

## **Keep it Simple, Saint**

*Jonathan Gallagher*

K.I.S.S. is an acronym that should be burned into our brains as we try to share what we believe.

Baptising K.I.S.S. into “Keep It Simple, Saint,” let’s see how such a motto could help us to speak well to those around in ways that really do communicate. For there is a true saintliness in simplicity.

Ellen White tells the story of a meeting with a little girl who had brought some of her friends to hear Ellen White speak. The girl was disappointed to learn that Ellen White was not going to speak that afternoon, and had the boldness to give some words of advice to the preacher of the day.

“A little girl once asked me, ‘Are you going to speak this afternoon?’ ‘No, not this afternoon,’ I replied. ‘I am very sorry,’ she said. ‘I thought you were going to speak, and I asked several of my companions to come. Will you please ask the minister to speak easy words that we can understand? Will you please tell him that we do not understand large words, like “justification” and “sanctification”? We do not know what these words mean.’

“The little girl’s complaint contains a lesson worthy of consideration by teachers and ministers. Are there not many who would do well to heed the request, ‘Speak easy words, that we may know what you mean’?”

And we are all part of the “many who would do well to heed the request”!

For how much of our “witnessing” is taken up with the vain repetition of clichés and phrases that are incomprehensible to those we are addressing? The little girl mentioned one such barrier to communication—the use of in-house jargon that has no meaning to those outside.

Technical theological terms, for instance, like “justification” and “sanctification.” As Ellen White comments, there are many long in the Church who do not understand such terms, so why unload them on outsiders? A testimony to passers-by on the street that “by His prevenient grace my transgressions have been expiated and my multitudinous calumnies of concupiscence are now expunged” may be technically correct, but is worse than useless as a form of modern communication!

So point one: get rid of the technicalities.

Which leads neatly on to the second point: abandon the familiar phrases and clichés.

We may all know (or perhaps not!) what we mean by “the right arm of the message,” or “the pen of inspiration,” or “being in present truth.” But who else does? Even the platitudes such as “many precious souls being won for the kingdom” have no place in external communication, because they simply get in the way of expressing truth. For some of us this means learning a new language, because we have become so used to saying things a certain way we have forgotten that there may be better (and simpler) ways to express ourselves.

Point three: we have to use modern language. Not just that, but simple language. So out go the archaic phrases, beautiful though some may be.

When Ana and I married, we followed the wedding service in the manual. When it got to the end of what we had to say to each other, “and thereto I plight thee my troth,” Ana turned and asked, “What on earth does that mean?”

“I don’t know, but plight your troth anyway,” I replied. It seemed like the right thing to do, though what we were promising each other at that point was very unclear...

So too with the seventeenth-century King James language as a way of communicating to the twenty-first century. No more divers ways and manifold blessings. No more noisome pestilences or bewraying or chambering. No more locking up the truth in language.

Simple, easy-to-understand language is the key to communication.

*Instead of:*

The Almighty Lord of Hosts conveys His magnanimous salvation upon His children who with the perspective of faith commit to Him their hearts.

*Why not:*

God will save all who trust in Him.

In essence it says the same thing, without the old formulas and without the long words. In fact the second statement is all mono-syllables, and can be readily understood by all. Not to say there is not the need for more explanation (what do you mean by God, save, trust, etc.), but the essence is clear.

As Ellen White goes on, telling the story of the little girl’s request:

“Make your explanations clear, for I know that there are many who do not understand many of the things said to them. Let the Holy Spirit mold and fashion your speech, cleansing it from all dross. Speak as little children, remembering that there are many well advanced in years who are but little children in understanding....” Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, Chapter “The Importance Of Simplicity,” pp.254-5.

This was the method Jesus himself used. In simple language he spoke of eternal truths. He used imagery and parables and simple ideas to express the vital elements of salvation. They were not hard and wordy sermons, and the common people heard him gladly—because he was relevant and his words were simple.

“Christ’s manner of teaching was beautiful and attractive, and it was ever characterized by simplicity. He unfolded the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven through the use of figures and symbols with which His hearers were familiar; and the common people heard Him gladly, for they could comprehend His words. There were no high-sounding words used, to understand which it was necessary to consult a dictionary.” Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, p.240.

“He [Christ] reached the people where they were. He brought plain, simple truth to their comprehension. How simple His language! Even the poorest, the unlearned and ignorant, could understand Him. Not one needed go to a dictionary to obtain the meaning of the high-sounding titles or words that fell from the lips of the greatest Teacher the world ever knew. Review and Herald, July 19, 1887.

No need for dictionaries! If we are looking for understanding, then we must use language that is clear and readily understood. Jesus “reached the people where they were.” He did not ask them to learn a new language or to study a new vocabulary. The greatest Teacher ever needed no interpreter. That’s our goal—to be as transparent and simple as Jesus, not thinking that hard words and great-sounding terms will make us appear wise and educated. Jesus is to be our example in this also:

“His words were simple and direct, and no one need look in the dictionary to ascertain his meaning. A child could comprehend his teaching. And as he did his work, so are we to do ours, following his example.” Signs of the Times, July 8, 1889.

“All who have taken knowledge of Jesus Christ will imitate Him in their manner of instruction. They will not have hard words, difficult to understand, but will aim to do no surface work, be short in every address, and not labor to exhibit themselves but to come directly to the point to inculcate ideas which are of value, and every word used should be so plain that the children need not go home and get a dictionary and search out the meaning of the words used by teachers and superintendents.” Manuscript Releases Volume Nineteen, p.304.

Keep it short. Keep it understandable. Most of all: Keep it Simple, Saint. The spiritual realities we want to share may seem hard to explain in everyday terms, but our calling is to follow the example of Jesus in making the dark things plain. Our role in telling the truth about God is not to be academics using high-flown technical language, nor orators amazing audiences with our wide vocabulary, nor inward-looking elitists confusing others with our in-house jargon.

Our role is tell the story of the God who made us, who came to save us, and who is coming again to take us home—and to invite as many who will respond to come to love and trust our God too.

It really is that simple!

“John speaks of Christians as ‘little children,’ and this is what all the members of God’s family on earth are. In knowledge and understanding we are nothing but babes. Christ volunteered to teach us in a language so simple that all can understand. No one needs to use a dictionary in order to comprehend the meaning of the simple words He uses in telling us how to gain eternal life.” Sermons and Talks Volume Two, p. 222.

Simple words telling how to gain eternal life. That is the message of those who are truly following the motto, *Keep It Simple, Saint!*

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