

## *Smoky Mountain Reflections, September 2010*

Words. Words are what we use to communicate. The English language, which is relatively new on the language scene, has about three quarters of a million words. When the Angles and the Saxons migrated to the British Isles and created the first language that is genderless in many ways by inventing the word *the*, they had no idea that that they were creating a language that would replace Latin and French as the worldwide language. As a matter of fact, ever since the Tower of Babel, when God divided mankind's language from one to many in order to dilute our sinful nature, human creativity and lazy diction have led to a constant and fluent change in the human vocabulary. The English language contains a little over one million words, in fact that the average English speaker has a vocabulary of about 20,000 speaking and 40,000 listening. So, let's focus on *words* this month, shall we?

Words and phrases have a shelf life. Some have survived for centuries while others have a shorter life span than that of most teen idols! It really depends on what the word is designed to communicate. Words like "**sundries**" which still appears on a local drug store sign here in Pigeon Forge have long since gone out of use. Many people do not know that sundry means miscellaneous objects too numerous or too small to be specified. If someone were to say, "Put that on a **lory**"—an American would say, "What is a lory?" and an Englishman would say, "You have misspelled **lorry** which you colonists call semi-trailers!" while an Australian would think you were crazy to try to put something on a parrot! But none would think you were speaking of a common 19<sup>th</sup> century English hand-cart used on tramways, in mines, or at railway stations for carrying coal or other types of ore. In the same way, many modern English speakers would not know what an **apothecary** is (a pharmacist) and would have no idea what a **brigandine** was unless they were into things like a medieval coat of chain mail consisting of metal rings sewn onto leather or cloth. Suffice it to say, words can have multiple meanings at the same time depending on the spoken context, the cultural context, and the time in which it is used.

On top of this we have slang and the transitory nature of catch phrases that are all very cultural and time sensitive. So, in our life time, the words **bad, hip, cool, bomb, trick, hot, rad**, and a host of other words that have other meanings have each spent time or continue to mean *good*. I am reminded of Isaiah 5:20 which says "**Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,**" but that is a discussion for another day. Let's expand our discussion from words to familiar phrases. "Back to the drawing board"—back to the computer now; "carbon copy"—photocopy; "catch you on the flipside"—audio files do not have one like 45's did; "close but no cigar"—how long since cigars were fairway prizes? A lot of the phrases we use today are not even remotely connected to what they originally meant. "Drop a dime"—still in use but good luck finding a pay phone and be ready to pay much more than a dime! "Full steam ahead"—how long has it been since any thing was powered by steam? "In like Flynn"—I hope not as he has been dead for over 40 years. "Off the hook"—how long has it been since you really *hung up* a phone or have you *ever* hung a phone on a hook? "Over the top" meant something crazy like leaving the security of a WW1 trench, and for my younger readers...I did not misspell Wii. WW1 means World War One.

OK...I think I have more than made my point. All language is in a state of constant fluctuation and change. This makes it even more amazing and clearly an issue of faith, that God cut directly through all that chatter to give us His clear and authoritative word. He first carried this truth from creation to Moses, giving us the Pentateuch, a combination of divine revelation, written and verbal witnesses and mostly His first-hand eyewitness. For a more profound understanding of formal verbal traditions and the confidence we can place in God's word from a middle eastern view, I recommend the 4-part series by Crossways: "The Historical Jesus: A Middle Eastern View" with Dr. Kenneth Bailey who has profound insights into the middle eastern mind and communicates them very clearly.

After traveling through time and the ancient languages of biblical Hebrew and biblical Greek, languages that are distant cousins to modern day Hebrew and Greek and which are no longer really

spoken as they were in their day from 1446 BC to 95 AD, the amazing and miraculous word of God has survived through history unscathed by our weaknesses. It cuts through the fleeting nature of words and grammar to communicate to us how much God loves us and how He redeemed us through Christ's blood.

So for this month, I will close with the words of a stuttering farm animal:  
"That's all folks!"