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THE RIVER OF LANGUAGE

Language is a fluid thing, like a river. A small stream flowing out of the north joins with the Ohio and Missouri rivers to become the mighty Mississippi. And yet, the Mississippi at Memphis and the same river at New Orleans are very different. In the same way language flows, is added to, and changes. The English of America in 2015 is not the same as the English of England in 1611, when the King James Version of the Bible was translated. And yet many even today insist on using the same words in the same way. We deride the Amish for being frozen in the 1800s, and yet in many ways we try to freeze the Bible in the 1600s.

The King James Version is, on the whole, still one of the best translations of the Bible. In many ways it surpasses the second favorite today, the New International Version. It must be understood, however, that it is one of the best translations if one knows the meanings of the words. Unfortunately, some words have changed in meaning since the time they were used in the translation. Language is, after all, fluid. Perhaps the most commonly used example is 1 Thessalonians 4:15, which says that “we which are alive *and* remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.” The modern usage of the word “prevent” would imply that Paul’s readers imagined that the living would keep the dead from going to heaven. In 1611, however, readers understood that word to mean “precede” rather than “obstruct.” Another example shows three words that have changed meanings: suffer, allow, and let. The first of those words would today be translated by the second, and the second by the third; and let originally had the meaning of “hinder” rather than “permit.”

We can see those changes in language, and actually prefer the newer ideas. But many in the church are not willing to grant the same consideration to other words. One that particularly comes to mind is the word “pastor.” For years in the Churches of Christ people have been pointing out that a pastor is not the preacher, but rather one of the elders. Much time has been spent pointing out that 1 Timothy 3 uses bishop and elder interchangeably, and that 1 Peter 5:1-4 uses elder and the concept of the shepherd (pastor) interchangeably.

Therefore elder/bishop/pastor all refer to the office of elder. In modern English, however, the preacher of a congregation is often called the pastor, whether or not he holds the office of elder. In some religious groups they have many pastors, but no elders. Perhaps it is time for some people to realize that some words have changed in meaning over the years. Rather than turning people off by insisting that a pastor should be the same as an elder, perhaps we should be embracing their terminology and using that as a starting point for agreement.

On the other hand, sometimes the fluidity of language has not been favorable. The translators of the King James Version did the world a disservice when they refused to translate the Greek word *baptizo*, but rather used the word baptize. Perhaps the reason they did so was that practice had changed and they did not want to offend. To baptize, in modern parlance, could mean to immerse, to pour water on, or to sprinkle with water. This change in meaning from the original Greek has taken away one of the most beautiful pictures of salvation. When we take baptize to mean anything other than immersion, we destroy the whole concept Paul was trying to portray in Romans 6. Baptism is a reenactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. When we change it to anything other than immersion, we take away from that picture. Who, after all, considers a person buried if they are lying on the ground with a little dirt sprinkled on their head?

Language is a river. Sometimes that is good; sometimes that is not so good. The hard part is determining when we should resist change or when we should just go with the flow.

Contents

The River of Language	1
A Bicycle Commute	2
The Broad Way	4

A BICYCLE COMMUTE

I try to bicycle to work a couple of times a week, wind and precipitation permitting. The ride involves a considerable climb. My house is at an altitude of 5,668 feet. The highest point of my ride is about nine miles in distance and 450 feet in altitude (6118 feet) farther along. This is followed by a four mile, 930 foot drop. Then comes another slight climb and drop until I end up sixteen miles and 556 feet lower from home. This ride has taught me a few life lessons, which I also learn from the Bible.

Be Prepared

One such lesson is the same as the Boy Scout motto: Be prepared. There is a big difference between leaving home at 6:30 a.m. during the summer (Daylight Savings Time) and the winter (Standard Time). The obvious difference is that one must dress warmer in the winter, but one must also have a headlight and taillight in the winter months. Tire pressures must be monitored more closely in the colder weather, but the summer brings sticker burrs which, in New Mexico, attack tires with an accuracy as if they were radar guided. The morning commute in all seasons includes vehicular traffic.

In a similar way, we should be prepared to teach the gospel at all times, under varying circumstances. "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season;

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reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." (2 Tim 4:2) Paul knew that different "seasons" and conditions required preparedness.

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. (1 Cor 9:19-22)

Peter also knew the value of being prepared. "*Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.*" (1 Pet 3:15) We never know when the opportunity to teach may arise. Nor do we know the form in which the opportunity will appear, or in which our teaching will occur. Sometimes we teach with actions, almost always accompanied by words. (Good actions are of little value as teaching if we don't also tell why we do what we do.)

Be prepared. Instead of an air pump and a patch kit, you might need a Bible and some compassion. Instead of a heavy coat, you might need to take off some self-righteousness, pride, or even worry. You might even need a headlamp to show you someone in your path. A friend of mine recently mentioned a conversation about God that all started in a restaurant by carrying a plate for an elderly man with an oxygen tank. The opportunities are there; we just need to be prepared to take advantage of them.

Don't stop

I don't always follow my own advice, but I learned long ago that when climbing a hill on a bicycle, you should never stop. If you have to stop, wait until the crest or a flat area. Downshift if you must, but keep pedaling until you reach the top. In my experience, it is much harder to try to get started again on an uphill climb than it is to shift into low gear and keep going. Trying to restart on an uphill can even be dangerous. You can't get enough speed to go straight or to keep upright. As much as you want to stop, don't.

It is the same in our walk with Christ. The moment you stop, you run the risk of giving up and turning around. Many people have started the heavenward climb, but stopped somewhere along the way and just couldn't get started again. If they do succeed in restarting the first time, it is harder if they stop again.

My theme song as I climbed Mt. Fuji in Japan (on foot; not by bike) came from Philippians 3:14. "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." The temptation was great to stop, but I had a friend to spur me onward, and I had Paul's words.

Paul had every reason to stop. He had a history that interfered sometimes with his faith. His past even caused believers to shun him. He was stoned and left for dead. He was shipwrecked, imprisoned, beaten, and rejected. He had a coworker desert him once, and several coworkers leave him on another occasion. Rejected by his countrymen, rejected by other Christians, and rejected by those he sought to teach, Paul could have quit at any time, and most people would not have blamed him. And yet he

writes that marvelous passage to the Philippians; and from prison, no less.

Paul had plenty of inspiration in the art of not stopping. Apparently he was a fan of sports, particularly racing and boxing. He uses metaphors from those sports in his writings. His home base was the congregation in Antioch, and that city was famous for its chariot races. (The chariot race scene in *Ben Hur* took place in Antioch.) As a lover of the races, whether on foot or behind a horse, he knew the results of stopping before the finish line. In a chariot race, as in today's auto races, stopping could have fatal consequences. In a foot race it would merely mean loss of the prize.

Toward the end of his life, Paul could say that he did not stop. In spite of everything, he refused to stop.

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. (2 Tim 4:7-8)

If Paul also wrote the letter to the Hebrews, he used the same imagery to encourage people not to give up. Whoever wrote it, (s)he uses Jesus as an example of continuing onward.

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1-2)

Ups and downs

Another valuable lesson from my bike ride is that life has its ups and downs. It is not a constant climb. On my commute there is a moderate valley about a third of the way through, and a long downhill just before a final climb. There are plateaus that are relatively flat. For every up, there is a chance to rest going downhill.

Fifteen of the Psalms are called songs of ascent. Scholars believe these psalms were sung by pilgrims as they went up the mountains to Jerusalem, or possibly by the priests as they went up the fifteen steps to the altar. These are the songs for climbing. But there are even more psalms that could be called songs of descent. Those are the songs where the author is at a low point in life, asking God the perpetual question, why? Peaks and valleys; highs and lows. Just like the history of Israel, the Psalms reflect the cyclical nature of life.

There is some value to the cycle. Life would be pretty boring without ups and downs. If it weren't for the highs, we would never know how low the lows are. More

importantly, if it were not for the lows, we would not know how high the highs are. As one travels eastward from San Diego, California on highway I-10, one quickly gets to a point that is 6,000 feet in altitude. Shortly after that, the road drops again to sea level in El Centro. On my bicycle commute I climb from 5,600 feet to 6,100 feet to 5,200 feet. The peak is about the same altitude, but driving it in a car one does not get the same sense in Albuquerque as in San Diego County. That is because the difference between the lows and the high is significantly greater in California than in New Mexico. One feels the high and the low more when the difference is greater.

A part of being prepared is the realization that life does have highs and lows, and one follows the other. The temptation is to feel lost and deserted during the low points, forgetting that the emotional high will follow.

In Psalm 23, David indirectly points out this fact.

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Shortly after he says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," he says, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Psalm 13 is an even clearer example.

How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? how long shall mine enemy be exalted over me? Consider and hear me, O LORD my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death; Lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved. But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation. I will sing unto the LORD, because he hath dealt bountifully with me.

Several other psalms follow this same pattern: Why have you brought me low, God? But I will praise God because of his goodness. Until I know the depravity of my sin, I cannot appreciate the glorious salvation afforded to me.

Some days I don't want to face the long commute. Then I reach the first plateau, and everything is good. The climb may be hard, but the view from the top is breathtaking. This life has its pains, but we just haven't reached the peak of heaven. Yet.

THE BROAD WAY

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in therat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matt 7:13-14)

This is a familiar passage to many. It has been used to express a variety of opinions; some valid, some less so. Some use it, when others call their doctrine narrow-minded, to point out that narrow may be good. Others, sometimes with some justification, use it to accuse those who attend megachurches of being too liberal in doctrine (or lack of it) in order to gain more followers. Perhaps, though, there is another thought about this passage that might not be very popular with some Christians.

Conservative Christians like to emphasize the narrow (strait in the King James Version) way. They claim to be on that way. There is even a cliché that misquotes the passage based on a similarity in sounds: being on the straight and narrow. It is variously a point of pride or judgement.

The other part of the passage, though, says that many people will never find the narrow way. This may be because they are not looking. It may be because they would rather enjoy the pleasures of sin. It may even be because nobody on the narrow way chooses to show them the error of their way. Whatever the reason, Jesus says the majority will not find that road.

One lesson from that could be that those who have found it have an obligation to try to show it to others. That is a valuable lesson, but not the only one.

Christians have to realize that not everyone will become, or even wants to become, a follower of the Christ. In another context, Dorothy Sayers points out

It is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. (*Creed or Chaos*)

Her point was that few people even know what the followers of Christ truly believe. But the last part of her statement is also true; not everyone would follow with only a little encouragement. There are many people who will refuse to follow, even with extreme encouragement. Some would not even follow at the point of a sword or the wrong end of the barrel of a gun.

What does that mean to us? Foremost, it means that trying to legislate morality is an exercise in futility. Whether it is about drugs, marriage, or a liquor license near a school or church building, some people cannot be made to believe as Christians believe. Nor should we attempt to ram it down their throats. Even a majority of Christians object to the tactics of the Westover Baptist Church when they lead protests at military funerals, even if the deceased had nothing to do with a gay lifestyle. Yet those same people use the same tactics at legislatures or clinics without qualm. In both cases, Christians are driving away more people than they are teaching.

This is not to say that we have to tolerate sin. It is not to say that we cannot identify sin when we see it. Rather we must acknowledge that “the poor you have with you always,” and the sinner, too. We are not going to change people by protests and legislation. We will change them by loving and teaching, in that order. When we become judgemental we need to heed another warning from Jesus. “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.” (Matt 7:6) Too many people are turning to rend Christians simply because they were unduly provoked.

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