

# Deborah Sokolove and Dan Phillips: Words, Forbidden and Otherwise

## Words, Forbidden and Otherwise

Deborah

Some time ago, [Dan gave a sermon](#) in which he mentioned that when he would stumble over certain “forbidden words” when talking to other Seekers, he would feel chastised. While I am well aware that we collectively tend to avoid certain terminology, I found myself wondering just what he thought those “forbidden words” were, and what we were doing to make Dan – and probably others – so uncomfortable.

Dan

We are a community of words, an articulate group. Many of us have written and given sermons here. We have written poetry, spiritual reports and Soundings submissions. We participate in worship by speaking our prayers, participate in learning by telling our stories and begin our gatherings by sharing. So, I guess I should not be surprised that certain words, when used at Seekers, provoke a negative reaction. This is a sermon exploring that reaction, and the larger theme of how we use language in our spiritual community.

Deborah

What we bring today grows out of a series of conversations that Dan and I have had in recent weeks, both on paper and face-to-face. In fact, it is an attempt to reproduce some of that conversation, which was illuminating to both of us, and, we hope, will be for you, also.

Dan

Lord is a word that many members of Seekers do not seem to like. I have not understood that. Granted, it has a hierarchical connotation that is definitely out of date and not in accordance with the egalitarian spirit of this community. Nevertheless, that does not seem to equate with the strong reaction to the word that I have noticed here. After all, KING has the same connotations, if not more so, and we don't seem to mind referring to GOD as KING, so why balk so at referring to Jesus as Lord?

Deborah

Oh! Wow! I hadn't even thought about the problem with "Lord" being hierarchical! When I first came to Seekers, inclusive language was a major discussion. "Lord" was a gender issue, not a hierarchical one. We were trying hard to get beyond masculine images of God, to make sure that women and girls in the congregation felt themselves included in hymns and prayers. So we didn't want to call God "Lord."

Dan

But Jesus **is** masculine. And Lord is a word that, for most

of us, is only used in a religious context.

## Deborah

It does get a little confusing when it comes to Jesus, because Jesus obviously was a male human being. But the reason Jesus is traditionally addressed as Lord is (in part) to blur the distinction between him and the one he called both "Father." The word Lord has a certain inherent ambiguity, both in English and in the Hebrew and Greek of the Scriptures. It may be simply a term of respect for an adult, male human being; or it may be an acknowledgment that God is the ultimate ruler, the lord, of our lives. ALL of the persons of the Trinity-Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, as we name them in the Doxology-are God (some of us seem to forget that sometimes).

About 20 years ago, some people – not just Seekers, but a number of theologians-began to distinguish between the first century Jesus, who was clearly male; and the pre-existent, eternal Christ, who is beyond gender. In other words, Jesus is the Christ, but Christ is understood as more than Jesus. And to address Christ as "Lord" was seen as gender-bound, limiting us to images of a masculine deity.

The Inclusive Language Lectionary, which we used for many years (until it went out of print), has an extensive discussion of this, as does the Inclusive Language Bible we use in worship. There are a number of strategies these texts, and others, use for avoiding the word Lord while preserving the ambiguity of Christ's human-divine nature. Personally, I tend to use "Holy One" as a way to address any of the three Persons of the Trinity, but others have

adopted different formulae.

Dan

I would think, from the explanation you gave, that the word CHRIST would be more offensive, since that word refers to Jesus' divinity. It still all seems a stretch to me, worthy of more conversation. It seems even more a stretch when we wreak havoc on familiar songs to avoid saying Lord.

Deborah

As far as the word Christ is concerned, it wasn't the divinity of Jesus Christ that people found offensive, it was the imputation of gender to that divinity.

And, yes, changing the words to the songs IS a problem, since many people know them by heart. But many people find the old words problematic, too, so maybe we need to keep talking about this. Meanwhile, I am going to have to think about the hierarchy thing.

Dan

Another set of words that have occasioned controversy at Seekers is the language used to refer to warfare, specifically words such as SOLDIERS (as in *Onward Christian Soldiers*) or *Marching* (as in *Marching To Zion*). I realize that we are a Peace-and-Justice congregation, and I want us to be that, but still, there is a struggle going on in our world. It is a struggle between good-and-evil, and I do not want us to forget that. I think it is important to remember that we are part of something important, something worthwhile, and something contentious. As Leonard Cohen

sings: THERE IS A WAR.

Deborah

Aren't assumptions interesting?!? Once again, it didn't even occur to me to think about the avoidance of war images as a peace-and-justice issue. I probably should have, though.

In any case, I don't actually know how widespread the wish to avoid war language is in Seekers. What I do recall is that, several years ago, when Celebration Circle was writing the guidelines for choosing worship music, our conversation about not using war images was not so much about peace and justice in general, but about Christian triumphalism. Certainly, there is a struggle between good and evil in the world, but too often that is construed as warfare between Christianity and the rest of the world. It tends to sound like, "we are good, and everyone else is evil, so we have to kill them." This is a particularly dangerous doctrine, which has repeatedly led Christians into such disastrous adventures as the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the various bloody battles between Protestants and Catholics that began in the 16th century and continued, at least in Ireland, into modern times.

Dan

Well, I am certainly not in favor of songs that encourage the Inquisition. Nevertheless, I am also not sure that such language has to engender an 'us versus them' mentality. Moreover, I do fear that in our attempt to excise such language from our vocabulary, we will come to believe that we can practice our spiritual life with no struggle, no effort.

Deborah

You are right about that, but the specific songs you cite, "Onward Christian Soldiers" and "Marching to Zion," tend to reinforce an image of Christianity taking over the world by force, and some of us have seen far too much of that to be wanting to sing about it in church. When I think about the struggle between good and evil, I am as aware of my own evil impulses as those of others. I don't want to see any other person as the personification of evil, even when I judge that person's actions as highly detrimental to the public good. So maybe this does go back to matters of peace and justice, after all. Saint Francis said,

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred . . . let me sow love  
Where there is injury . . . pardon  
Where there is doubt . . . faith  
Where there is despair . . . hope  
Where there is darkness . . . light  
Where there is sadness . . . joy  
Divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled . . . as to console  
To be understood . . . as to understand,  
To be loved . . . as to love  
For it is in giving . . . that we receive,  
It is in pardoning, that we are pardoned,  
It is in dying . . . that we are born to eternal life .

Or, as Jesse sings about Nelson Mandela, "You breathe in

the pain of the world; you breathe out compassion.” I guess that’s an image of struggle I am more comfortable with.

Dan

Amen. That is a wonderful image. It focuses on our personal response to the world around us. And it recognizes that many, most even, of our struggles are against things and situations that all people experience.

Beyond all the specific words that we have issues with, I have a larger concern of how we deal with language. During our discussions of music and music guidelines, I felt that at least one person was suggesting we make of list of the words that we did not want used, ever. That suggestion, if that was what was intended, seemed too much like censorship to me. After all, the language in our worship is freer than any other church in which I have been. I do not want that to change.

Deborah

Me, too! I don’t recall the suggestion to make a “forbidden words” list, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. I do recall some conversation about a “forbidden song” list, however, and I’m not entirely comfortable with that, either. In general, I think that everything can be brought into worship, as long as there is a reason for it, a connection with what else is going on in the lectionary, the congregation, and the world around us.

Dan

Words reflect who we are, and Seekers span a wide variety of theology and traditions. Our diversity should lead us to be more genteel and accepting in how we approach the words and ideas used here. In addition, our awareness of our own differences should lead us to be very careful with those who are new to our community. We must approach the task of presenting ourselves to others with true humility. As Pat demonstrated recently, our secret is often hard to articulate.

Deborah

Yet, we have to try. We do that in sermons, in classes in the School of Christian Living, and-perhaps most importantly-in the informal but deep conversations many of us have over meals, bike rides, or other activities outside of church.

Dan

And let us not forget that we often disagree with each other on the meaning is of the words that we share, words such as *call*, *inward* and *outward journey*, and *commitment*. We think we know what these words mean, but in close conversation within our community, we find real differences in opinion over these terms. If we cannot agree on the meanings, explaining them to newcomers will be hard. Do not get me wrong, I am not pleading for universal Seekers agreement, just an awareness of how ambiguous such important words can be.

Deborah

As ambiguous as "Lord"?

Dan

I believe that every word has some place in our vocabulary. That place may be a once-in-a-lifetime usage, but we never know when it is the right word. While we need to craft our language intentionally, it must be with the awareness of all our values, which include freedom and risk-taking. We must not approach language with intending to prune the acceptable language. Rather, we can and should use our creativity to re-define the language tools we have been given.

Deborah

We need to keep having these conversations. As new folks start to become part of our common life, we need to be open to their understandings, their history, their needs; and to be willing to explain – repeatedly – how we got to where we are. I have a hunch that Dan and I are not finished with this conversation, and that all of us have a lot to learn.