

Headline news

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

Readers send us instances in which misused words, typographical errors or strange turns of phrase provoke chuckles. The backlog of these is large, a fact that makes it possible for me to dip into the pile to illustrate almost any kind of point. The point today has to do with headlines gone astray.

Presbyterians Pro-Life News not too long ago bannered the headline “Imminent Theologian Points Toward Reformed Understanding of Unborn.” The bold print lead-in to the article begins, “Thomas T. Torrance, one of the world’s most imminent contemporary reformed scholars . . .” Until we read that, we had always thought of Tom Torrance as a keeper of deadlines and a maker of appearances. Now we learn he’s always on the edge of doing whatever he is doing.

Sports pages give us many examples. A *Raleigh News-Observer* headline screams “Christ the King Falls at Buzzer.” It would be interesting to see what early Christians would have made of that.

But enough frivolity. Now to the grim point. I begin with the proposal that the Religion Newswriters Association needs a complementary group, a Religion Headlinewriters Association. RNA members’ stories tend to be of high quality. The writers spend considerable energy getting things right. But the writers of headlines can, and often do, mess up those stories.

Recently, newswriters covered the votes by the House of Bishops (“overwhelmingly” pro) and the House of Deputies (“overwhelmingly” pro) at the Episcopal Church’s General Convention in Denver. The votes were on whether to enter “full communion” with “exchange of ministers” with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The newspaper stories were good, but on two of them I saw the headline writer speak of the move as a “merger.”

Both churches took great pains to emphasize that this is not a merger or anything like a merger. The two bodies remain “autonomous.” Since the United Church of Christ merger in 1957 not much merging has gone on except within families, such as

the Presbyterian and the Lutheran. Many Christian bodies describe “full communion”—not the swallowing of one by another or fusing of two into one—as their ecumenical goal.

While the “merger” headlines were inaccurate, another was offensive. The *Chicago Tribune* headlined “Episcopal Church Approves Alliance with Lutheran Sect” (July 9).

Sect! In 1957 when the United Church of Christ was born, *Life* magazine headlined it as a “sect” and heard many loud howls. Now, 43 years later, the word still has not spread that no one, zero, zilch, nil wants to be called a “sect,” not even historic sects. Similarly, since Jonestown, no group wants to be called a “cult,” but headline writers don’t know this.

Calling religious denominations sects and cults is as welcome as calling Native Americans “savages” or African-Americans by the ‘N’ word or dot.com billionaires “robber barons.” Denominations need better lobbyists on hand when style manuals get written.