

When Rhubarb Isn't Rhubarb

By: Keith Keyser

My father has a well-developed sense of humor, coupled with an unnerving ability to bring up obscure bits of trivia that sound highly implausible. Usually on the infrequent occasions when he mentions these arcane details, I question the accuracy of what he is saying, only to discover upon further investigation that he is correct. Of course, this fills him with great mirth and gives me a healthy piece of "humble pie" to eat. This occurred a few months ago concerning the word "rhubarb," and reminded me of the importance of defining terms - particularly in connection with biblical terminology. It all started when my father referred to an argument between two men as a rhubarb. It went something like this:

Dad: "They're having a rhubarb!"

Me: "What did you say?"

Dad: "A rhubarb. You know: a fight."

Me: "You're making that up! That's 50's slang from Beech Street. Nobody talks that way. A rhubarb is a plant." [He grew up on Beech Street in Pottstown, PA.]

Dad: "I'm not making it up. Look it up."

Dutifully, I opened up the electronic version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and looked up "rhubarb." To my surprise, "4. c." says "*U.S. slang*. A heated dispute, a row, *spec.* a disturbance or argument on the field of play at a sporting (orig. *Baseball*) event."¹ The dictionary further cites confirming evidence from *The New York Herald Tribune*, July 13, 1943, attributing the expression to "Red" Barber who announced baseball games for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Once more, I acknowledged my father's astonishing mastery of verbal-historical minutiae.

The Value of Verbal Precision

The foregoing story is amusing and trivial, but it illustrates the way in which words may mean wildly diverse things to different people. The cults certainly assign alternate definitions to Bible words like "grace," "faith," and "salvation." To some "faith" is trusting in the sacraments of a religious organization for entrance into heaven. Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 4:4-5 show that human effort and biblical faith are completely different. Yet billions of people worldwide trust in their religious ceremonies and good works to save themselves. Misusing Scripture is a timeworn, Satanic tactic: he successfully used it against Eve and unsuccessfully employed it against the Lord Jesus (Gen. 3:1; Matt. 4:6.) It is all too common among the world's false religions. Therefore, believers must use the Bible carefully - properly defining our terms - in order to ensure that our hearers do not form the wrong conclusions about God and His Word.

Unfortunately, verbal miscommunication is not restricted to the non-evangelical world; believers also use words improperly and misleadingly. Take for example the simple word "change." During the past few decades the church growth movement in the western hemisphere made that concept central to their strategy for improving local churches. It is obvious that North American churches need to change, for in many places there is less commitment to the remembrance of the Lord, prayer, sound Bible teaching, discipleship, and evangelism (to name just a few weak points.) Nevertheless, when modern Christian pundits use the word "change" they are usually speaking of external things pertaining to the meetings and activities of the local assembly. Thus, the music must be modernized, new evangelistic tools employed, buildings where the church meets improved, technology brought to the fore (do I hear PowerPoint, anyone?), etc.

The Necessity Of Biblical Change

Doubtless there is nothing inherently spiritual about following old, traditional practices out of mere habit. This author does not oppose using newer songs - if their content is sound and deeply Scriptural - to supplement the great songs of past eras which memorialize so much truth. Technology can also be helpful in putting visual aids before the audience. What is disturbing, however, is how the word "change" is seldom employed in keeping with the teaching of the Bible. That is to say, the Scriptures emphasize internal change, not mere external alteration.

When the Lord addressed seven local churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern day Turkey), He repeatedly called upon some of them to repent (Rev. 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19.) With the exception of the persecuted Smyrnaeans and overcoming Philadelphians, the churches were solemnly warned to change their attitudes and behavior. Likewise, Paul charged the Corinthians to change their sectarian mindset and overly tolerant treatment of blatant immorality (1 Cor. 1:10; 5:1-9.) Colossians was written to counteract false ideas of spirituality. 1 & 2 Thessalonians address false doctrine regarding the coming of the Lord. A study of Acts and the Epistles shows that the Lord is much more concerned with the spiritual health and doctrine of the church, rather than external issues. Should not the modern church seek to emulate the emphasis of the early church? The first Christians were steadfastly devoted to teaching, the Lord's Supper, fellowship, and prayer (Acts 2:42.) Their witness was powerful and pervasive throughout the first-century world. They loved the Lord and each other. When their hearts moved from the Lord to other things, He told them to repent (Rev. 2:4-5.)

Without question the contemporary western church needs widespread change: more spiritual prayer, sound Bible teaching, and unadulterated love for the Lord Jesus Christ. In many places, we must repent of legalism; in others, liberalism - both of these errors essentially being a turning away from the Lord. We must eschew materialism and use our possessions as a stewardship for our God. We must warn the lost of the judgment to come and of the mighty Savior who can save

them from it. We must live for the age to come and not for this age. If we really want effective change, then we must return to our first Love and His holy Word as the central focus of our lives. May our words and lives accurately reflect the teaching of God's Word. Joel 2:13 expresses well the need for inward rather than outward change: “And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.”

ⁱ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, 1989; electronic version. Entry for "rhubarb," 4. c.