Just Language Covenant:
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And God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light. . . . And God called the light "day", and the darkness God called "night." (Gen 1:3 & 5a)

In the beginning was the Word . . . (John 1:1a)

From the creation story in Gen 1 to the opening words of the Gospel of John, Christian faith tradition has taught followers about the power of the spoken word. In Gen 1, God speaks into being all of creation culminating in the creation of humanity in God's own image, thus giving us the power also to speak into being new realities. In the Gospel of John, the writer is seeking to proclaim the power of God made manifest in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, thus creating another new reality. In word and deed, Jesus revealed God's love and grace to all whom he met, and he charged his followers to go and "preach the Good News." Language thus creates, shapes, and gives voice to our world, our lives, and our faith.

In teaching and preaching about biblical texts, we are trying to convey the "gospel" message of God's love and grace offered to the work. To that end, we must strive for both our written and spoken language to reflect the equality of the people of God and to maintain the mystery of God. Such "Just Language – language that reflects our changing consciousness about God, the universe, ourselves, class, gender relations, race, disabilities, and violence – is essential if we are to overcome injustices and hatred that obstruct peace, equality, and harmony for which we long."[1] What follows are specific guidelines for how we, the class members of AH 525 Bible & Contemporary Issues, will live out the Just Language Covenant when speaking of humanity and God in class conversations. These guidelines are to be followed in preparing written assignments.

Language About the Human Community

As such a powerful tool, language can be used both to include or to exclude. Words can speak a word of hope or they can be used to destroy all hope. Speech can build up a person in love or it can tear down out of hate. Words can indeed hurt or heal. The Israelites understood the particular power inherent in the act of naming something or someone. When the human (*'adam*) is brought a new animal, the human names the animal and thus is claiming a position of power over the animal world. Outside of the egalitarian garden, the man names his wife, "Eve," and signals the beginnings of a patriarchal culture in which men will have power over women. Without voices and often unnamed, women and other minorities are excluded from human realms of power but certainly not from God's love. Time and again, the stories of Israel proclaim a God who takes notice of the powerless and chooses those whom society deems "unworthy" to do God's will.

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[1] Kathleen Ashe, "Foreword," in *Creating Just Language*, (Chicago: The 8th Day Center for Justice, 1999), 4.

This concern for the marginalized and voiceless was revealed again in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel stories show Jesus going against the exclusive rules of society to be among those who most needed to hear that they too were loved by God. As those who seek to follow Jesus, Christians are commissioned to proclaim the Gospel of God's radically inclusive love for all people. Gospel words should not exclude anyone from knowing God's love and grace. Rather, amid a broken world, Christians must speak into being a new reality of God's reign where all are welcome.

Examples[2]
"Sexist Language"

Instead of . . .	Try using . . .
Man/mankind	Humanity/humankind

Whether or not it was ever the case that "man/mankind" was meant to include all persons, it is not the case today. If the intent is to refer to both male and female persons, then that is what one should do.

Brotherhood/bretheren	Community
	sisters &brothers

Businessman, fireman, chairman, etc.	Business leaders, firefighters, chairperson/chair

Titles ending in "man" or "woman" are made non-gender specific by replacing those endings with "person" or by using different terminology (e.g. policeman/police officer). Feminine endings (e.g., ette, esse, and ine), which often are used in other words to indicate imitation, inferior, smaller, or less important, are eliminated by using the non-gender specific title (e.g., authoress/author or stewardess/flight attendant).

He/him/his/himself	he/she/zie/they, her/them/him/zim, zir/zis/their/hers/his, them/him/her/zie -selff[3]

There is no such thing as a "generic" pronoun (i.e., one that may refer to either a woman or a man) in the English language. Individuals should be allowed to choose the pronouns for their own identification. In writing, efforts must be made to eliminate the need for a singular pronoun altogether or to use the dual/plural forms as seen above. A few

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[2] Many of the examples provided in this section are borrowed from *Creating Just Language*, 41-49.
[3] These are just a few examples of "gender inclusive pronouns" or "personal gender pronouns", taken from: https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/. The use of 3rd person plural pronoun as a singular is also an accepted practice. For more information, see https://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2009/09/10/singular-they-and-the-many-reasons-why-its-correct/.

examples may help to illustrate the available options.

> Don't judge a person on the basis of **his** sex.
> Don't judge a person on the basis of sex.

> When a student graduates, a diploma will be given to him.
> Upon graduation, students will receive their diplomas.

> A minister is a person called by God, and she is ordained by the Church.
> A minister is a person called by God and ordained by the Church.

"Racist Language"

Below are just a few examples of how language can serve to perpetuate racism:

black sheep

black and white (where black indicates the "bad", "wrong", or "undesirable")

to be blackballed or have one's name blackened

a person's dark side

an Indian giver, acting like wild Indians

dragon lady, china lady

to "jew" down a price

expressions such as: jap, chink, spic, etc.

"Language Regarding Disabilities"

Instead of . . .	Try using . . .
Disabled or handicapped child/person	Child/person with a disability; Persons who are differently "abled"
Deaf and dumb	Hearing impaired
Confined to a wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair
Crazy or Insane	Mental illness

Also important in this area is to be especially careful in how one uses words referring to particular conditions in a derogatory manner. For example, saying that someone turns a "blind eye" to the truth could be insulting to those whose vision is impaired. In like manner, saying that someone is "deaf" when it comes to cooperation could be offensive to those whose hearing is impaired. One should also be careful not to put too much emphasis on particular abilities as being available to all (e.g., "everyone can see the truth" or "let those who have ears to hear", etc.).

Obviously, there are more areas where language can be used to divide rather than to unite. The areas described above are only meant to be starting points for consideration of all words used in describing persons. As our awareness of the global community broadens, more areas will need to be named and considered, if Christians are to continue to spread the Gospel.

Language About the Divine

Often the discussion about language used to describe God is presented as less strict and reliant more upon one's personal theology. While no one should be told how or what to believe about the Divine, leaders of the Church are often called upon to speak about God on behalf of the gathered community. In such situations, one's personal beliefs about God can no longer be the only criteria for language about God. Speaking in front of and/or behalf of a group requires leaders to be sensitive to the diversity of the gathered community, both in human characteristics and in their beliefs. Thus, language about the Divine can not be seen as less important nor less powerful than language about the human community.

As was stated above, the power of naming someone was understood among the Israelite community. To know someone's name was to have some intimate information about who that person was. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus renames Simon as Peter, representing his trust that Peter would continue the work Jesus had begun on earth (Matt 16:18). Nowhere was the power of naming more important and dangerous than in human attempts to name the Divine. When Moses asked to know God's name, he was given a phrase that defied translation and comprehension. The phrase, *'eyeh asher 'eyeh*, maintained the mystery of the God who calls humanity into covenant. Similarly, when Jacob wrestled with the stranger at the Jabbok, he too demanded a name but instead Jacob received a new name.

Still, humans have used words to speak of God and of their experiences of God. Hagar, the only person in the First Testament to "name" God, called the Divine "'*el roi*", which reflected her experience of having been seen by a God who took notice of her suffering and who gave her a blessing. Recognizing the inherent danger of limiting God through human words, the Israelites were careful not to solidify their God into one image or name. The third commandment not only referred to making tangible images of God but also to concretizing God into verbal images as well. The same prohibition is found in Deut 4:15-18.

> [15] Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb
> out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, [16] so that
> you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the

form of any figure-- the likeness of male or female, [17] the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, [18] the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. (NRSV)

Acknowledging the mystery of God and the impossibility of finite language to name the Infinite, Christians must also take care in how they name and speak of God. Metaphorical language is a common way for humans to describe God, but the danger is always there for God to be equated with the metaphor and thus produce a static image of God. Given the biblical mandates against limiting God to one image and the multitude of Divine descriptions found in scripture, Christians are called to expand both their own and the faith communities' understandings of the God who called Israel out of bondage, who brought forth new life out of the death of Jesus, and who continues to call the faithful to work for a just world.

"Pronouns"

In the biblical languages (i.e., Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), nouns were given a grammatical gender (i.e., masculine, feminine, and in Greek, neuter). For example, in Hebrew the word for city is feminine and the word for house is masculine; however, a city is not female nor is a house male. The English language no longer utilizes grammatical gender for nouns. Unfortunately, though, most translations of the Bible into English were done without a consideration for this difference. Thus, when translating the words given above, many English Bibles refer to a city as "she" rather than the more common English pronoun, "it."[4] Not surprisingly, given that most biblical translators have been men, the pronoun used for "road" is "it" and not "him." Similarly, in referring to God, which is a masculine noun in Hebrew, most English translations use the pronoun "he" when "it" would have been just as grammatically accurate. Given Israel's firm confession that their God did not have a sexual identity (male or female), it is highly unlikely that an obviously male pronoun, like "he", would have been used to refer to God. Although Greek does have a neuter form for nouns and pronouns, this identification is also a grammatical one and not one of sex.

In English references to the Divine, then, it is important to recognize that the use of a masculine pronoun for God implies that God is indeed male.[5] In order to avoid this misconception, it is more accurate to use the word "God" when referring to God and to use the masculine pronouns only when referring to a male person. While some may claim that this practice is cumbersome, avoiding masculine pronouns for God will allow the Gospel to be more clearly understood. If one says, "God," then it is clear to whom one is referring.

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[4] The continuing practice of some to refer to cities with feminine pronouns reflects sexist attitudes in that cities are often described as being dominated or conquered, and in biblical texts cities are often condemned for their infidelity. The use of feminine English pronouns perpetuates an image of females as less moral or faithful than males.

[5] See above section on "Sexist Language" and pronouns.

"Images/Metaphors"

One common theme of both testaments of the Christian Bible is the diverse ways by which reference is made to God. The countless metaphors used by the biblical writers testify to a God who is more than any human word can name. Those who have been called by God to be leaders of the Church are challenged by the ancient authors to expand their own understandings and descriptions of God. In speaking in a gathered community, use of only one image for God not only limits God but also may prevent others, who find that one image unhelpful or disturbing, from hearing the power of the Gospel. Thus, in spoken and written language about God Christians must continually search out ways to speak of the Ineffable Presence of the Divine. To this end, language about God in worship, class, and convocations should never use only one image to define God (e.g., exclusive use of Father or Mother, of King or Judge, etc.).

Continuing Dialogue

Language is in a constant state of flux as new words are created to name new realities (e.g., Internet, web, etc.) and other words fall out of use when they no longer speak of contemporary life. The language of faith is a particularly unique combination. Much of the faith is reliant upon telling the "old, old stories," but for the faith to continue, those stories must be told in language that will transmit the Gospel to new generations. While it is true that many congregations are resistant to changes dubbed "inclusive language," God calls men and women to challenge the status quo. This call has been answered by the faithful throughout time in the lives of the Israelite prophets, Jesus, Paul, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King and others who proclaimed the Gospel when it was not always a welcomed message. If leaders of the Church do not offer their congregations the opportunities to expand their vocabularies for humanity and for God, then they are doing a disservice to those people. The liberating Word of God only has the power to transform lives if our language invites persons into this new reality and does not exclude anyone.