

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

---

5-9-2019

## Why the Words We Use to Describe Faith Matter: A Review of Learning to Speak God from Scratch

Kayt E. Frisch  
*Dordt College*, [kayt.frisch@dordt.edu](mailto:kayt.frisch@dordt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Frisch, K. E. (2019). Why the Words We Use to Describe Faith Matter: A Review of Learning to Speak God from Scratch. Retrieved from [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work/1063](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1063)

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

---

## Why the Words We Use to Describe Faith Matter: A Review of Learning to Speak God from Scratch

### Abstract

"God has gifted us with language—both to communicate with each other and (more importantly) to communicate with us through the written sacred texts."

Posting about the book *Learning to Speak God from Scratch* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/why-the-words-we-use-to-describe-faith-matter-a-review-of-learning-to-speak-god-from-scratch/>

### Keywords

In All Things, book review, Learning to Speak God from Scratch, Jonathan Merritt

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# in things

May 9, 2019

## **Why the Words We Use to Describe Faith Matter: A Review of *Learning to Speak God from Scratch***

**Kayt Frisch**

**Title:** *Learning to Speak God from Scratch: Why Sacred Words are Vanishing—and How We Can Revive Them*

**Author:** Jonathan Merritt

**Publisher:** Convergent Books

**Publishing Date:** August 14, 2018

**Pages:** 256 pages (Paperback)

**ISBN:**978-1601429308

If you met a stranger on the Brooklyn subway and said to her that you recently “asked Jesus into my heart,” would she understand you?

When Jonathan Merritt moved from the Bible Belt to New York City he noticed that he became hesitant to talk about his faith. He realized that the words he used to describe faith (words like “born again,” “saved,” and “lost”) had been a common place in his Atlanta church culture, but that they did not connect with the strangers he was meeting on the New York subway. As a result, he set out to learn how to speak about his faith (i.e. “Speak God”) that allowed him to articulate the central ideas in ways that non-Christians could understand.

As Merritt dug deeper into the question, he came to believe that *speaking God* is in crisis. To make his point he references a study of words from Google’s digital library showing that use of words in published literature that describe moral virtue has decreased in the past 100 years and to a survey (that he commissioned) in which less than half of participants reported *speaking God* regularly. This is a problem because the

words we use both reflect and shape what we value. Furthermore, God has gifted us with language—both to communicate with each other and (more importantly) to communicate with us through the written sacred texts. Merritt argues that if we stop *speaking God*, the language of faith (what he calls “sacred words”) will follow the course of other languages that are no longer spoken—that is it will become a “dead” language alongside ancient Hittite (among others).

Not all hope is lost, however, if believers are willing to actively strive to revive the sacred language. Drawing lessons from several languages that are currently rebounding from the brink of extinction (e.g. Hebrew and Celtic), the majority of the book helps readers imagine how this revival might take place. We must, Merritt argues, be willing to explore the meanings of our sacred words and (as C.S. Lewis suggests in *Studies in Words*) allow them to grow new meanings. In short, we need to “learn to speak God from scratch.”

In the second half of the book, Merritt chooses a selection of sacred words and uses a combination of memoir and popular media reflections to play with his own understanding of the words. Some are words you would expect to show up (e.g. grace and prayer) and others that might surprise you (e.g. pain and neighbor). The list is by no means exhaustive and is meant to be a representative sample and encourage people to start the conversation. As an evangelical-turned-high church Christian, I particularly appreciated his musings on the words “saints” and “creed,” but the one I found most profound was his discourse on the word “word.” He traces the translation of “logos” as used in John’s gospel through Erasmus and invites his readers to not just know Jesus Christ as “the word” but to enter into the ongoing conversation with God that is the person of Jesus Christ.

My own small town in middle-America flies the same flag as New York City but has a strong cultural assumption that everyone here *speaks God*. Here most of the local business are closed on Sundays, stores play Christian music over the PA system, and people assume (rightly or wrongly) that their neighbors go to church. However, our need to refine and recalibrate our vocabulary of faith is also strong. Our neighbors are changing as non-Dutch people (some of whom speak English as their second language) move in to support the local industries, and I am reasonably certain that some of my neighbors do not attend church regularly. Not only do we need to be able to *speak God* fluently in our changing culture, we need to understand what we mean deeply enough to communicate it to friends and neighbors who do not speak the same language as us.

Overall, *Learning to Speak God from Scratch* is a relatively light read that reflects the opinion piece and web-based writing training of its author. It has a casual tone,

occasionally draws sweeping conclusions from limited data sets, and seems to underestimate the need for the reimagining of our vocabulary to happen within community. However, if you agree that there is a problem and want some case-study examples to help you reimagine the meanings and ways that you use sacred words, this book will provide an interesting starting point.