

Choice terms: Fancy religious language

by [Michael L. Lindvall](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

The word *jargon* suggests needlessly obscure words that insiders use to dazzle and confuse outsiders. But if we call the same words “technical vocabulary,” we’re suggesting a precise and established way of speaking that emphasizes accuracy. Christians have lots of words like *hermeneutical*, *ecclesiology* and *sanctification*. Are they technical vocabulary or religious jargon?

A friend with a Ph.D. in theology was writing a popular book on the Trinity and asked me to read the manuscript. It was excellent and generally accessible, but several times he used the term *instantiation*. I told him nobody knew what an instantiation was—he should either drop the word or explain it. He argued that it would take pages to explain, and that if scholars read his book and found he’d not talked about instantiations, he’d lose credibility.

That, of course, was the point. *Instantiation* is technical vocabulary in the positive sense that it’s precise and brief, and jargon in the negative sense that it marks the user as a member of the Trinity Experts Club.

I’ve decided that there are five reasons people use jargon, or technical vocabulary—some good, some bad.

- 1) It makes you sound as if you’re smart, or maybe a smarty-pants.
- 2) It makes it clear to both insiders and outsiders that you’re an insider. My friend’s use of the word *instantiation* made me feel like an outsider even though his intent was to assure other Trinity scholars that he was an insider.
- 3) It’s brief. Like my friend said, it would take pages to explain instantiation. Jargon or technical terms offer a shorthand, a way to keep too-long books from being way too long.

4) It captures the history of an idea. Christian theologians have been talking about instantiation for centuries. Using a venerable term lays you in the arms of a grand heritage of ideas.

5) It's precise. "An instantiation," as I understand it, is not exactly "an example" nor is it quite the same thing as "an instance." It's exactly "an instantiation."

I am a sailor, and sailing also has a language of its own, deployed by sailors for the same five reasons. Take the word *starboard*. Reasons for using it: 1) It impresses landlubbers. 2) Talking about "starboard" marks you as a salt, a member of the sailing fraternity, and not a landlubber. 3) To utter "starboard" sets me in happy continuity with a venerable nautical heritage. 4) *Starboard* is briefer than "the right side of the boat when you're looking forward (toward the pointy end)." 5) It's precise. If I yell to someone who's facing aft while I'm facing forward, "Pull that line on the right side of the boat," he might have to ask, "Your right or mine?" *Starboard* is always clear; it's on the same side of the boat no matter which way you're facing.

When I preach on Romans 5, do I use the word *justification*? Can I use the term *sanctification* in baptism class? When the communion liturgy speaks of "righteousness," won't a lot of people in the pews actually hear "self-righteousness"? Can you let the word *sin* fall from your lips without sounding like Elmer Gantry?

I try never to use jargon/technical vocabulary to impress anybody or mark myself as an insider. The attempt will usually backfire anyway, making me sound more pretentious than clever.

But I feel rooted in my theological heritage when I use a term that was once on the lips of Paul or flowed from the pen of Augustine. Using the words they used helps me remember that I'm standing in a long parade of the faithful who also loved words and struggled to use them well.

A large part of my task as a preacher, teacher and writer is to invite listeners and readers into the great conversation with and about God, a conversation that has been conducted for ages in its own unique and well-honed vocabulary. So I use jargon/technical vocabulary, but judiciously, even sparingly. If I were to speak of justification in that sermon on Romans 5, I would explain the word, but not as an expert to the uninitiated. Rather, I might tell the story about the time I first heard it and how I came to understand it. If I were to refer to sanctification in baptism class, I

might talk about how we and our children are forever growing in faith, and then note that there's actually a wonderful old word for just that.

I even dare to rescue the word *sin* from the Elmer Ganttrys, but I give a nod to its current awkwardness. Then I add that it's an important word, it's our word, and we should not let misunderstandings of it steal the term from us.