

What's in a name?

A Paper by Robert Jackson

What I seek to offer here is a personal, opinionated survey of a bunch of words which we have misused and abused in our church, and suggestions for how we can “clean up” our vocabulary. There are many words which probably should be on this list but aren't – I intend for this paper to do little more than generate further thinking and discussion.

Awesome

In the Bible, God alone is awesome (Nehemiah 1:5). In Acts 2:43, why were the Christians filled with awe?

- ✚ It wasn't because God was adding to their numbers every day.
- ✚ It wasn't because the apostles were in their midst.
- ✚ It wasn't because people were so generous and hospitable.
- ✚ It wasn't even because of their transformed hearts.

They were in awe of God, plain and simple. You could take all those above four things away, (as happened in Acts 8:1-4) and the Christians would still have been filled with awe, because of God's love and holiness (as they were after the scattering).

Our misuse of this word has been a reflection of our man-centred culture, where we have looked to man's achievements to find faith and encouragement. Things like

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| ✚ Baptisms, | ✚ Compelling, stirring sermons, |
| ✚ Great works of faith, | ✚ Deep times of openness and heart-challenge, |
| ✚ People overcoming their fear, | ✚ Fulfilling relationships. |
| ✚ Loud, exciting services, | |

None of these things are bad – they're great! – but they should never be the source of our faith: God's love and faithfulness should be the basis of our faith, and God never changes. None of the seven things in the above list are “awesome”: They are fleeting, their effect wears off in time, they are tied to the faithfulness of man (which is never perfect). Only God is awesome.

Suggested alternatives: Great, exciting, compelling, stirring, fulfilling, encouraging etc. depending on the context.

Fruitful

In the Bible, there are at least six different kinds of fruit:

1. **Apples and oranges:** Genesis 3:6 – Not much needs to be said here!
2. **Having children:** Acts 2:30 – The Bible literally says “The fruit of his loins.” The first command in the Bible is to be “fruitful”, and this refers to having children.
3. **Evangelistic Fruit:** Luke 10:2 – Here, Jesus talks about taking in a harvest as he sends the 72 out to evangelise – to save souls.
4. **Character Change:** Galatians 5:22-23 – This list is not exhaustive, but it lists 9 areas of our character where God's Spirit seeks to transform us every day. A changed life is a key “fruit” of God's working.

5. **Financial Contribution:** Romans 15:28 – The Bible literally says that Paul “sealed this fruit to them.” Our financial contribution to the needs of the church and to the poor is a fruit that we bear through the grace of God (2 Corinthians 8:7).
6. **Worshipping God:** Hebrews 13:15 – This is by far the most important kind of fruit bearing – I saved the best until last! Our personal praises to God through song and prayer constitute our fruitful and faithful acts of worship.

So, the problem, obviously, is that we have too narrowly used the word. We have focussed entirely on number 3, and ignored the rest. For the record, what do I think John 15 refers to? I think it refers to each and every kind of fruit(!), but especially number 4 – character change, which is probably the most defining kind of fruit in a true church of God, because churches false and true can be heavy on 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6, but only a church truly blessed by God will abound with number 4.

In fact, I may as well point out that number 3 is the kind most susceptible to manipulation through worldly “growth tactics”, but I think we know enough about that.

To put it simply, Biblical fruit is *productivity* – living a life that abounds with potential and victories in every area of our life, that is, living life to the full, as God wants us to! It’s God who makes the seed grow, its God who convicts our heart and who inspires us to worship Him.

Suggestion: This word is so Biblically abundant, it would be a loss to lose it – I suggest simply adopting the full range of meaning for it. “That chat we had was so fruitful.”

Personally Fruitful

Closely related to our narrow usage of the word fruit is the concept of being “personally fruitful.” Here are some contexts:

- ✚ “I studied the Bible through who 3 people last year, but I was only personally fruitful with one of them.”
- ✚ “I was met by Dougie and James.” “So who was personally fruitful with you?”
- ✚ “A lot of my family is in the church; my brother was personally fruitful with most of them.”

How pervasive this term had become – it defined our thinking about evangelist fruit. If you met someone, you’d go down in the stats as having “been fruitful with them”, even if you went overseas the next day and never saw them again. Am I saying that, in that case, the person who studied the Bible with them should be “credited” with the fruit?

No. A thousand times no. I am saying that God should be credited with the fruit. It is God who draws men to him, not us. We baptize into Jesus’ name, not our own.

Suggestion: We should utterly eradicate the notion of being “personally fruitful.”

Quiet Time

Why not a loud time? This is obviously a word we have invented, so we should not feel bound to use it. But my main hang up is that it came to be very narrowly defined in our minds: “A quiet time is when you read the Bible (or a DPI book) and then say a prayer before going out for the day.”

If you haven't "had a quiet time this morning", you've sinned: This has been our mentality; it has been openly taught. And I think it is a legalistic load of rubbish.

You should read your Bible at whatever time of the day suits you. You should pray night and day – the command is actually to pray constantly (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We are never commanded to read or Bible and/or pray in the morning, every morning. If anything, our focus should be to have a dynamic relationship with Christ.

To feel guilty for not having "read" in the morning is pure legalism – we should read when we have a clear mind and when our schedule best allows us to. Perhaps that is in your lunch hour, or when you get home from work. The same is true for prayer.

Suggestion: The word I'm easy about, it's the legalism behind it that we need to undo.

D-group

I'm not sure if we'll ever hear this term again. Like the word "missions contribution", it's got such negative connotations that we may never be safe using the word again, on pain of death! A D-group basically incorporated a ministry, leadership group, or a same-sex grouping confessing their sin. D-groups were often called in response to sluggish growth, under the pretence that there must be sin which we need to "get out" in order to get the ministry going (the "Achan Principle").

This, in itself, is humanistic enough, and D-groups were a number one forum for abusive and arrogant rebukes and put-downs against people who had not lived up to a man-made standard of righteousness.

Suggestion: Openness should always be initiated by the person being open; it should *never* be coerced. The person being open should be able to "set the terms" of their openness – they may not feel comfortable doing it in a group, in the fellowship, or over the phone. That's fine! We need to put people in a safe place where they can feel secure to be open without judgement. There is a lot about this in "Golden Rule Leadership."

Fired Up

Romans 12:11 says to never be lacking in zeal. But zeal, like love, is not a feeling! Biblically, zealousness is a reciprocation of God's jealousy – it is when we *eagerly protect the sanctity and integrity of our relationship with God*. It's got as much to do with our *conviction* and *connection* to God as anything else. It has nothing to do with how we feel at any one time. Jesus was a man of sorrows, but he never lacked zeal, because he always protected his connection with the Father.

God never commands our emotions! He simply points out that the heart is the most deceitful thing in the universe (Jeremiah 17:9), and then leaves it at that! Trying to manipulate our emotions is a waste of time; thinking that our emotions tell us anything about our connection to God is a mistake. Thinking that we need to "be fired up" or "get fired up" goes to the heart of our shallow focus – thinking that how we feel matters.

Suggestion: Scrap the term completely. The Bible says that it's the way sinful men *think* that is the death of them, and it's the way that spiritual men *think* that is the key to their salvation (Romans 8:6). We'd be far wiser to discipline our thoughts (Philippians 4:8-9) than to try to tame our emotions.

Come On! / Amen

It's a lot easier to say the "Amen" than to change our ways. As someone who has preached before a congregation, I can testify that it can be encouraging when you're nervous to hear words of encouragement. I have no issues with calling out during services, so long as it is done in sincerity, and not just because we want the service to be loud. May I suggest that if we were more focused on the words of God than the vessels through which it was being delivered, our services would be more reverently silent?

Kingdom

This is an issue that has been adequately dealt with. The Kingdom is either the "Reign" or the "Rule" of God. He Reigns over the entire universe, his "kingdom", in a physical sense. But he Rules over the souls that have submitted to him, and who make up the spiritual Kingdom, which was Israel before, but now it is the church. The church is not our institution, it is the wider people of God, and only God knows its boundaries in *space* and through *time*.

Suggestion: Once again, it would be sad to see this word go. I honestly suggest that we strive to use the word correctly, because if we lose it, we may lose the associated sense of God's Kingship over us!

Fall-Away

In Hebrews 6, the Bible clearly defines a "fall away" as someone who has left God and hardened their heart so badly that they can never, and will never, return to God. They have committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If someone leaves the church family, they have "wandered off" (Luke 15) and may yet return. We have adequately dealt with this as a church.

Suggestion: Everyone is making an effort to use these terms correctly now, and that is very encouraging to see.

Campus

This is a pure Americanism. I have never heard any Australian refer to uni or the uni grounds as "Campus" except in the technical sense of a "Darlington Campus" or "Kensington Campus".

Suggestion: In Australia, we should use the Australian name for it: Uni, or University.

Convicted

"I was so convicted by last night's sermon." This is just another mis-usage. To be convicted means to be *declared guilty*. It is the opposite of justification, which means to be *declared innocent*. The Bible clearly teaches that as Christians we will never be condemned (Romans 8:1) – if we were being convicted, we would be leaving the grace of God! Perhaps our usage of this term shows what a tenuous grasp we have on grace.

The correct term for feeling motivated to repent of sin is *mortification*, which refers to the Biblical idea of putting the sinful nature to death, which is an ongoing process. The process of becoming more holy is sanctification. Mortification and sanctification work in tandem: The two are directly proportional.

Now, mortification is just another man-made word (it is derived from Latin, I assume). But I think that there's a lot to be gained by recognising that this is what we *really should be saying* when we use the word "convicted". I don't think it will ever catch on, and here's why: Because we don't really mean it anyway! When we've said we were convicted, we've just meant that we "felt bad", which, very likely, was due to the negative, accusing and graceless way that the sermon was delivered.

Suggestion: If we actually mean to say that we are going to go out and change some aspect of our lives, then we should just say so plainly. If we're not really going to change, though, then just drop the platitudes; we'll be better off without them.

Dates and Doubles

We have been extremely legalistic in the way we have approached our social lives. Here are just some of the rules that "Dates" were subject to:

- ✚ They had to be at least a "double date": two couples together.
- ✚ They had to be on Saturday night.
- ✚ The brothers were expected to pay and organise it.
- ✚ The sister needed to home by midnight.
- ✚ Non-members of the church were not allowed to be a part of it.
- ✚ It needed to be organised at least a week in advance...

I must emphasise that all these rules were formulated for the right reasons – the motive behind them was good. However, they were so rigid in their application that they became legalistic – rules of men which were enforced as if they were the law of God.

The reason for the legalistic entrenchment of was an *intensive lack of trust in church members to be mature and righteous in their relationships with the opposite sex*. It was assumed that, given the first opportunity, we would fall into all manner of sin. It has been a well observed phenomenon that a church will rise only to the levels that the leaders expect of it. I have no doubt that this *intensive lack of trust* was a major cause of the sheer volume of people who left our church in order to pursue sexual sin.

Related to this, the superstructure of rules governing our relationships with the opposite sex made it nearly impossible for a brother to simply have a normal relationship with a sister; it was assumed that they must be interested in each-other, or, if not, that the brother should stop "focusing too much on the sisters." The lack of meaningful brother/sister friendships has greatly contributed to our lack of emotional maturity.

Anyway, back to dating rules: Why should a sister in a flat mind getting home after midnight? What's wrong with going on a "single"? –they are very rewarding! There should be no rules on dating except what the Bible lays down, namely, no sex before marriage. Everything else is up to our own conscience, conviction and experience.

Suggestion: Radically de-formalise our social lives. Just have great hang outs however you please, whenever you please, guided by common sense and the biblical standard of righteousness. And don't call them dates, it is a very weird word to use for a hang-out.

Dating or Going Steady

Courting couples had to work within the framework of “dating rules”, but were given more freedom as the relationship progressed, being allowed to spend time alone, to kiss, hold hands etc. (especially after engagement). The process of “announcing” couples had the effect of putting huge social pressure on newly-courting couples to “make it”; a very unnecessary pressure to have when beginning a romantic relationship. Dating couples were intensively monitored through disciplining. The details of a romantic relationship were another area where concerns of confidentiality were continually flouted.

When it comes to a romantic interest, there is no doubt that this is the number one area in our lives where getting independent spiritual counsel is paramount. However, this cannot be enforced. It must be left to people’s own conviction to seek advice and help as they see fit, from whoever they want to seek it from. People should be taught to be mature, not forced to be dependent on others. Wise men seek their own counsel.

It will, of course, be argued that if we simply get rid of all the rules, we throw open the gates to all kinds of compromises. I would ask: “Have our hundreds of rules stopped people from sinning in the past?” It is shocking to consider the number of couples who have left this church *together* so as to pursue their relationship in the world. Our rules have bitterly failed; perhaps we would be best just sticking to what God has laid down.

Suggestion: Drop all the rules – let people pursue their romantic interests in accordance with their own conscience and maturity. If a sister doesn’t want to go out with a brother, she should say “No.” If she wants to end the relationship, she should end it. If the brother persists, the “3 steps” should be followed. (This could result in a disfellowshipping, and, of course, legal action)

Also, call a spade a spade: going steady is *courtship*, plain and simple: “I’ve been courting Linda for 3 months now.”

Advice

Advice in this church has never been advice: it was either permission or a command.

What was said	What was meant
I really advise you to stop hanging out with her.	Stop hanging out with her, or else.
My advice is that you can see that movie.	I permit you to see that movie.
I’m advising you to call him every day.	My command is to call him every day.

You get the point. True advice is personal counsel, preferably using biblical principles, given as a friend, and you can either take it or leave it – it’s up to you. If it’s not up to you, then it’s not advice; it’s a command.

What’s more, to think we need to get “permission” to do things is a very humanistic mind set. Why do you need anyone’s permission to ask someone to be your girlfriend? If you are wise, you may want to seek some spiritual advice on the matter, but that may not be necessary. We are free to act in accordance with our convictions.

Suggestion: To avoid the negative connotations, I would suggest calling advice “counsel”. “I’ve always been inspired by Derrick’s marriage; I’m going to seek his counsel about my relationship with Linda.” As for permission, who needs it?

Sharp

From what I can glean, “sharp” is another pure Americanism. The word is perfectly common in America (if various books I’ve read that use the word a lot are anything to go by) but I never heard it used in this context before coming into this church. High powered, well educated – these are more common.

But usage is not the issue here. The issue here is our focus on trying to convert “sharp” people. Mike Cameron defined the word as “a healthy quotient of intelligence, sporting prowess, good looks and worldly success.” (*Discussion Paper on Discipling and Related Issues*) As Mike was trying to imply, none of these things have anything to do with spirituality. God sees straight through them even faster than we do. The only “sharp” people who Jesus seems to have converted were Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, the Centurion and Zacheus. The former two were both members of the Sanhedrin, which is pretty incredible, but almost every passage of the Gospels gives us the overwhelming sense that Jesus did the absolute opposite of “going after sharp people”. He avoided the rich and powerful, and ministered to the poor and downtrodden. May I suggest that, in fact, it was this unbridled focus of Jesus that had such a profound impact on the “rich and powerful,” such as Zacheus?

Suggestion: Let’s actively focus on having the same “ministry focus” as Jesus and stop looking at the things man looks at.

Weak

There is an amazing study in “The Disciples Handbook” called “Weak or Uncommitted?” I’ve never forgotten its impact on me; I’d recommend looking it up. It draws a biblical distinction between the two concepts:

- ✚ **The weak** are those undergoing spiritual or emotional hardship or distress. They are in genuine need of encouragement and support.
- ✚ **The uncommitted** are lukewarm; they are skimping on their commitment to God due to their selfishness.

There is a night and day distinction here – one that we have consistently *failed* to make as a church. We need to “encourage the weak”, but warn the uncommitted.

Suggestion: There is nothing sinful or shameful about being weak; this designation should be defined biblically and de-stigmatized. It is NOT a “catch-all” for people who stop coming to services.

Struggling

I would make a very similar point with this concept. If we *aren’t* struggling against sin, something is seriously wrong. The day we stop struggling, we start simply giving in to sin wholesale. Usually if someone says that they’ve been “struggling with this sin”, they mean the exact opposite; they should be saying: “I’ve been giving in to this sin day after day.” If they’d actually been struggling against it, they’d probably have won some victories by now.

Suggestion: This is another word that needs to be de-stigmatized. We need to encourage one another to stay in the fight against sin.