

# Five Theological Sounding Words Christians Should Know and Use

In the 15 years of being a pastor and preacher in Chicago, I don't think I have ever one time used the word "Justification" in a sermon. Or "Sanctification". I believe the concepts they entail are necessary to teach but I have always felt that they could be heavy to my audience and I am comfortable explaining them with other words.

That is not the case with all of the "Christian-ese" the American church has. There are some words I do not want to erase from my vocabulary in an effort to make the Bible easier to understand. I believe there are some words that have no good synonyms and are so rich in meaning that the church does well to learn and use them. Because you can't find anything equivalent in secular vocabulary. Christianity has concepts and truths unequaled and unparalleled in the world.

As always I seek balance. I don't want to talk completely in esoteric jargon as a Christian but neither do I want to try to be so hip with my lingo I eliminate all theological terms entirely. And I will say up front that your list may be different than mine. I am not claiming this is the "correct" list on this topic. With that said, here are five I use:

## 1. Covenant

I have written before that [I do not mind using the phrase](#) "Christianity isn't a religion; it's a relationship." Yet the word "relationship" can be woefully inadequate when describing the relationship our God wants us to have with Him in Jesus Christ. I have a relationship with my uncle. But I don't have

a *covenant* relationship.

For millennia, through men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, God has used this word to communicate how he enters into a relationship with men. And there are consistencies in all of their covenants: a promise on God's part, a symbol or sign to confirm it and a response of a faithful commitment by the followers. It was a very serious relational pact to be entered into. It was not to be taken lightly. It was like a spiritual marriage.

Now through Jesus Christ we enter into a New Covenant, not from the blood of lambs and goats, but through his blood. And we need to grasp the level and seriousness of the commitment that covenant is. No other word in English really captures it. "Marriage" is close but it carries too much in connotation. Yet man-woman marriage is supposed to be a picture of the God-man covenant commitment.

## **2. Atonement**

I have written about this before for REO when writing about [Leviticus for Good Friday in 2016](#). This word matters to teaching about Christian salvation and how we can enter into covenant with God. No other word (apart from the very similar "propitiation") in English carries so many layers in meaning and truth.

In general, in both Testaments, it has a threefold significance: a substitute is given in place of our sin, our sin is forgiven and God's wrath is satisfied. All three of these facts are crucial to our theology and faith. And God gave us a beautifully concise word to capture them together. We see it in Leviticus over and over, we see it change in the Gospels and we see that change explained in Romans and Hebrews. I love the Bible for how I marvel at how it is both consistent and simultaneously divided by a major

transformation at the same time. Jesus is now the substitution (not animals) but God's wrath is still satisfied and my sins are still forgiven.

### **3. Evangelism**

Phrases like "Sharing your faith" and "Witnessing" are great but the word "Evangelize" literally means to preach or proclaim the Gospel. And that is our message. I would put "Gospel" as one of the five words but it has such a deep, rich and multi-faceted meaning it cannot be treated in a short paragraph. Yet I will mention [I still agree with REO contributor David Lytle](#) when he expands the definition of Gospel to the entirety of the content of four books we have on Jesus's life and not something as simple as "The Gospel is that Jesus died for your sins and rose again."

Regardless of what Gospel means, we are mandated to share it and we have a ready-made verb to communicate that mandate. Phrases like "Preach the Gospel" conjure up ideas of standing on a stage in front of a crowd. "Evangelism" has less baggage, in my opinion (though the word "Evangelical" may have a ton of baggage).

### **4. Lamenting**

I suppose this is a word that we hear in English outside of church, but not very often. Yet the Bible has a form of this word as the name of one of its books, which is significant to me.

Christians should know how to lament. And the importance of it. Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" and Jesus was a "man of sorrows and familiar with the deepest suffering". Over 60 of the Psalms can be labeled "Lament Psalms". And in both testaments over and over God's people are commanded to weep

and wail and all manner of similar verbs (Isaiah 22:12, James 4:9).

But I think there is a theological significance to the word "Lament". I believe it teaches us how to process the horror that comes from both the evil in the world and in our hearts in a God-honoring and proactive way, instead of a reactive state that similar English words convey.

## 5. I AM

This one is different and not just because it's two words. It's because it's not a verb or a noun like the others. It is in some way a name for God that connects Old Testament YHWH (another name Christians should know) and New Testament Jesus Christ.

The significance of Jesus saying in John 8:58 that "before Abraham was, I AM" is monumental. They started to stone him for it because his opponents knew he was claiming what YHWH claimed in Exodus 3:14-15. Outside of how fascinating it is that here Jesus claims to be outside of time and that he cannot be restricted by human logic or the grammar of any language ("before Abraham was, I AM" is linguistically nonsensical in every language I have studied), Jesus saying "I AM" communicates a claim to and self-awareness of his deity. He knew perfectly Scriptures like Exodus 3:14-15 and Isaiah 42:8 and was intentional with his words.

There are many other "I AM" statements by Jesus and perhaps my favorite is in John 18:6 when a detachment of soldiers carrying torches and weapons went to arrest Jesus. He asked them whom they were looking for and they said, "Jesus of Nazareth". And he replied "I AM". Some translations add the word "he" as in "I am he" for clarity but I think it makes the meaning less clear. For when he said this phrase, they drew back and fell to the ground. No army in the world can stand up

to the LORD of Heaven's Armies. I think there is power in this name of God as stated in Exodus. And Jesus being God in the flesh and using this name, humbled these men.

Are there theology words you feel similar about?