are incomprehensible to many people. We wouldn’t go to Mexico, preach the gospel in English and expect everyone there to understand what we’re saying. Instead, we would preach in Spanish, so the people could understand. When we proclaim the gospel in our worship or at any other time, we need to remember many listeners don’t understand our church

language.

Your second concern regards sexist comments. These comments often involve excluding women in one's speech and/or making derogatory statements about women. Failing to use inclusive language may seem like a small matter, but many believers and nonbelievers find it offensive. This is a matter of gospel inclusion, not political correctness. It makes no sense to leave out half of your hearers. Derogatory statements concerning women are more serious. Regardless of your view of the role of women in the church, belittling women is disrespectful and unseemly. It's wrong in itself. Beyond that, it confirms to nonbelievers that Christians don't respect women. Books like Dan Kimball's [\*They Like Jesus, But Not the Church\*](#) illustrate how disrespect for women obscures our gospel proclamation.

Many factors influence our current declines in church attendance and commitment. Using religious jargon and making sexist statements may be among such factors because they harm our proclamation of the good news of Christ. We never should allow such things to become "stumbling blocks" for people who wish to follow Christ.

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*Right or Wrong?* is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to [btillman@hsutx.edu](mailto:btillman@hsutx.edu).