

Wednesday November 14, 2012

Pooled ignorance

By Jim Taylor

Dante's *Inferno* defined nine circles of hell, each appropriate for different kinds of sin. I have my own definition of hell – editing by committee.

You know how it works. A whole group reads a draft, and wonders what to do with it.

Then one member ventures an opinion: a certain sentence should use “different than” rather than “different from.”

Now the floodgates open. Everyone has a pet phrase that they feel impelled to insert, challenge, or delete. They resurrect grammar no-no's from Grade Eight. Someone objects to the recommendations -- additional alternatives should be included. No, says someone else, they can't be alternatives, because “alternative” implies only two possibilities. With more than two, they must be called options. Or choices.

Would a discreetly worded disclaimer reduce legal liability?

A handful of commas would make it clearer.

And shouldn't the bullet list be numbered?

I guarantee that the result of editing by committee will be verbose, ponderous, and incomprehensible – even if every single amendment were linguistically correct! (I'm being charitable in suggesting that possibility; almost inevitably, some “improvements” will be just plain wrong.)

Dependable filter

Committee members are entitled to their opinions, of course. But a collection of inputs needs to be filtered through a single competent mind to produce a readable document.

I can think of only one significant exception to this rule -- the King James Version of the Bible, created by a committee of 74 independent scholars in 1611. But even there, they borrowed two-thirds of their text from a previous translation done by one writer, William Tyndale.

For his heretical efforts, Tyndale had been lashed to a stake, strangled, and then burned.

Unfortunately, editing by committee has gained popularity in the digital age of social media. Anyone can now contribute their knowledge – or their ignorance – to any subject.

It's called “crowd-sourcing”. James Surowiecki's book, *The Wisdom of Crowds, Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few*, popularized the concept. Its philosophy is the more, the merrier. And the more creative.

Yes, there are times when crowd-sourcing seems to work. Wikipedia is an example. Random sampling of its contents apparently proves it fractionally more accurate than even the venerable *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Still, there are times when its entries seem to reflect the obsessions of a few fanatic individuals.

Amateur hour

But now Collins has thrown open its dictionary to anyone with an Internet connection – in other words, anyone.

Which means, for example, that someone can insist that flout and flaunt are the same thing. Or career and careen. And is it you're, your, or yore? There, they're, or their?

You're not sure what the difference is? Look 'em up. Oh, sorry, you can't. Well, yes, you can, but can you trust a collective wisdom that includes ignorance?

As Jonathan Green asked, in Britain's *Guardian*, "If it is not intensively researched, edited, proofed and rendered as 'true' as possible, why bother to consult it? If a reference [text] is to remain useful, it cannot become amateur hour."

There is a place for wisdom, for knowledge, for expertise. Pooled ignorance – as politics keeps proving -- does not add up to wisdom.

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YOUR TURN

Lots of mail about last Wednesday's column, resulting from a friend who said she could no longer attend worship in her denomination because of the hymns.

Dave Denholm shared my friend's reluctance to attend: "I'm a retired minister ... and I don't do church much any more. Church is boring... When I did it -- up front -- I may have pushed some boundaries. People said I made them think ... which is what I hope I was called to do, help people to think about the ultimate and respond in heart, mind, soul, and action..."

But now, Dave continued, "Too many want answers ... too many want rules ... too many want not to think ... Too many just want 'warm fuzzy' Christianity..."

Isabel Gibson felt the pain over losing some old favourites: "As a 30-something, I thought the 60-something women in my church were just silly, fussing about the changing of hymns' words to drive out sexist language. Of course we needed to do that! Then all the 'triumphalist' language was removed -- no more 'Lord' and so on. It bothered me when it hit my favourites, and I finally 'got' what those old ladies (of whom I now was one!) had been saying. Things change -- and so they should -- but that doesn't mean we don't feel bereft."

Hymnwriter Judith Fetter commented, "The main reason I started writing hymns back in the '80s was because some of the words that went with popular hymn tunes had become virtually unsingable. Nowadays in my church we don't sing many of them any more. There is so much really good hymnody being done these days. I also sing in Chorus Niagara... My friend Bruce Small once remarked to me that it was a good thing some of the things we sing were in Latin, because in English they would no longer be acceptable!"

The column coincided with Dale Perkins' concern about the language we use to describe divinity: "I concur with your friend ... Same thing for me -- even though the musicians in churches in this town (UCC congregations I know) try hard to find good music, they have to nod to the whims of a few in the congregation (including, unfortunately, most of the clergy in charge) to have at least one or two 'classical' hymns which are familiar and comfortable -- and completely anachronistic, with an ancient world-view and vocabulary... They fail the likes of me and your friend to express our faith in word and song... Sad, really.

"Perhaps you could encourage your friend and her peers to start a new group which would develop other liturgies and use songs of faith that work for them. I'm doing that here in Victoria, with a small cadre of like-minded

folks, and it is a positive response and preferred to just absenting myself from everything currently available. We still must nurture our spiritual being, and it still might have a 'family resemblance' to something that worked for us in the past."

Pastor Pat Macy-Beeman posited another dilemma: "I agree with what you had to say about hymns. However, I find much of the 'new' praise music equally offensive. Many of these songs have theology that is just as uncomfortable for me as the traditional hymns. Many of the praise songs are what I call 'seven-eleven' songs -- we sing the same seven words for eleven verses! Boring! And, most of them have catchy melodies so people want to sing them and do not stop to think about what the songs are saying. They just like the upbeat feel of the music -- especially if there happen to be drums and guitars accompanying. The whole thing creates a dilemma because there are a few 'modern' hymns (written in the 19th century) that have right-on theology but the melody is unsingable by anyone other than a professional singer. What's a pastor to do?"

Bill Franzman shared Pat's dislike of some modern songs: "99% of praise songs make feel like I am being led by a performance of soloists on stage. But I still enjoy and receive an inner feeling of humbleness and thankfulness when singing a hymn. Although I have had no problem with the words in hymns, your column makes me think that I will pay more attention to what I am singing."

Greta Horton is already paying more attention to the words: "I find that the words of some hymns offend me more now than they used to, despite the catchy or not so catchy tunes. I listen to the words more than I used to."

John Hatchard in New Zealand had mixed feelings: "Regarding those 'triumphalist, sexist, obsessed with sin, anthropomorphic...' hymns you friend could no longer tolerate... As a choirboy in an Anglican Church I remember enjoying them very much, a chance to sing lustily and noisily without paying much attention to the words. Within ten years, although I still liked the tunes, the words became inappropriate to what I believed was needed in the world. However, there are many hymns whose words were written from a different inspiration and remain beautiful and meaningful."

John recommended "the hymns written by Joy Cowley and Colin Gibson... These two people have had a profound influence on musical quality here in New Zealand."

Beth Hawley, in Edmonton shared John's affection for some older hymns: "I have spent years sifting through the hurtful memories of my fundamentalist childhood. I bristle at the antiquated terminology and cannot talk about my spiritual journey with my family. And yet, a few weeks ago, an old hymn 'slipped into the back door' of my mind. It was 'Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is calling.' It caught me by surprise.... It reminded me of a friend who died several years ago. His father, a radical minister, abandoned his family to 'preach the word.' So my friend grew up, became head accountant for a major Canadian firm, and when he retired, went to theological college and earned his degree. Like me, he listened to the still small voice of God calling him to a deeper understanding of God.....At his funeral, in the Anglican church where he attended, they sang, by his request, 'Softly and Tenderly...' I think I may have the same hymn at my memorial."

Problems about language were nothing new for Jean Hamilton: "Of course, this is what women have been saying for the last 40 years, but it is probably time to reopen the conversation, this time around the atonement theology that is implicit in so many of our hymns and liturgies. Micah knew that God did not require sacrifice; why is it so difficult for the church? I suspect that what was true of inclusive language is also true of atonement theology."

Jean suggested that my friend might like two recent United Church of Canada books, *Voices United* and *More Voices*. "Not perfect," she suggested, "but a major advance."

Perhaps, Jean continued, "We're caught between the 'great hymns' that we all love to sing even when the words make us cringe, and the happy-clappy ones that are either pretty lightweight or based on an outworn theology."

I think these two hymnbooks have tried to steer a course between the two with varying degrees of success, but it is a work in progress.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The Lectionary suggests 1 Samuel 2:1-10 as the psalm reading for Sunday November 18. It’s supposed to be Hannah’s song, celebrating her pregnancy, but aside from verse 5 which refers to “the barren” bearing children, it sounds to me more like the victory cry of a triumphant military general. I tried to recast it (rather loosely, I admit) as a woman finally becoming a mother.

Oh, my God, what’s happening to me?
I feel new life moving within me.
It kicks my kidneys; it compresses my bladder;
I love it!
They said it couldn’t happen.
They said I would never have a child.
Now they have to eat their words.
Ha!

I thought it was my fault.
I wasn’t trying hard enough.
I didn’t realize God couldn’t act
 until I quit trying to run things my way,
 until I playing God.
God helps the helpless; the rest just help themselves.

My clock was running out;
Menopause lurked beneath the bed.
Then it happened -- the spark of life!

I don’t know what lies ahead –
 it may be heaven, it may be hell.
I don’t care; I’m committed.
I’m committed to life; I’m committed for life.
There is no turning back now.
I know, beyond any flicker of doubt,
 that this is what God intended for me.
My child may be a genius or a dunce,
 a cello virtuoso or penniless poet...
But God will watch over her.
God will give her the strength I cannot give.

I had lost hope.
I shall call her Hope.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,

info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

[<http://www.hymnsight.ca>](http://www.hymnsight.ca) www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. [<http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>](http://www.churchwebcanada.ca)
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
