

## The Necessity and Problem of Language

In our conversations about sexual orientation and human sexuality, we often stumble over our words. It is easy to get entrenched in language that sounds and feels divisive before we even begin the conversation. This is particularly true when we are trying to differentiate one perspective from another. The language that we choose can heighten an already contentious subject and keep us from talking about the really important stuff.

I am the writer of the study guide, *Body Mind and Soul* and I will be the first to say that the language used to describe the different interpretations of Scripture and the “two sides” of the debate in the church stinks. It’s terrible. I resent it. We all do.

Progressives and Traditionalists. The words come out of your mouth and the divide deepens.

So, then, you might ask, why did we choose that language? Couldn’t the Design Team have chosen something different, something better?

Well, yes.

And no.

We needed language that would help people understand that there are different ways of interpreting and understanding. It needed to be clear. It needed to be language that signified the beliefs being expressed in an immediate and easy way.

When I say Traditionalist – most people know what I mean.

When I say Progressive – most people know what I mean.

And there are lots of people who will gladly claim one of those identities for themselves in this conversation on sexuality.

But some object, and I agree. Traditionalist, some people say, is derogatory. It is confining. It pigeon-holes people into the stuffy past. Some say, “I am Traditionalist, but that doesn’t mean I am not also open to new ways of thinking and being.”

“Wait,” say other people, “I am a Progressive, but I value tradition. Why does one side get all the tradition?”

Ok, so let’s try on some other language.

Let’s try Revisionist and Prohibitionist. These are commonly used terms when describing people on opposite sides of the spectrum regarding sexuality and the church. When I use those words, most people know what I mean.

Revisionists are Christians who, relying on the Holy Spirit and Biblical scholarship, find that there are new understandings to be found of ancient texts. The Biblical text can be interpreted

differently than previously held because we know more, or have learned more, or, some will argue, have been given new revelation.

But Revisionists are also easily accused of monkeying with the Bible, reading it according to what they want to hear, and being disrespectful of the church's long history of reading Biblical texts in certain ways. That's not accurate or fair.

Prohibitionists are Christians who, relying on the Holy Spirit and Biblical scholarship, emphasize that the Biblical texts set up boundaries on human behaviour. The texts say what they say and that cannot be changed. We might change, and the culture around us might change, but any way you cut it, the Biblical texts clearly prohibit certain behaviours and same-sex relationships are one of them.

But Prohibitionists are easily accused of being overly negative. Prohibition carries with it the baggage of failed historical movements. And using the term "Prohibitionist" makes it sound like those who read and interpret the Bible from this perspective always focus on what you can't do, killjoys, and legalists. That's not accurate or fair.

So, someone else suggested that we try to find two positive terms – terms that will make everyone feel good at the beginning of the conversation.

Why not use "Welcomers" and "Affirmers"?

If I say I am a Welcomer – many people will *not* know what I mean.

And if we talk about Welcomers versus Affirmers, there seems to be a contradiction right at the start.

And the first thing, and perhaps the most significant thing, that we lose in this choice is clarity.

If a person says she is a Welcomer, it is not immediately clear where she stands on the issue of full inclusion – both for marriage and ordination standards – and the church. It is difficult to have a conversation involving two very different ways of understanding the Biblical texts, as well as the theological convictions that arise from these interpretations, without clear language.

Going a little deeper, we find more problems with this language.

Those categorized as Welcomers say that all are welcome in the church, regardless of any distinctions involving sexuality. However, that welcome has very defined limits. LGBT people are welcome in certain roles and in certain ways, and not others. The welcome is conditional. Those who identify as LGBT have found such a restricted welcome has often contributed to their sense of marginalization and made them feel unwelcome.

Those categorized as Affirmers say that all are welcome in the church, regardless of any distinctions involving sexuality. The welcome has no limits, and affirmers are advocates of full inclusion, in regards to marriage and ordination standards. But being an advocate of full

inclusion does not mean one affirms every sexual behaviour or activity. Affirmers can be misunderstood as those who have no ethical standards at all – anything goes.

The terms Affirmers and Welcomers, as terms to identify people of differing interpretation of the Biblical text, theological convictions, and church polity on the issue of sexual orientation, may *seem* to be more positive and less divisive than progressive and traditionalists. But they aren't and, in the end, they are neither clear nor helpful.

“Well then,” someone said, “let's throw out all the terms. They all carry negative connotations and baggage. Let's get rid of them all. We'll just say, 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand.'”

Remember, now, we are not talking about a lecture, but rather a written study guide that moves back and forth between different interpretations and perspectives quite frequently.

When I say, “On the one hand...” – no one knows what I mean.  
When I say, “On the other hand...” – no one knows what I mean.

The risk of confusion is too great.

There is no perfect language. All of the terms are somewhat problematic, carrying negative connotations for someone or some group of people.

But, we need language that can help us understand why and how people interpret Scripture and arrive at their theological convictions. Language is necessary and problematic at the same time.

Language is vitally important and our words must be chosen with great care. But language is not an end in itself. It is a means to a greater end. We can either get caught up in the terms, or we can use the terms to help us understand each other better. Most of us will find that neither “traditionalist” nor “progressive” provides a fully accurate description of what we think or believe. We are somewhere along the spectrum between them. Terms like “Progressive” and “Traditionalist” are placeholders in a continuum of perspectives. They are not meant to be labels or statements or endings. Rather, they give us a way to begin the conversation that will hopefully lead us closer to one another rather than further apart.

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