Being Christian in 21st Century: Speaking Christian
The Need to Redeem Christian Language

I. The Premise: Religions are like languages. To be part of a religion includes using, hearing, and understanding that religion's language. To be Jewish means "speaking Jewish," to be Muslim means "speaking Muslim," to be Buddhist means "speaking Buddhist." So also, to be Christian means "speaking Christian." Of course, religions are about more than "speaking," about more than "words." They also involve a way of seeing reality and an "ethos," a way of life. But all of this is conveyed in language, in words.

   *Analogy to being French, or Turkish, or Korean (and so forth)

*An illuminating phrase from recent scholarship: Religions are *"cultural-linguistic traditions"* (George Lindbeck, 1984). Something simple and important is meant: each religions *originated* in a particular culture and used the language of that culture, even if it also challenged that culture. Religions that survived over time became *cultural-linguistic traditions* themselves, each with its own language, stories, understandings, and ethos.

II. The Problem: Christian language in our time is often unfamiliar and even more often misunderstood.

***An unfamiliar language.** In recent decades, more and more people have grown up "unchurched." (In the U.S., people born from 1964 onward….)

***A misunderstood language.** Why? Two central features of the "common Christianity" of the recent past that have shaped the meanings of much of Christian language.

   *By "common Christianity," I mean simply what most Christians learned growing up and thus took-for-granted and shared in common not so long ago. It continues today as the heart of fundamentalist and conservative Christianity. It is also affirmed by some within mainline denominations.

1. First Feature: The Literalization of Christian Language.

***Hard form:** everything the Bible says is the literal, factual, and absolute revelation of God. *If the Bible says something happened, it happened. If the Bible says something is wrong, it's wrong.* Goes with claims of biblical inerrancy/infallibility.

   Example: Genesis versus evolution….

***A softer form:** not everything in the Bible is literally and absolutely true. But the really important things are. Often a "taken-for-granted" literalism, not an insistent literalism.

*Biblical inerrancy and literalism are modern, neither ancient nor traditional.

2. Second Feature: An Understanding of Christianity's Core Message

A memory exercise. Suppose you had been asked at the end of childhood, at age twelve or so, to state the heart of the Christian message,"the gospel,"in a sentence, what would you have said? Why did Christianity matter? Why should you or anybody be Christian?

*My answer at the end of childhood: *Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven.* Note what it emphasizes: the afterlife; our sinfulness; and Jesus' death as the basis for our forgiveness.

   *Not peculiar to my upbringing, but was/is central to "common Christianity"

This understanding shapes the meaning of much of Christian language. Words have their meanings within contexts, within frameworks. "Elephant" means something quite different in the context of a zoo, a poem, a political cartoon. ***Within the framework of common Christianity*** (examples, not a comprehensive list):

Salvation is about "eternal life" – about going to heaven. *Saved* means to be saved from our sins. *Savior* refers to Jesus as the one who does this. **But**

Sacrifice refers to Jesus' death on the cross as payment for our sins. **But**

Mercy is what we need from God: to be forgiven in spite of our wrongdoing. **But**

Repentance is contrition about our sins and resolving to try to live otherwise. **But**

Redeem, redeemer, and redemption: Jesus redeems us from our sins; he is the redeemer who brings about our redemption. **But**

Faith, believing, means believing all of this to be true, usually literally true. **But**

Gently: all of this is wrong. The meanings of these words in the Bible are much different, richer and fuller. The common meanings distort the biblical meanings.

Common Christianity also affects how the creeds and the eucharist are understood, making them difficult for many Christians. **Hence the need to redeem, reclaim Christian language – to learn how to "speak Christian" again.**

III. A Case Study: Redeeming the Word "Salvation" (and "Saved," "Savior")

*One of the "big" Christian words – as central to Christianity as *nirvana*….

*For many today, a "loaded" word; it carries a lot of baggage. But in the Bible:

1. In the Old Testament: Salvation, saved and savior are used in the story of the exodus from Egypt; in the context of Israel's deliverance from exile; in the Psalms, where they often refer to deliverance from enemies or illness.

*They are not about an afterlife; and the issue is often not sin, but liberation from bondage, return from exile, healing of disease, deliverance from enemies….

2. In the New Testament, these uses continue, even as the words are sometimes associated with life after death and with the forgiveness of sins. But that is not their primary meaning.

3. Their Primary Biblical Meanings: "salvation" is about *transformation* in this life, this side of death - the transformation of ourselves and of the world. It's both personal and political, concerns both individuals and the transformation of societies.

4. Multiple Biblical Images for Salvation. The transformation from:

> Bondage to liberation
> Exile/estrangement to re-connection
> Sickness/woundedness to wholeness
> Blindness to seeing
> Death to life
> Anxiety to freedom from anxiety
> Self-preoccupation to the ability to be present and compassionate
> A world of injustice to a world of justice
> A world of violence and war to a world of non-violence and peace

All of this is what salvation is about. Transformation as a concise crystallization of what Christianity and the Christian life are about.

*Story about "What's our product?"

*Transformation is our "product," message. It responds to our deepest yearning.