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A Language of Unwelcome

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Ecclesiogab:

LET GO AND LET GOD. ADOPT A KINGDOM LIFESTYLE...

SO WHAT HE'S REALLY SAYING...
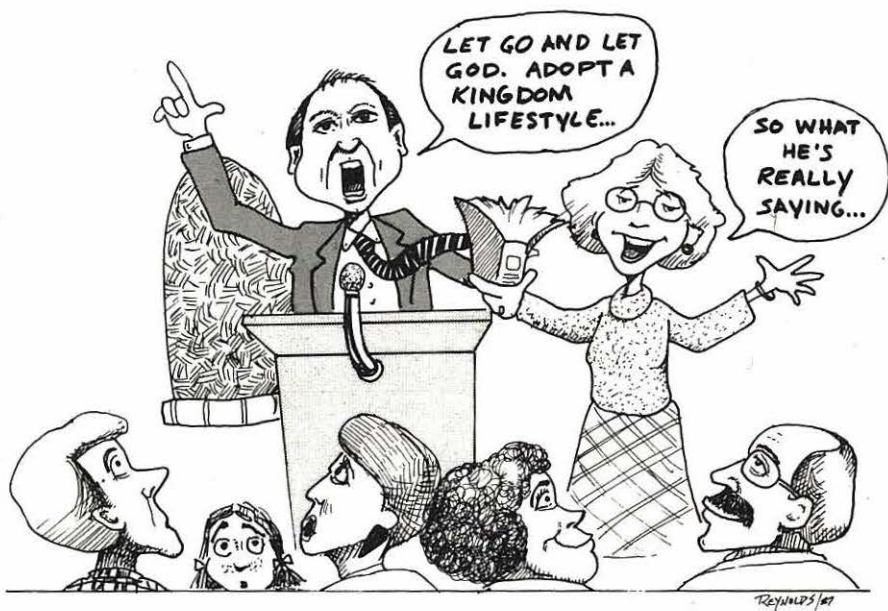
A language of unwelcome

BY KENNETH R. BADLEY

In the next worship service or Bible study you attend, try this exercise of imagination. Imagine you've brought friends with no church background. Listen to the proceedings through their "unevangelical" ears. Do you hear anything that doesn't seem to make sense? How do you react to that?

Each of us has at some-time experienced the feeling of being an outsider while others carried on a conversation in "computerese," "legalese," "medic-alese," or some other jargon. When such technical dialog is from an unfamiliar field, it might as well be a foreign language.

Linguists tells us that every group in society with a common interest develops such a specialized language. If we are outsiders to that group, we call that language by its negative name, jargon. If we are insiders, we treat that language as natural and may not notice when others cannot understand us because, to

them, it is jargon.

Linguists say that any group's specialized language accomplishes three things. First, it provides an economy of expression. In the case of Christian language, we save a great deal of time when we use such words as "substitutionary death" or "tentmaking" instead of reciting a long explanation of what we mean. A technical language serves a second purpose; it identifies people as members of the group and bonds that group together. When we hear someone say "tentmaking" or "substitutionary death," we know there's one of "us." We feel a bond because that person has shown a kind of membership card; he has demonstrated his mastery of our "code," so we'll let him into our club. The third function of a specialized language is that it's a source of "in" jokes and puns. When we hear that someone "had roast preacher" for Sunday lunch we may laugh or not, but we do recognize that only a church insider would understand the joke.

Everyone is competent to speak one

or more technical languages as occasions demand. We have special languages for occupations, sports, hobbies, buying and selling houses or fixing our cars. We also have a special language for church. I call it "ecclesiogab." It's our technical language for dealing with biblical, theological and church matters.

There is nothing wrong with using such a technical language. Imagine the time we would spend in explanations of what we mean without our specialized words. In fact, we might be hard pressed to clearly define one concept without using other ecclesiogab vocabulary for the explanation. I'm not about to suggest that we stop using any specialized religious language. To do so would be silly. But we should consider the negative side of the identification and bonding that our use of a technical language brings about.

Suppose a newcomer, who is not competent to speak our specialized language, comes into our group, how will we assess him? For example, if he uses "substitutionary death" in what we know is the wrong way, what will we think?

Consider this short list of words and phrases: die to self, let go and let God, the deeper life, body life, every member a minister, bought by the blood, the old man, born again, make a decision, affirm one another's gifts, Kingdom lifestyles, justified, sanctified, redeemed, atonement.

And the list goes on. The point is that we are competent to work with this sort of lexicon but our hypothetical newcomer is not. And sadly, our newcomer is not very hypothetical at all. Many newcomers to our church are newcomers to the church in general and simply don't know the code. They want to be accepted by and identified with us but, quite unconsciously, we look for that "membership card" of language. The result is the exclusion of people we ought to include in our circles. One of my acquaintances simply did not know what "witness" or "testimony" meant for some months after her conversion. Yet how central such language is to our church life.

Unfortunately, the problem runs deeper still. As a result of our vocabulary habit, we may be fooled by someone who is not sincere in his heart but

who "knows the code" or is proficient at picking it up quickly on joining the group. We may welcome some people on the wrong basis. Imagine that a relative newcomer to an evangelical congregation gave this report in a public meeting:

"I lived the self-life for 25 years. I lived in sin and misery of every conceivable sort. But people prayed for me and the Holy Spirit started to convict me in my heart. Well, I got more and more miserable living with old Ego on the throne. Finally, I knew I had to confess my sin before God so I got in my car and I

Fluent jargon and faith are not the same thing.

drove to the nearest church; it was this one. I came in and said to the minister, "I've been under terrible conviction for months and I can't go on any longer. I want to accept Jesus as my Savior. We talked for awhile because he wanted to make sure I understood the cost of discipleship. He went through the gospel with me from the Bible and then led me in the sinner's prayer and Jesus came into my heart and changed my life. Now I walk with him beside me day by day. In fact, this is my one-month birthday as a believer today."

Any of us would welcome such a person. Yet, on reflection, we recognize that such a testimony could be memorized, pieced together with code words the newcomer heard over a period of a few weeks.

Another aspect to consider is whether the person who doesn't speak ecclesiogab understands it well enough to accept the Christian message or to grow in the Christian life. Imagine the unchurched friends again. If they can't understand much of the terminology, are they finding the help, the answers, the direction they're looking for?

We may chuckle as we recall some of the more absurd examples of ecclesiogab, but we need to take careful note of the importance of language itself and how much importance we attach to it — usually without noticing — in our church life.

What can we do about these problems, especially to ensure that we don't exclude from our fellowship people who want, need and ought to be included?

First, we must recognize, and then remind ourselves periodically, that fluent jargon and faith are not the same thing. Of course, we do recognize that. But we should make it such a part of our consciousness that we check up on ourselves and the kinds of judgments we make when we listen to other people. Let's uncross our arms even when people don't know our verbal code. As well, remember that impostors can easily gather up a few stray phrases and assemble a "great testimony." We shouldn't equate sincerity of faith with ability in speaking.

Then, as it relates to our own speech, we need to take care, both in public meetings and in conversation with individuals, to speak in ordinary language.
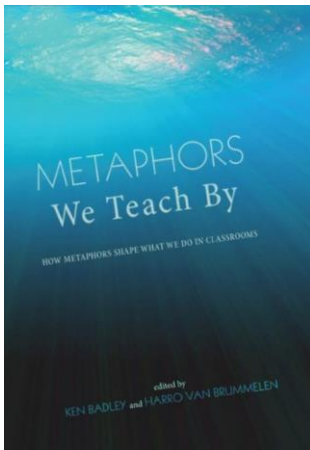
This will take effort because our jargon has long been part of our ordinary language, a process linguists call naturalization. When we reflect on it, we'll recognize words and phrases that should be reserved for the initiated. In conversation with linguistic newcomers we will have to translate those particular words and phrases.

We may protest, "How uneconomic!" That plea is valid but such translation is necessary if we are to communicate and reach out effectively. If we fail to translate, we will frustrate and exclude. Furthermore, when we are forced to reword our thoughts, we may have to rethink them, and that, too, will be good for us.
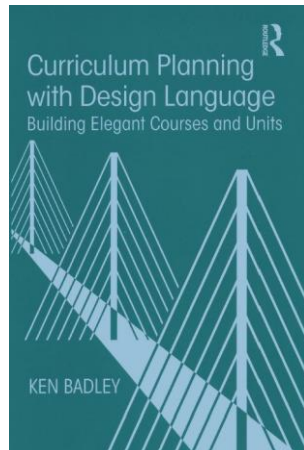
In all things, let our speech be such that it demonstrates to others that we wish to include them in our speech community and in the community of faith. ♣

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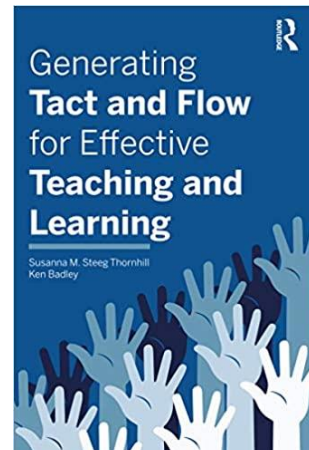
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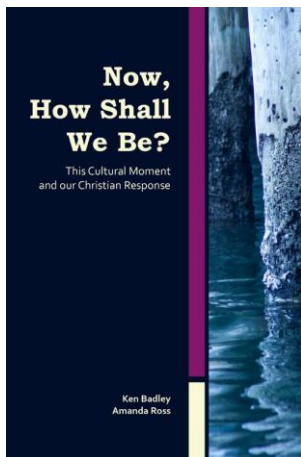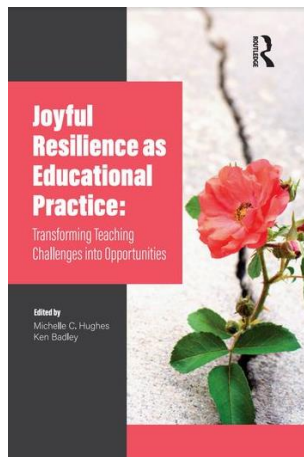
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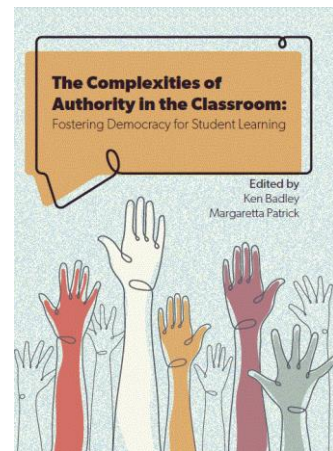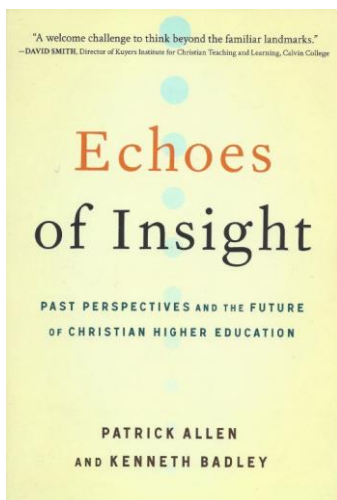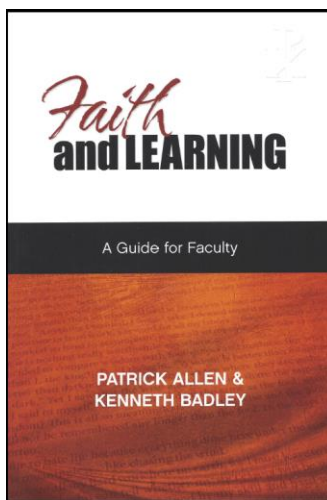Fostering Democracy for Student Learning
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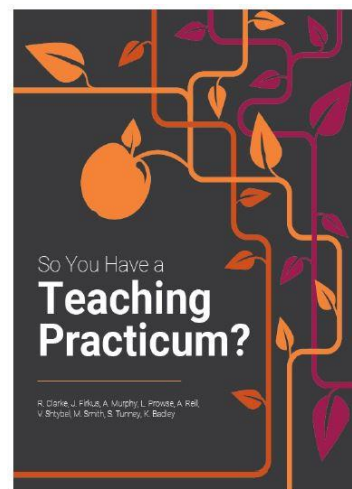
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