

Speech lessons: A richer repertoire of Christian practice

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

Two messages arrived on the same day, each one from a talented young adult concerned about how best to use Christian language. One person was concerned about the “large number of people my age who cannot seem to connect with God. I think part of the reason is because the church has a very traditional, peculiar vocabulary.”

The other young adult was struggling with his sense of vocation. He wrote that when he finished his undergraduate studies he wanted “to be useful to others, to incarnate love, to develop a skill which I could then use to work with others so that they would have enough to eat.” As a result, he decided against the study of theology. Instead he joined the Peace Corps and started studying agronomy in the Third World.

He was discovering that “the very language we use is the problem.” He noted the tension between the secular language he was learning in his agronomic studies and the theological language he believes “is true.” Drawing on Wendell Berry’s words and ideas, the young man observed that “the salvation of the world cannot be prefigured in the same language that dismembers it and deprives it of theological significance.” Traditional Christian language was becoming critically important for his life and vocation in the secular world.

I was struck by these two people’s concerns. What language should the church use in a world dominated by secular concerns? How can we most effectively communicate with people who find themselves disconnected from God?

As I pondered these questions, I was taken back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous prison letter about language and Christian faithfulness (written in 1944). Bonhoeffer begins the letter by noting, “Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship—all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture

any more to speak of them.”

He then observes, “In the traditional words and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it.” At that time, Bonhoeffer thought the only options were “prayer and righteous action,” but he contended that at some point in the future people would be called “so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it.”

It will be, he said, “a new language, perhaps nonreligious but liberating and redeeming—as was Jesus’ language. It will shock people and yet overcome them by its power; it will be the language of a new righteousness and truth, proclaiming God’s peace with men and the coming of his kingdom.” But what would that new language be?

Several early interpreters of Bonhoeffer proposed that we indeed needed a nonreligious language to address a “world come of age.” In this view, we need to jettison the church’s traditional language in favor of a new language that is more compatible with the sensibilities of a secular world.

But others have interpreted Bonhoeffer’s comment in the light of his conclusion to the letter, in which he describes Christian life needing to be a “silent and hidden affair.” This, along with a few other tantalizing references to the “arcane discipline” of the early church, suggests that Bonhoeffer believed that we needed to focus on purifying Christian language in order to enable the church to reclaim its power. He evokes the pattern of the early church, which combined invitations to seekers with significant patterns of maintaining the power of the gospel in shaping the lives of believers.

Bonhoeffer emphasizes the importance of a rigorous catechesis by which Christians are initiated into the power of Christian convictions and “traditional” language. The church invites people initially to explore what it means to live, feel and think as Christians through seeker-friendly services and other invitations to discipleship. But that beginning is linked to an invitation to undertake the “discipline of the secret,” whereby they would learn the power of traditional Christian language for interpreting and living in the world.

I am convinced that the latter reading is a faithful understanding of the church’s task today. We have either too quickly given up on the power of “traditional” Christian language and convictions in our attempts to reach people who are disconnected

from God or from the church, or we have emphasized “in-house” language in ways that alienate people from the church.

Could it be that the concerns of my two interlocutors are both correct? We face a problem of alienation because both theology as a discipline and the church’s practices have too often relied on “in-house” language and conversations that have lost power to engage the broader world. At the same time, we must not jettison the language, for even fields such as agronomy need theological analysis in order to be faithful to God.

Rather, we need to develop richer repertoires of Christian practices and disciplines, especially for initiating people into the faith, and then provide deeper understandings of the significance of themes and practices such as loving enemies, reconciliation and regeneration, cross and resurrection, hospitality and healing. The deeper our own internal Christian practices and patterns of conviction, the better we will be able to search for authentic and creative analogies to interpret Christian faith in the world. The challenges are real—and so are the opportunities.