

THE LAST WORD

Is He One of Us?

By Jamie Buckingham

Christianese, the “language of Zion,” is spoken with many accents. The use of certain words often signifies whether a person is “one of us.”

Last year a Pentecostal friend learned he could evoke a warm “amen” and even a few “hallelujahs” when he talked about “the Blessed Virgin” at Catholic conferences. But when he slipped up one Sunday and used that phrase before his own congregation, a lot of folks accused him of being a papist and left the church.

The use of words to identify members of the kingdom dates back to the time the men of Gilead were guarding the shallow ford of the Jordan River. The only way they could distinguish between their troops and the hostile Ephraimites who were trying to sneak across was by using the password “shibboleth.” The Ephraimites, it seems, said “sibboleth” instead. It cost a bunch of them their lives.

The use of key words to identify various brands of Christians continues. When a newspaper reporter said Ronald Reagan had “charisma” a group of Christian zealots quickly passed the word that Reagan spoke in tongues.

Use the shibboleth, “God wants you to prosper,” at a conference, and all the Haginites and Copeandites nod in approval. You’re “in.” Say “seed faith” and you’re identified as an Oralite. Talk about “church growth” and you’re numbered among the Choites and the Harthernites. Speak of “discipleship” and your enemies will number you among the Mumfordites and the Simpsonites.

Such are our modern shibboleths. It’s easy to spot the Ephraimites



at a Baptist meeting. They are the ones who speak of the Baptist *church*, rather than the Baptist *churches*. And woe be the man who tries to cross the Catholic river talking about the *symbol* of the Lord’s Supper.

The problem of pet words is not limited to Christians. Editors consistently blue-pencil what they call “shop talk”—words familiar to select groups but foreign outside the shop.

Family groups are the worst. We call my wife’s mother “Pe Pe.” The name first appeared when she tweaked the cheek of our firstborn son and told him to say “precious.” The best the little guy could do was gurgle “pe pe.” Now everyone calls grandmother “Pe Pe.”

But if a stranger sits at our dinner table and we begin to chatter away about Pe Pe—our guest suddenly feels cut out of the conversation. There’s no faster way to break the unity at a gathering than for the home gang to start using shop talk.

Every movement, it seems, develops its own shibboleths. It often comes from a desire to break from dead tradition. For instance, in our congregation we seldom use the word “church,” since it evokes images of steepled buildings. We prefer “body,” which speaks of relationships. But pity the poor fellow who wanders into a morning service for the first time in his life, not knowing a psalter from a pepper shaker, and hears the minister say, “Will the body please rise.”

What we have done is formed another set of semantic ruts—a new “language of Zion”—which is just as confusing to outsiders as the old words were misleading.

Words such as “covenant relationship,” “community,” “body ministry” and “shepherding” quickly tell us from whence you come. And like the men of Gilead, we are quick to loose an arrow at the man who says “sibboleth”—not knowing we may be shooting down a hare-lipped Israelite.

A friend of mine recently applied for a job with what he thought was a business run by charismatic Christians. During the interview my friend told the supervisor, “I want you to know my home is in order.”

The supervisor gave him a vague smile and replied, “Yes, it seems you are a very tidy person.”

It’s easy to spot the Ephraimites. ☞