

# Language as a Means of Conflict Resolution in the International Church—

Dr. Charles R. Gailey

One of the main points of tension in the building of an international church is the matter of language. Much conflict is engendered in this arena. Unchecked and unresolved, the issue of language can lead to the fracture of social groups, including the church. This paper is an attempt to outline the problem as it exists, and then to suggest ways of employing language techniques to facilitate conflict resolution within the global church.

What is language? Language is simply a structured system of arbitrary symbols, usually vocal, by means of which we interact and cooperate. Language is absolutely essential (as we have just demonstrated) for cooperation to take place. A human group literally *cannot* cooperate in most circumstances without a common language. We all remember the difficulty of understanding the theories of Talcott Parsons because of his obtuse language. (I found that in the seminar room he was quite lucid.)

Cultural differences are inextricably bound up with language. Within common language groups, differences may be found on national, provincial, and local levels. Specialized speech communities and local dialects abound. Being cognizant of these language variants may be just as important as knowing the major family in the avoidance of conflict.

An effective case in point within the English language which has contrasting American and British meanings. Picture this: An American General Superintendent in a tense assembly business session in London, England. An advisory board member moves to table the motion. The General Superintendent, thinking in American terms, believes that the member wants to *postpone* action on the topic. Actually the British English meaning of the term "table the motion" is exactly the opposite—the member means to bring the matter up onto the table and discuss it *immediately*. The General Superintendent misses the point, and the level of conflict is heightened.

Picture this: The General Superintendent, trying to make amends, invites the advisory board member to visit his home. After a good meal, the guest pushes his chair back and says to his host, "You know, I'm really fed up," and then turning to his hostess, "You're a very homely woman." One can only imagine the conflict that is likely to result from that exchange!

Add to these hypothetical illustrations some actual historical gaffs:

\*The General Superintendent, who, wanting to relate to a congregation in Ireland, used the term "bloody well done" in his sermon and thereupon lost the congregation as well as his reputation. The service has to be dismissed.

\*The General Superintendent, who, despite all my efforts to teach him the ordinand's name of Magagula, still came out with Mehala!

\*The World Mission division director who, praying for the ordinand named Shadrack, called him Meshack.

\*The missionary who, confusing "ngena" (enter) and "phuma" (leave), testified that the Holy Spirit had left him!

And now let me add my own horror story. As a green and inexperienced missionary, it was necessary for me to attend school discipline meetings. Teachers who were reporting infractions of students often showed intercepted notes to the committee. While looking at one not, eager to learn the language, I asked about the phrase "unesisu" and was informed it meant "she is pregnant." Several weeks later, another new missionary couple arrived and I was called upon to introduce them in church. All went well until the missionary husband showed up at the last minute-- without his wife. He explained that his wife was too ill to come, due to her pregnancy. I introduced him, and then explained that his wife was absent because "unesisu." The waiting congregation literally exploded into laughter and shock. I had implied that the missionary wife was *illegitimately* pregnant!

It is readily apparent that language usage is a problem of immense proportion in the development of a truly international church. The Church of the Nazarene is now operating in ninety world areas, and the number of different languages far exceeds that. The matter of language usage is very possibly the most important single non-theological problem facing the progress of the church.

Language and culture are inseparable. By definition, then, when many cultures come together within a church, the problem of language usage becomes extremely important. Non-verbal behavior, such as facial expressions, personal distance, and body movements<sup>(1)</sup> compound the situation. Verbal and non-verbal language may be as significant as doctrinal differences in bringing about the following example of conflict within the church which appears in the 1990 edition of *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, concerning Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre:

Five religious groups "share" the most sacred church in Christendom. But here Christian religions mix "about as well as holy oil and holy water." Every inch of the church is carefully divided between the groups and is jealously guarded. Protestants and other groups get nothing, and those who do "own" a share spend much of their time coveting their neighbor's share. A chapel in the church is built over a mound that some people believe is the historic Golgotha-- where Jesus was crucified. The floor in that chapel is made up of tiny marble stones, and each stone can be identified as belonging to a specific group: Greek Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, Syrian, or Roman Catholic. A priest who polishes a stone which does not belong to his own group may be in serious trouble!

Members of each of the groups have been known to throw stones at one another and to switch the locks during the night so others cannot get into the church. Sometimes the combat is limited to verbal exchanges. According to a Wall Street Journal article, highly educated clergy-- who claim to worship the same Messiah-- have been fussing with each other for years about their relative portions of a pillar supporting the roof.

On Easter Day, times for services are calculated so precisely that a twenty-one-page booklet is published to inform worshipers who may pray, when they may do so, and where this will occur. But not even this level of cooperation is always achieved. Repairs on the church, which

was built during the time of the Crusades, are a serious problem. The groups are unable to agree on how to maintain and restore the church. If one group does ahead and white-washes the walls or repairs damaged floors, zealots from the other group may tear up the repairs and even retaliate by destroying some other part of the church identified with the sect that initiated repairs.

Similar conflicts exist in other holy sites, In the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Greek and Armenian Monks fought with fists and brooms at Christmas time a few years ago. The fight broke out over who would dust a cornice. Hatred between the various groups of Christian devotees in the Holy Land is sometimes intense, despite the teachings of their master. Forget the admonition to love thine enemies; these folks can't stand their religious kinsfolk. And the tenth commandment, which advises that "Thou shalt not covet," is obviously passe-- or at least irrelevant when such important issues are at stake!<sup>(2)</sup>

Considering the intensity and the extent of conflict in the international church may lead us to despair unless we remember the positive things that are happening: the love, joy, and peace that irradiates from Christian fellowships ranging from local churches to General Assemblies. It is at this juncture that we are reminded of the weakness of applying conflict theory across the board to the church or to any group, for that matter. The theory itself is not without its problems. As Keith Roberts points out:

If functional theory often errs in overemphasizing consensus and harmony, conflict theorist often see only social stress, power plays and disharmony. Although conflict theory is helpful in illuminating the causes of change, it is less complete in explaining social cohesion and cooperation.<sup>(3)</sup>

In the matter of language, disharmony is very evident. Words have multiple meanings within cultures ( "love" is an example). Sometimes the literal translation of a word into the language of another culture renders it nonsensical. Some words are culture-bound and cannot be translated adequately into another language.

Compounding the problem are different points of view. In Peru there is a culture which visualizes the past as being in front of us, because it can be seen. The future cannot be "seen", therefore it lies behind us. The American view is, of course, exactly the opposite: the *past* is "behind" us and the future is "ahead" of us.

Although we recognize the immensity of the problem, we affirm that something can be, indeed must be, done. Certainly conflict theory is not a "solve-all" for "coping with and utilizing conflict."

What are some ways that language techniques may be employed to lessen conflict in the international church? The following are several suggestions.

1. Christians must learn other languages. Americans are notoriously ethnocentric language matters. Recent television interviews of people in such diverse places as Eastern Europe, Russia, and China have brought responses in near-perfect English. How many Americans could respond in Russian?

Our brains have just as much capacity as other humans for learning three, four or more languages. I know an African who can preach in *seven* language! Surely American s can learn two or three.

Full-time representatives of the church, such as missionaries, must learn other languages fluently. Every Nazarene could at least learn a few simple greetings in several languages. A few weeks ago a visited a Hatian church. What a difference "Bonjour" and a few other words made! Surely we can do as well as President Kennedy, who, with three simple German words at the Berlin Wall developed great rapport with thousands.

2. We must not use language "labels" for other people. Our language should be inclusive. We should not say, "I met a lovely Hispanic person," rather "I met a lovely person." The extra label is the open doorway to the exercise of prejudice.

Ashely Montagu knew this potentially dangerous effect of a label. In his book *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* he proposed to abolish the word "race" and substitute the word "ethnic group,"

The phrase "ethnic group" serves as a challenge to thought and as a stimulus to rethink the foundations of one's beliefs. It encourages the passage from ignorant certainty to thoughtful uncertainty. For the lay (person), as for others, the term "race" closes the door on his understanding; the phrase "ethnic group" opens it.<sup>(4)</sup>

Montagu's thesis, of course, breaks down because he is ultimately substituting one label for another. Words, after all, are sounds which only have meaning as humans pour meaning into them. The substitution of one label for another may help, but it is only a temporary solution. As Christians, we must strive for the abolition of labels, both within and outside of our fellowship.

3. Whenever a common language is not possible, Christians must make provision for adequate interpretation and translation. This is not the hopeless goal that some portray it. As Eugene Nida has pointed out, languages tend to have more or less similar metaphors and figurative language. All cultures have the same major cultural universals (age differentiation, stratification, economic system, etc.), which provide some points of reference. Further, groups of people everywhere on earth have the same intellectual apparatus. With sufficient effort in going behind the words to the meaning, it is possible to translate and interpret effectively. For instance, in America a person loves a person with the heart, in Africa with the liver and in the Marshall Islands with the throat. In all instances, with proper study, the principle *can* be communicated, and thus the level of potential conflict can be reduced.

Such translation and interpretation is seldom seen in our ethnocentric culture. Other cultures are much more adept. There are over 220,000 translators and interpreters in China alone!

We must do a better job in the church of providing services of interpretation and translation. That was the plea of the international delegates to the 1989 General Assembly. They proposed that, rather than have everything spoken in English, that the church provide earphones for everyone, not just the "international" delegates. In this way the English-speaking delegates

would hear interpretation of *other* languages as well. It was one of the more interesting floor debates of the General Assembly. It was said by some to be too expensive. The results of the voting eventually looked strangely reminiscent of the numbers of international delegates who were attending.<sup>(5)</sup> Of 129 votes cast, 339 voted for the proposal, 390 voted against. The motion was thus narrowly defeated. We may wonder what will happen if a similar proposal is made in a future General Assembly when international delegates may be in the majority.

Providing proper interpretation and translation is not always convenient. Dr. Young-Baik Kim wisely brought his own interpreter to every meeting of the Internationalization Commission this last quadrennium. Although this sometimes resulted in a dull murmur in one part of the room, we no doubt need more, not fewer interpreters.

### ***The quality of interpretation must also be improved:***

Learning to help an interpreter can make speaking through an interpreter a much easier experience. Meeting an interpreter in advance and going over a list of difficult words or phrases that will be used can be a big help by giving advance opportunity to consider a proper translation. Using an interpreter can be a difficult intercultural communication problem, but with experience and proper use of the interpreter, the problem can be minimized and the outcomes very rewarding.<sup>(6)</sup>

Make no mistake: the improvement of communication in the international church will be costly. The dividends in conflict resolution, however, will far outweigh the sacrifices of inconvenience and expense. We all have heard that effective communication is a vital part of the reduction of conflict. Are we willing to make the sacrifice of learning another language, of changing our manner of speaking in order to avoid labels, and of funding the egalitarian provision of interpretation and translation? If we are, the reduction of conflict will be greatly facilitated within the global church. The tools that we have discussed, when wedded to our theology, could make an exciting impact on the church.

In Christ there is no East or West, In Him no South or North; But one great fellowship of love Thro'out the whole wide earth.

1. For a helpful discussion of these factors, cf. The Brislin article in Larry Samovar and Richard Porter, *Intercultural Communication*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth) pp. 235-236.

2. Barbara Rosewicz, "At Jerusalem Church, People Often Ignore Tenth Commandment," in Keith A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, p. 63.

3. Keith Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, (Belmont CA: Wadsworth), P.70.

4. Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, (London: Oxford), p. 444.

5. There were 805 official delegates to the 1989 General Assembly. Of these, 298 were non U.S.A. 520 were American. More than 75 did not vote on the earphone proposal, probably because of absence.

6. Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter and Nuni C. Jain, *Understanding Intercultural Communication*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth), p.145.