

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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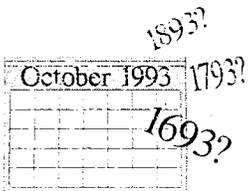
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## What century is this?

After a holiday or a trip away from home I often find myself thinking "What day is this?" And when I write a date early in January, I have to stop and think "What year is this?" Sometimes I just write the wrong day or year without even thinking.



The church has a similar problem that is much more serious. We've lost track of what century we're in. And worst of all, we don't seem to realize that anything is wrong.

## Our religious words don't fit our world

Although I appreciate the daily Bible verse on the front page of my newspaper, it always gives me a jolt. There among the news about Bosnia and last night's murders is a relic from the 17th century: "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." I get a similar jolt when I'm driving on a freeway and see a church billboard that says, "Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden." These words don't fit their surroundings. They are relics from the past.

Today we use the computer, not the abacus. We use faxes, not smoke signals. We use laser surgery, not leeches. Yet we still express the Gospel in outdated words.

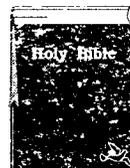


## Relics in worship

We use outdated language most in our worship services, and many people hear Christian teaching nowhere else. We pray "Our Father who art in heaven," and say "sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." We sing, "He leadeth me: O blessed thought! O words with heavenly comfort fraught!" Hearing these words must make newcomers and outsiders wonder, "What century do these people think it is?" No wonder people accuse the church of being irrelevant to life in today's world!

## God hasn't stopped speaking

God undoubtedly didn't stop communicating with human beings when the last word of the Bible was written. God is still speaking. So when we're thinking and talking about what God intends for today's world, we can't limit ourselves to the Bible's words.



Besides, in the Bible God's word comes to us filtered through countless human beings—the original speakers and writers, and also copiers, translators, and editors, each of whom had their own axes to grind, their own blind spots, and their own language. So if we worship the particular English words in which we know favorite Bible verses and prayers, we're worshipping something human. That's idolatry.

We don't even know what Jesus' exact, original words were. The words we attribute to Jesus weren't recorded until long after his death, and many people with many different motives reworked them before they got to us in English translation. Even if we could discover Jesus' exact words and could translate them precisely into English, we still wouldn't need to limit ourselves to them, any more than we need to wear only the kind of clothes Jesus wore. After all, Jesus' language, like his clothing and his use of other first-century customs, was simply part of his being human. It wasn't part of his being divine, nor was it timeless or unique.



Jesus' role as our savior, and some other aspects of his life and teaching, *are* timeless, unique, and divine. In these he is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). But the ways in which we tell about him and show his kind of love *must change* to fit the changing circumstances in which we find ourselves, and the variety of people God calls us to minister to.

For communicating the Gospel, we urgently need to use words that speak clearly and accurately to the people who live in our own century. To reach today's people we need to use today's language.

## We can't blame the Bible's authors

We can't legitimately blame the Bible's authors for our refusal to use contemporary language. In the Bible's original words we see people speaking to God in the same words they used for speaking to friends and family. And our religious words don't come from the time of Jesus or the earliest church, so that isn't a reason for using them forever.



Our outdated religious words come mainly from the King James Version of the Bible, which first appeared in 1611. It was the first widely used English translation, and for centuries there was no other translation of comparable quality. It is still the most poetic translation. When it appeared the English language had recently acquired its modern form, its vocabulary had expanded greatly, and printing was coming into general use. For these reasons the words of the King James Version have played a unique role in our religious history. But the Bible is infinitely more than a literary and historical document. And a translation's literary and historical value is not what is most important for our faith.

Besides, when the King James Version was published, words like "thee" and "thy" and "dost" and "couldst" were used for speaking to people, not just for speaking to God or about God. Although they were more flowery than everyday conversation, they weren't a special religious language. ❖

## What about the words we sing?

Music written in earlier centuries leads many people to God. But for use in worship its words often pose a problem. They're often in Latin, German, or archaic English, which few of today's U.S. churchgoers understand.



When a musical composition's original words are foreign, either we must be content with enjoying the music but not understanding the words, or we must translate them into our language. But translating foreign or outdated words often destroys the composition's beauty and singability. New words that mean the same thing as the original words rarely fit the music as well in phonetic quality, rhythm, or style. For classical music we sometimes need to keep using original 17th-century-English words or a translation that



uses that kind of words, because they fit the style of the music better than contemporary words. So for musical reasons using outdated words is sometimes justified.

## What do our words really say?

In our conversation, worship, teaching, prayer, and singing, the words we use for talking to God and about God deliver powerful messages to the people who hear us. The most powerful messages are some that we send to ourselves and our hearers without realizing that we are sending them.

In using special words only for speaking to and about God we *intend* to state some important truths.

### ▪ We want to affirm the permanence of our faith

We continue to use words from the past as a way of saying that neither God nor the basic contents of our faith change over time.

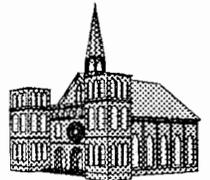
### ▪ We want to acknowledge that God is holy

Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! ... For you alone are holy.  
Revelation 15:4

By using certain words only for God, we're trying to say that God is totally unlike everything else and is infinitely more worthy.

### ▪ We want to give God our best

Many people assume that unusual words are the most beautiful and that using them shows the most skill. So we use them for the same reason we wear dressed-up clothes to church and build ornate church buildings—to offer our best to God.



Many of our most popular hymns, anthems, and praise songs, however, use 17th-century language even though they have been written in more recent centuries. Their musical style doesn't require the use of older words, and their words were already outdated when the author wrote them. So in these songs, if we can replace outdated words with contemporary words that keep the meaning and are singable, we have little reason not to do so.

We often refuse because we want to preserve authors' original words. But in many of our most familiar hymns we've never sung the authors' original words. We learned the hymns in forms that already had been edited. And why do we sing an



author's composition? To worship the author, or to worship God and convey meaning clearly? To keep ourselves comfortable, or to reach today's people with the Gospel?



We may not agree on these issues. But if we want to be faithful we must ask the questions and look for God's answers.



▪ **We want to show respect to God**

Like using formal words and elegant stationery for writing to a prominent person, some Christians feel that they must use special words to show their respect for God. They feel that addressing God in everyday words would be inappropriate, like writing the queen of England in pencil with slangy words on torn paper.



**We send and receive harmful messages**

Besides the truths we want to affirm, our use of outdated words also sends untrue and harmful messages that powerfully influence us and our hearers. Words that we constantly hear and speak engrave hard-to-erase messages into us without our being aware of what is happening. Our lack of awareness is what gives the messages so much power over us.

▪ **We make our faith seem like a useless relic**

When we use outdated words for speaking to God and expressing our beliefs, we are telling ourselves and others that God, the church, and our religious beliefs have no relation to today's world or to the life that most people live today.



▪ **We make people feel unqualified to pray**

By using only a special language for speaking to God, we are saying that skill is needed for speaking to God, and that the few people who are experts at speaking the required religious language have greater access to God than the rest of us.

▪ **We hide our real thoughts and feelings**

When we speak to God only in a special language, we're acting as if God will find out only what we choose to say in the special language. When we pray only by putting a few censored thoughts and feelings into a special prayer language, we keep ourselves from remembering that what God actually hears and wants to hear is the honest, uncensored expression of our real selves.

▪ **We act as if God knows only one language**

God hears and understands every kind of words. In fact, the Bible tells us that we don't need to be able to put our thoughts and feelings into words at

all, for God to hear and understand them. But our use of words often sounds as if we don't know this.

▪ **We make God seem remote and inaccessible**

Talking to God in words different from those we use with friends makes God seem unknown and far away.

**You are God's temple ... God's Spirit lives in you ...**  
1 Corinthians 3:16

▪ **We don't see how the Bible's words apply to us**

When we express the Bible's contents only in archaic words, we mistakenly see them as applying only to remote times, foreign cultures, and people very different from us. We miss seeing how they apply to us personally and to today's church and world. ❖



**Words serve many purposes**

To solve our language problem, we'll have to look at the purposes our words need to serve.

▪ We need words that express the Gospel clearly and accurately, especially to non-Christians and new Christians. 17th-century words can't do this effectively today.

▪ We need words that help us think in mature ways about what we believe, and words that reflect current knowledge about the Bible and Christian history and doctrine.

▪ We need words that preserve what is timeless in our faith but also help us grow and move in the new directions God calls us to go today.

▪ We need words that express our dependence on God, and the awe, mystery, and reverence we feel. We need words for talking to God without having to think what to say, and without analyzing or controlling what we say. At times of crisis we also need faith statements that we can recall easily.

King-James-style words may meet some of these needs for long-time churchgoers who learned scriptures, creeds, and hymns in those words. But presenting the Gospel to outsiders and younger people in that form is pointless, misleading, and unconvincing. And they are the main people we need to be reaching.



**Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!**  
Isaiah 43:18-19

### A problem we urgently need to solve

Updating our language is hard. Merely discussing the church's use of language evokes strong feelings. But we need to make some changes.

What I've written here is mainly my effort to clarify the problem. I don't claim to have *the* solution. However, I strongly feel that we must take some new viewpoints seriously, and actively look for solutions. Many faithful Christians recognize the problem as very important, and we can't afford to ignore what they are seeing and saying. By doing so we could be rejecting God-given insight.

When we worship, pray, read scripture, and talk about our faith in outdated words, we not only fail to communicate the Gospel effectively to today's world. We also miss hearing a lot of what God is saying to us today. We can't afford to keep doing that if we're serious about following Jesus Christ and being the church. ❖

*Barbara*

Next month . . .

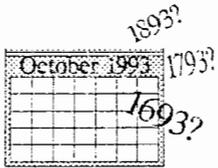
Our stories connect us — reflections on starting the second year of *Connections*



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**What century is this?**

### The church is still organized for the 18th century

In many ways U.S. churches are still organized for the 18th-century America in which they began. In those days many people lived in tiny, remote, rural places that could be reached only on horseback. People didn't move around much. Communication and transportation were primitive. Clergy were all male, and most were unmarried. Most lay people had less education than their pastors. Women were expected to stay in the background and be subservient to men. Few women worked away from home, and many men worked at home, too. Social life centered around the church.



These conditions no longer exist, but we act as if they did. Methodists still use the system of itinerancy that was designed for the circuit riders of early America. We still expect pastors' spouses to be full-time assistants and to move often. We appoint pastors to rural areas and urban ones indiscriminately, without regard for the different gifts and training needed for each setting. We still deny leadership positions to women, and expect them to do all the church's background-support jobs like food preparation. We still give laity little voice in church decision-making processes. We don't make full use of communication devices like faxes, computers, and video. We ignore major current social problems. The 21st century is nearly here, but the church is stuck in the 18th.