

## Speaking Christian: Redeeming Christian Language

**I. Premise: Religions Are Like Languages.** To be part of a religion includes using, hearing, and understanding that religion's language. To be Jewish means "speaking Jewish," to be Muslim means "speaking Muslim," to be Buddhist means "speaking Buddhist." So also, to be Christian means "speaking Christian." Of course, religions are about more than "speaking," about more than "words." They also involve a way of seeing reality and an "ethos," a way of life. But all of this is conveyed in language, in words.

\*Analogy to being French, or Turkish, or Korean (and so forth)

\*An illuminating phrase from recent scholarship: Religions are "**cultural-linguistic traditions**" (George Lindbeck, 1984). Something simple and important is meant: each religion *originated* in a particular culture and used the language of that culture, even if it also challenged that culture. Religions that survived over time became *cultural-linguistic traditions* themselves with their own language, stories, understandings, and ethos.

## II. The Problem: For Many in Our Time, Christian Language Is Unfamiliar and Often Misunderstood.

\***An unfamiliar language.** In recent decades, more and more people have grown up "unchurched," especially in the U.K. and Europe and increasingly in the U.S. Examples:

\***A misunderstood language** – by Christians and non-Christians alike. Why? Because of two central features of the "common Christianity" of the recent past that have shaped the meanings of much of Christian language. By "common Christianity," I mean simply what most Christians absorbed growing up, took-for-granted and shared in common not so long ago.

### I. First Feature: The Literalization of Christian Language in harder and softer forms:

\***Hard form:** everything the Bible says is the literal, factual, and absolute revelation of God. *If the Bible says something happened, it happened. If the Bible says something is wrong, it's wrong.* Goes with claims of biblical inerrancy/infalibility.

Example: Genesis versus evolution....

\***A softer form:** not everything in the Bible is literally and absolutely true. But the really important things are. Often a "taken-for-granted" literalism, not an insistent literalism.

\***Important to Know: Biblical inerrancy and literalism are modern, neither ancient nor traditional.**

### 2. Second Feature: An Understanding of Christianity's Core Message

*A memory exercise. Suppose you had been asked at the end of childhood, at age twelve or so, to state the heart of the Christian message, "the gospel," in a sentence. Why did Christianity matter? Why should you or anybody be Christian?*

\*My answer then: Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven if we believe in him.

\*Note what it emphasizes: afterlife; our sinfulness; Jesus' death; believing

\*I call this “*heaven-and-hell*” Christianity and “*belief-centered Christianity*”

**This understanding creates a framework that shapes the meaning of much of Christian language.** Words have meanings within contexts, within frameworks. “Elephant” means something different in the context of a zoo, a poem, a political cartoon.

***Within the Framework of Heaven-and-Hell Christianity*** (not a comprehensive list):

\**Salvation* is about “eternal life” – about going to heaven. *Saved* means to be saved from our sins. *Savior* refers to Jesus as the one who does this. **But** in the Bible, these words seldom have those meanings

\*Rather, salvation is about deliverance and transformation

\**Sacrifice* refers to Jesus’ death on the cross as payment for our sins. **But** in the Bible, sacrifice is never about substitutionary payment for sin(s). Sacrifice, yes; payment, no.

\**Redeemer/redeemer/redemption*: Jesus redeems us from our sins, and is the redeemer who brings about our redemption. **But** in the Bible, these words have nothing to do with sin and forgiveness, but refer to liberation from slavery/bondage

\**Repentance* is contrition about our sins and resolving to try to live otherwise. **But** in the Bible, the meaning is twofold: to embark upon a journey of return/re-connection; and to go beyond the mind that you have.

\**Righteous and righteousness* refer to rigorous individual moral virtue. **But** in the Bible, these words most often mean “just” and “justice.” They are central to God’s character and dream for the world.

\**Peace* means individual and internal peace. **But** in the Bible, peace also means the end of war; it is central to the passion and dream of God.

\**Faith, believing*, means believing all of this to be true, often literally true. **But** in the Bible and pre-modern Christianity “faith” and “believing” were primarily about (1) loyalty (commitment, allegiance, faithfulness) and (2) trust (its opposite is anxiety). To make use of its etymology, “to believe” means “to believe.” Believing is about believing God, and Christian faith means believing Jesus as the revelation of God.

[If time: multiple biblical images for salvation]

**\*Gently: the most common meanings of these words are wrong.** They distort and obscure the ancient meaning of these words, which are not only different but much richer and fuller. **Hence the need to redeem, reclaim Christian language – to learn again how to speak and understand Christian.**