

# Publishing Editor's column

**L**ANGUAGES ARE living things, continually developing, except for one or two cases where they have become frozen in time and used only for religious purposes. The English language in particular is a fast-developing one due to its widespread use across the world and the rapid changes that are taking place across society. Every few years the publishers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* produce new lists of words that have come into currency.

Words also change their commonly accepted meanings; readers of the AV have to realise that 'conversation' means 'way of life', not 'talk' as it does today. Attitudes to certain words change; words once used in children's books of black people are now regarded as derogatory, and their use may even be a criminal offence in some circumstances.

Sometimes the way certain words change their meaning is a matter to be regretted. I can remember when a gay person was a happy and carefree person; now it refers to a homosexual. The original sense is there in my dictionary but takes second place to the new meaning; a pleasant word has been appropriated to denote a practice which is abomination in God's eyes, thus making it sound a good thing.

Other words that once denoted things bad in God's sight are losing their meaning; 'sinful' is more likely to be used of eating a piece of chocolate cake when you are on a diet than of wrong behaviour, and 'wicked' is used by young people to denote something really good. Sometimes verbose euphemisms serve to hide reality; behaving badly becomes behaving inappropriately. Parents and teachers do not, or cannot in the case of teachers, address a sharp command to children; 'stop that' becomes 'mummy would really prefer you not to do that'.

The net effect of all this is to blur the distinction between right and wrong. In some cases, as with the popular use of 'sinful' or 'wicked', this usage arises out of a lack of respect for, or even awareness of, Divine standards. In other cases something more sinister is a stake. Presumably the modern use of 'gay' comes from a deliberate attempt to promote homosexuality; the use of words such as 'inappropriate' or 'challenging' to describe behaviour seem to come from a desire to avoid the idea that there are such things as

good or bad. The words of Isaiah 5:20 are apt to describe this situation: "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!"

There is a danger in all this that we fail to recognise sin for what it is. This is a subject on which it is vital to get the right balance. We should not live in a state of anxiety about our sins and weaknesses, especially those that are past, that have been confessed and forgiveness sought, for we have the assurance that they have been forgiven. In contrast to this, it is likely that there are more of us today who fail to recognise aspects of our behaviour as sinful, and the atmosphere in which we live in the world today has a lot to do with this.

A question arises here regarding the vocabulary we use to speak of sin. For instance, what about the word 'shortcomings'? Does its use weaken the concept of sin, making it seem a relatively trivial matter? That is one view. On the other hand, the abstract word 'sin' can be used in a general way without conveying the idea of specific deeds, thoughts or words that are wrong in God's eyes; and if we think of 'shortcomings' in a literal way it carries the idea of falling short of the Divine standard: "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

There is a very simple definition of sin in John's first epistle: "sin is transgression of the law" (3:4); but that is not sufficient. We need to recognise that the thoughts that lead to sin are sinful even if the deed is not committed; our Lord makes this clear in Matthew 5. But it is not enough to avoid wrong thoughts and actions, because James said, "to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (Jas. 4:17). Doing something with a bad conscience is also sin, whether the deed itself is right or wrong, because Paul says, "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). We must not be lulled into a state of false security by worldly thinking that behaviour does not really matter unless it harms someone else, but at the same time we recognise that we have a loving Father to deal with, and a Son who can sympathise with our weaknesses, both of them having a great desire to provide the forgiveness and help that we need to get us to the Kingdom.

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