

Codes and Communicators

by Jim Punton

A CHANGING SOCIETY has left the Christian community fondly cherishing words which now have lost meaning and authority. They still communicate something! But hardly the relevant message intended by God.

Let's get into sin, for example! It's one of a group of words of little force today, a group including 'iniquity', 'wickedness', 'trespasses', 'transgression' and 'evil'. The ideas they translate figure large in the Bible, but to get at them we must return to the original words as originally used.

A boon though it is to be able to go directly to Hebrew and Greek, it is possible for everyone to share the excitement of discovery.* The first surprise is to find how many totally different words in Hebrew and Greek have been translated by the same code. Then to find how many different and unrelated English words are used to translate the same Hebrew or Greek word.

Look at the differing meanings of all these Hebrew words: *asham*: being to blame, culpable, answerable, guilty, at fault, *avon*: being out of line, bent, twisted, crooked, distorted, out of balance, evidencing inequality or inequity, *chattah*: missing a target or goal, not reaching, failing, failure, coming short, shortcoming, inadequacy, mistake, omission, *marad*: being abrasive, provocative, rebellious, *pecha*: being rebellious, antagonistic, in revolt, *ra*: breaking in pieces, shattering, crushing, tearing apart, oppressing, ruining, harming, *rasha*: given to bullying, oppressing, terrorizing, dealing unjustly, *shagag*: making a mistake, being in error, straying inadvertently, *taah*: wandering, straying, going astray.

And the variety of meanings of all these Greek words: *adikia*: injustice, acting unjustly, *anomia*: other than

what has been dealt out or allocated, heedlessness of established custom or accepted principle, being unprincipled, *asebeia*: lack of respect, absence of awe, irreverence, *hamartia*: missing a target or goal, not reaching, failing, failure, coming short, shortcoming, *kakia*: causing harm, being damaging, destructive, ruinous, troublesome. And there are several more . . .

One code (e.g. 'sin') cannot possibly carry such variety without loss. Oughtn't we to be more faithful to the originals?

All communicating is in codes. 'A' puts his message into codes (verbal and non-verbal). 'B' receives them, decodes in his own way and interprets. But communication, or 'shared meaning', takes place only when decoding results exactly in the message intended by 'A'. Attention to what happens at the receiving end is crucial. (If codes are unknown, misunderstood, or ambiguous, the serious communicator must not use them).

The Bible gives us God's message or Word in verbal codes, mainly Hebrew and Greek, in particular historical contexts. To get the message we must know the meaning of those codes, and re-code it again and again, in all the languages and cultures of men. English is not above other languages in this. When codes have become obsolete and 'religious', the challenge and judgment of God's Word has been muted and denied to men.

As society modifies or abandons its codes, so must we. And without bitterness or tears. The loss of words such as 'sin' is trivial and inconsequential, if the outcome is a deeper awareness of the reality of man's predicament and of God's love in Christ to meet man's need and bring him to wholeness in shalom.

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*Using, eg. Young's *Analytical Concordance* (not one like Cruden which hides the very things that need to be brought into the open). Hebrew and Greek are given below as written in Young.