

Words, Titles & ‘Bible Bashing’

As the title indicates, this is a three part sermon — the parts related to each other only in that all three of them have to do with language. It’s one of those potpourri sermons I preach occasionally so I can catch up on questions and requests and comments that come to me from the congregation. We’ll start with those slippery things we call words and how confusion may arise from their multiple meanings. The denotative sense of a word is what the word actually refers to in the physical world. For example, a dictionary says that the word *beach* denotes “the shore of a body of water, especially when sandy or pebbly.” But when **you** hear or see the word *beach* it will suggest any number of things depending on your personal experience: surf, water sports, sunburn, crowds, even gritty sandwiches. These are connotative meanings and they may grow out of strong emotional feelings. I associate the word *swimming* with summer fun, but my mother never heard it without remembering a handsome little brother who drowned. No verb or noun ever means exactly the same thing to everybody.

So, on that premise, let’s talk for a moment about a word that flourishes in church life and in all of the media — the word “miracle.” In the past few days, as the whole country talked about the McCaugheys of Iowa and their seven new babies, some of us were perplexed by how often we were told that a miracle had happened. Was everybody using that term to mean the same thing or did it slip from one definition to another depending on who was speaking? I noticed that medical experts were not prone to use the word *miracle* since the conceptions

followed the use of fertility drugs, and since the successful delivery owed so much to modern technology and a staff of superbly trained doctors. In fact, most fertility experts would call what happened to Mrs. McCaughey a medical *failure* rather than a *victory* — on the grounds that she had wanted another child, not seven of them.

Once it happened, of course, the McCaugheys graciously made the best of it. I think we can be sure that if they prayed for a successful pregnancy, they did not pray for seven, but they joined others in seeing it as a miracle from God rather than an accident of modern science. Back to our use of language for a moment: do all the people who call that multiple birth a “miracle” mean the same thing, or is there a lot of confusion in the way that word is used? The first definition in a good dictionary is denotative and points to something very specific: “A miracle is an extraordinary event in the physical world which surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.” Let’s apply that definition to what happened to the McCaugheys, a thoroughly admirable couple whom I use by way of example only because they are still so much on our minds from a torrent of publicity. Do all three parts of the definition work in their case?

The first one certainly does. Giving birth to seven babies is obviously “an extraordinary event in the physical world” and it’s extraordinary even with 20 doctors in attendance and all the wizardry of modern science available. In our emotional response to the event, we tend to forget that left to carry and then deliver all those babies without modern technology, the outcome for Mrs. McCaughey might have been tragic. And did you occasionally find yourself wondering, as all those people were praising God’s generosity, how many of

them would have wanted that to happen in their families? Once it happens, of course, one makes the best of it — and making the best of it, for many people, means giving God the credit.

Now, back again to one dictionary definition of “miracle.” Obviously, the first term in that definition is accurate: this was “an extraordinary event in the physical world.” But what about the second term — that the event “surpasses all known human or natural powers,” that it could not have happened, in other words, without supernatural intervention? We once had five babies successfully delivered in Canada long before fertility drugs and with primitive medical resources compared to the present. I saw a picture of six babies, born not long ago. Adding one more may be rare, may even be unique in history, but it is obviously still within the realm of the “natural.” And yet, simply because it is so unusual, a great many people credit divine intervention. Am I less a Christian because I credit the fertility drug, the intensive care given the mother in her final months of pregnancy, and that whole battery of highly trained medical experts and sophisticated technology that delivered the babies successfully?

I’m fascinated by the compelling desire on the part of millions of people to find a truly supernatural event whenever possible. We love miracles and flock to places where they have allegedly happened. Fascination with angel visits has grown incredibly in the last three years. There is a huge appetite for stories of near-death experiences involving glimpses of another world. Elvis fans have him resurrected and making

appearances here and there around the country. These are the kinds of things people often have in mind when they exclaim, “It’s a miracle!”

But there is another meaning of that word that doesn’t raise such difficult theological questions: when the word *miracle* is meant to describe “a wonderful or surpassing example of something.” As in: “My new Honda Civic is a miracle of fuel economy,” or “Michael Jordan performs miracles on the basketball court,” or “The stock market for months has been nothing short of miraculous.” Nothing supernatural is intended. No one is suggesting that God has a compelling, intervening interest in cars or basketball or the Dow. The word “miracle” is used in all those cases to mean only that something is truly impressive. In that sense of the word, I have no problem calling the birth of the McCaughey babies a *miracle* — an event that is amazing, but still explainable on natural grounds. But I’m acutely uncomfortable when public and press imply a supernatural intervention from God at a time when everything I read suggests we need fewer babies rather than more on a planet already desperately over-populated.

Let’s make a quantum leap now to a totally unrelated subject, and one much less important than the babies: the many different titles by which men and women who stand in pulpits are addressed. Newspaper and television reporters, visitors to this church, happy brides who wish to be married in this beautiful place — all wanting to be courteous — trot out the titles they grew up with. I am called, depending on people’s backgrounds: Reverend , Pastor , Doctor , Brother, even Father by those from a Catholic background who wish

to be properly respectful. Since some of you, from time to time, have asked about this variety of titles I decided to risk a few comments about something of only mild interest except to people who do what Gary and I do. I think there are some theological reasons for not liking certain titles, but about others I have only personal feelings which may or may not make any useful sense to the rest of you — in which case, the good news is that it won't take long to share them. I do find some Biblical sanction for rejecting one of them, the title "Reverend." It appears only one time in the Bible, where it is used in reference to God: "Holy and reverend is his name" (Psa. 111:9, KJV) The word means "worthy to be revered," or "to regard with respect tinged with awe." A great Catholic Bible translates it "commanding our dread." I don't qualify under any of those terms and although most people who use that title in speech or in print intend only to be courteous, it always makes me acutely uncomfortable. This personal feeling is clearly not shared by everybody because it is a fact that many sincere and capable ministers have not minded the title.

The word *Pastor* is the title of choice in a number of denominations and I'm sure the only reason it sounds strange to me is that I did not grow up among people who used it. In fact, if someone came into one of my childhood churches and asked to see "the Pastor," we knew immediately that this person had come from a religious background quite different from ours. It was one of our many shibboleths, our way of knowing when we had what we called an "outsider" among us. It is certainly not an objectionable title even though it is probably used more often than not with little sense of how it originated. It comes from a more pastoral time

when everybody was familiar with shepherds who carefully tended their flocks of sheep. So it was that by a typical extension of meaning, congregations came to be called flocks and their shepherds came to be called pastors. It's a personal thing again, but I never refer to you as a flock — mostly, I suppose, because I've been around sheep and I can think of more accurate and complimentary things to call you.

The title "Doctor" has an interesting history. It points to someone who has completed the terminal advanced degree in a specialized field: Doctor of Medicine, Dentistry, Theology, Philosophy and so on. Many preachers who do not have an earned doctoral degree like the sound of it, and if some college confers an honorary doctorate on them they gladly use it. I once knew a small denominational school in the deep South, student body of about 300, which handed out honorary doctorates right and left to ministers in a kind of unspoken quid pro quo arrangement: we'll give you a title, you keep us in your church budget. It seemed such a shameful scheme to me that I mentioned it one day in a church that helped finance that college, and managed to offend one or two of its most ardent supporters. The results of that single sermon were mixed: it made no dent at all in the practice of swapping honorary doctorates for desperately needed cash, but it did lead to a separation which resulted in the birth of this church — so for me, it may well have been the luckiest sermon I ever delivered.

I tried for several years at that great old church to have my co-minister and myself listed on the outdoor bulletin board either by our bare names or at most under the common title of "Mr." but many parishioners

argued strongly that the church seemed more prestigious if we both marched under the title of “Doctor.” All the big churches, they pointed out, use the title freely. My counter arguments seemed rather foolish to them, and although I’m not very proud of this, the truth is that I finally just gave up. If I were a more complete and stubborn Christian, I would insist on nothing more than the names my parents gave me, but a lifetime in the University where one often needs all the respect possible from students left me weak enough to succumb to at least one example of titlemania.

We actually avoided most of that in the fundamentalist church where I grew up. Whether pulpit minister or listing parishioner, everybody had the same simple designation as either Brother or Sister. Unfortunately, those forms of address have been made fun of so often in films and fiction as signals of simplistic religion, even cult life, that I can no longer use them without feeling awkward. The best thing about them is that they do not promote pride or vanity. As for Father, only Catholic and near-Catholic traditions use that title. There can be an appealing tenderness in it, and I have sensed that among my Catholic friends, but it also suggests at times a degree of submissiveness to an authority figure which bothers me as a Congregationalist. I will confess that if I were a priest I would probably like it very much and would enjoy the prestige and affection it commands among Catholic believers.

One title I hear, usually with a kind of joking affection but sometimes with contempt from non-church people, is “Preacher.” I try not to betray my annoyance either with those who use it innocently or those who use

it satirically, but I would be happy never to hear it again. It smacks of all the things people have in mind when they say, “Don’t preach to me,” by which they mean, “Don’t harangue and browbeat, droning on with your tedious platitudes.” So I’ll put a weapon in your hands: if you ever feel the need to get my goat, call me “Preacher”! If you’re wondering by this time what predicate adjective I like to use in describing what I do, here it is: “I am a minister.” It’s from the Latin word for servant, and when it’s a verb it means to serve, to give care, to contribute to comfort and happiness. I like being called a minister. No title can honor my life more than that.

I’m left with only a minute to explain the final phrase in my sermon title. A dear friend in this church calls one day to say she’s bringing a fundamentalist relative on the next Sunday and teasingly asks if I will be “Bible bashing.” What she means is will I mention some discrepancy in the text or point out how often the Bible makes no sense if we take it literally. She is only having fun, so I am pleased to tell her it will be a safe Sunday, but I’ve thought about that vivid phrase several times since we talked. I think that being honest about how much of the Bible is poetry, how much of it was borrowed from other cultures and adapted, how much of it celebrates holy war and male chauvinism is not “Bible bashing” but “Bible boosting” — an effort to promote what is still relevant and useful in Scripture and to admit what any intelligent reader knows anyway, that some of it serves no high moral or ethical purpose at all, and that much of it reflects an ancient culture so faithfully that we have to use good reading skills to separate out what is permanently valid from what made sense only in

a first-century setting. I am absolutely convinced that Christianity will survive among thoughtful people only through that kind of honesty. It is the glory of this pulpit that it offers those who stand in it the freedom to say such things. Gary and I both thank you!