

The Vocabulary of God

By DR. CARL J. PETER

Dictionaries make it clear. Words have histories just as men do. What formerly was slang is no longer, and terms that once were widely used in a particular sense are today obsolescent or archaic. For example, there is no reason to think that a phrase such as "The New Deal" conveys to the young in this decade what it did thirty-five years ago.

With the passage of time the same word can refer to utterly different things. Even when its reference is basically the same, much of what it once expressed quite well it may no longer be able to communicate.

There is no eternal human grammar.

Human beings who express their feelings and thoughts in speech change as a result of what they do and what happens to them.

Because they too are living, languages change. Even one that is not spoken any more but was long ago is indirectly affected by the conventional speech patterns of the world in which its translator lives. One has but to recall the varied comments a new English version of the Bible usually receives or the reactions to a contemporary rendition of ancient liturgical prayers. Religious language is, then, not an exception to all of this.

The importance of language must not be overlooked when it comes to considering the development that Christian Faith has had in its expression down through the past nineteen hundred years.

In His Self-communication to humanity, God Himself came to speech in situations affected by the limiting conditions of language.

Such was surely the case in the Old Testament. It was after all out of their experience and reflection upon it that the descendants of Abraham recognized in their existence a dimension that would not be reduced to the here and now or even the purely human and that loomed before them as the Always Greater. From events of seeing and hearing Faith in the God of Israel arose among men. Through this experience that God led a whole people to a recognition of Himself, and this involved a Faith they preserved from generation to generation.

Their new experiences brought them ever back to that Faith to express it once again. It in turn provided a perspective in which they understood their on-going history. That Faith would not have been preserved without deeply religious language.

But simply repeating from century to century the same

words was not enough. As a result their language about God and about themselves varied a great deal, not because He changed but because they and their world did. Only so did they retain a sense of one who was present in their midst as their Hope.

A good example is the way they spoke of Him as Life and the way they expressed their hope in Him as their Life was not the same in the Psalms and the Book of Ecclesiastes. Because of their Faith that He had given life to them as a people, they pondered His life-giving power in the face of personal death. He was the Source of Life for the author of Job and the Book of Wisdom. But precisely because He was, they could not simply say the same things about Him. And the alternative was not silence pure and simple.

An effort was made time and again to express in new and different circumstances what He was and would be for them. Their Faith developed; that means their experience and its expression did not remain unchanged. To use the language of Karl Rahner, this amounted to a change within identity and not of identity. Such was Faith in the Old Testament. If Abraham is the father of all believers, this should tell us something of Christian Faith today as well.



No, this is not Heaven,
but can I take the message?

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD McBRIEN

Q. I see where the bishops of the United States are going to have a massive collection in November to assist the blacks. You can count me out. I've had it. These people don't appreciate anything you do for them. They've been responsible for burning our cities, ruining our neighborhoods, and terrorizing our citizens. What right does the Catholic Church have in taking our hard-earned money and giving it away to people who will only convert it to drugs and alcohol? I don't think Christianity calls for that kind of waste.

A. Your first assumption is wrong. The "Campaign for Human Development" is not concerned with black citizens only. It seeks to eliminate the root causes of poverty for all Americans, of whatever race, color, or creed.

The campaign has two goals: "to provide funds at both the national and local levels for self-help projects which otherwise might not be possible," and "to help our people acquire a new knowledge of today's problems, a deeper understanding of the intricate forces that lead to group conflict, and a perception of some new and promising approaches that we might take in promoting a greater spirit of solidarity."

Your letter shows that the educational goal is at least as urgent as the financial.

Your second assumption is also wrong; namely, that our struggle for social justice should continue only when its beneficiaries are sufficiently grateful for our efforts. Where is it said in the New Testament or in the teaching of the Church that Christians should show the love of Christ only when people prove their worthiness? How far would mankind have got if our Heavenly Father had applied those same standards to us? God loved us, we are reminded, even when we were still in our sins (see 1 John 4:10).

Your third assumption has not been established; namely, that this kind of campaign promotes waste and subsidizes crime. You have every right, however, to seek an accounting of the collection and disbursement of these funds. Such a disclosure would do much to reassure those Catholics who, like yourself, fear that their money will not be put to the best possible use. Church leaders, after all, have an obligation to see to it that such projects be carried out in "a provident and orderly manner" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 98).

The responsibility of the Christian for the poor, however, is simply beyond dispute.

Anyone who is indifferent to poverty is unfaithful to the Gospel.

There is no hedging on this principle.

Please, think twice before you say, "Count me out!" It may mean counting Christ out, too.

In Sum: the Book of Acts

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT, SJ

Looking at the Acts of the Apostles as a whole, we might say that the book describes the early Church as it was preached by Christ and as it was realized by the Apostles, but in making any such formulas we should not forget the role of the Holy Spirit in the whole development.

In the Book of Acts we have seen the story of the first Christian community at Jerusalem, how it expanded and how it came to preach to the Gentiles. We have seen in this book something about the life of the early Christian communities. In the preaching of the Apostles given in the book we have seen the stress on the spiritual message that the Messianic kingdom requires turning away from one's sins, baptism in the name of Christ, and faith in him. Notice that the spiritual life of the Messianic kingdom is not totally interior. The conversion to Christ implies a change of life which involves acceptance of the Christian community's mode of life.

In the early Christian life depicted by the Book of Acts there is fellowship, the breaking of bread together, and praying together.

There is also a social and external organization, with a hierarchy and various levels of service in the kingdom. The Christian communities are not independent when it comes to the core content of the faith and its interpretation. The Apostles have the sacred trust of preserving that faith. This is not simply a Roman Catholic interpretation of Acts: It is the basic Christian understanding of the book. Our differences with other Christian Churches have come from further analysis of this core content.

Some scholars ask how the early Christians reconciled Christ's death with their belief that he was the Messiah. They say that the early Christians were forced to trace Christ's death back in the Hebrew Scriptures and they found it in Chapter 53 of Isaiah.

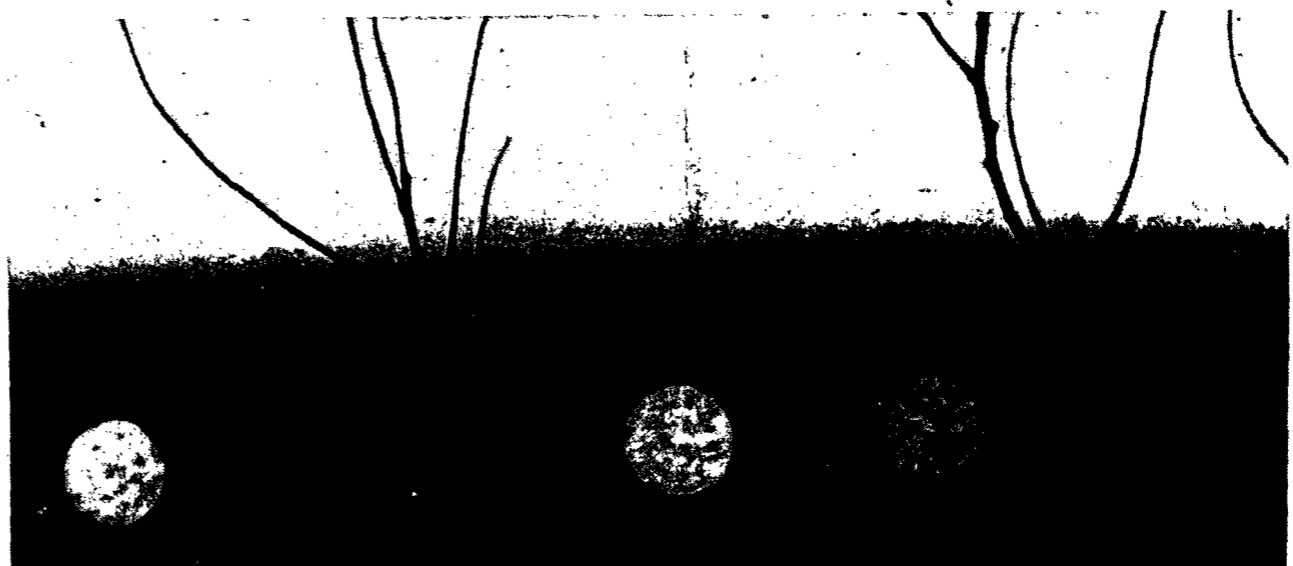
By the time of the Acts of the Apostles that phrase of Isaiah, "Servant of God," which was not used in the Synoptic Gospels, had become a Messianic title and Jesus was considered not merely as the dying prophet but also as the suffering and dying Messiah. They say therefore that the new preaching found in the Acts of the Apostles presents Christ as both the new prophet

and the Suffering Servant-Messiah.

One thing I don't like about this whole theory is that these scholars do not seem to take seriously the many references in the Gospels and the reference in Acts 1:3 which indicates that Jesus himself taught the Apostles how to understand the Old Testament Scripture passages about himself. They made it look as if the Apostles and their successors gradually developed these basic scriptural ideas and connections.

Of course, I must hastily add, these scholars do not mean that the early Christians did such thinking totally by themselves. They hold that such thinking was inspired by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised the Father would send to help them with such a development. They quote, for example, John's Gospel, 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."

We must now look at some of the Epistles of the New Testament. I hope you will read the last 13 chapters of Acts yourselves with an eye on the pamphlet commentary from Liturgical Press or the Jerome Biblical Commentary or the New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture (Nelson).



Trees and Traffic Lights

Even in the darkness of the shadow of Christ's death, the early Christians reconciled his death with their belief in him as the Messiah. (Photo by Frank Hoy)