



That Exclamation Mark

by Todd Wilken

I recently returned to the world of Apple. After a decade of PCs, I started using a MacBook. This was a big step for me. I don't tolerate Macsnobs well. Computers are like beer: the best beer you ever drank wasn't that much better than the worst beer you ever drank. Come to think of it, I don't care much for beer snobs either.

Nonetheless, the new computer does have some nice features; among them, an onboard dictionary. Just for kicks I entered a word I've been thinking a lot about lately: *ablaze*. Here's what came up.

ablaze | ə'blāz |

adjective [predic.]

burning fiercely : *his clothes were ablaze* | [as complement] *farm buildings were set*

ablaze. • very brightly colored or lighted : *New England is ablaze with color in autumn*. • made bright by a strong emotion : *his eyes were ablaze with anger*.

The LCMS capital fund drive/evangelism program that goes by the name *Ablaze!* is working off of the first definition, "burning fiercely." The fire motif is all over the *Ablaze!* program and promotional materials.

Grammatically, the word *ablaze* seems to fall into the category of adjectives that can only be used predicatively, that is, as a complement to a noun, linked to it by a form of the verb "to be." In other words, the adjective *ablaze* will always come at the end of a phrase like "the building is ablaze" and never before the word it modifies, "the ablaze building." *Ablaze* is like some other *a-* words, such as *astray*, *adrift*, *afraid*, *alone*, *aghast*, *ashamed* and *asleep*.

But what interests (and confuses) me more than the definition and grammar of the word *ablaze* is that peculiar exclamation mark after the word. *Ablaze!*

Set aside the unfortunate tendency of the printed word *Ablaze!* to give the impression that the author is shouting. Set aside the annoying way the word's punctuation forces readers to stop reading every time it appears in print and ask, "Is this the end of the sentence?"

Ablaze! What is that exclamation mark doing there?

Lynn Truss calls the exclamation mark the “expressive, attention-seeking punctuation that can’t help saying it with the knobs on.”

In the family of punctuation where the full stop is daddy and the comma is mummy, and the semicolon quietly practises the piano with crossed hands, the exclamation mark is the big attention-deficit brother who gets over-excited and breaks things and laughs too loudly.
(Lynn Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, pp. 135, 137-138)

In written English, the exclamation mark has a variety of uses:

1. with a declaration: *Time’s up! I’m tired! That’s one ugly parrot you’ve got there!*
2. with an interjection: *Hey! Wow! Jeepers!*
3. with a command: *Stop! Attack! Look!*
4. with a warning: *Beware of Dog! Poison! No Trespassing!*
5. to indicate strong emotion: *Yes! No! Wonderful!*
6. to emphasize an author’s surprise or perplexity with a word within a quotation:
The synodical official passed[!] the lie-detector test.
7. with words describing loud sounds: *Bang! Ka-boom! Poof!*
8. by itself as a sign of surprise or shock, usually drawn over the heads of characters in cartoon strips and comic books.
9. in the titles of Broadway musicals, websites or products: *Oklahoma! Mamma Mia! Oliver!, Yahoo!*
10. in advertising to draw attention to a change in a product: *New! Improved! Now with 25% more Lard!*

I ask, which of these uses of the exclamation mark is being employed in the grammatical riddle that is *Ablaze!?*

We can rule out most of these uses right away. Uses 1, 2 and 3 make no grammatical sense at all. Even Paris Hilton’s declaration “That’s hot!” and Christian Siriano’s “That’s fierce!” are complete sentences. Granted, everyone says things like “Great!” and “Marvelous!” But it’s hard to imagine a situation that would call for someone to declare, “Ablaze!” Also, sane people don’t go around shouting adjectives as interjections or commands.



Use 4 seems a stretch. After all, if I want to warn someone that something is on fire, I'm far more likely to yell "Fire!" or "Call 9-1-1!" than "Ablaze!"

Use 5 raises too many questions. What strong emotion is *Ablaze!* intended to express? Anger? Lust? Vengeance? Panic? A fire burning out of control is seldom a metaphor for pleasant emotions.

Uses 6, 7 and 8 also seem unlikely. I doubt the brain trust that dreamed up *Ablaze!* wanted the name to convey surprise, perplexity, shock or loud sounds.

Use 9 is difficult to consider seriously. I resist the temptation to contemplate *Ablaze! The Musical* too deeply. I suggest you do the same.

That leaves only use 10, and brings us back to where we started.

In advertising, the exclamations *New!* and *Improved!* are shorthand. They are the truncated remains of full sentences: "This breakfast cereal is new!" "These diapers have been improved!" As consumers, we don't even think about it anymore.

New! and *Improved!* deserve an exclamation mark --at least in the minds of the marketers of breakfast cereal and diapers. The exclamation mark is their attempt to convince you that something important has happened to their product. They want you to take notice. Ultimately, they want you to buy some *new* cereal and *improved* diapers to replace the *old* cereal and *unimproved* diapers you have lying around at home.

New! Improved! A single word stands in for an entire sentence, the full content of which is understood by everyone. Grammatically, this is the only reasonable explanation for the exclamation mark in *Ablaze!*

By itself, *Ablaze!* is just a remnant of a once-complete thought. "The old-growth forest is ablaze!" "The pile of used tires is ablaze!" By itself, *Ablaze!* leaves the reader guessing what, precisely, is or was on fire. More on that later.

Presumably, the strategy in *Ablaze!* is similar to that of *New!* and *Improved!* The promoters of the *Ablaze!* program want to convince you that something is on fire. They want you to take notice. They want you to do something about it. But the word *Ablaze!* alone doesn't tell you what is burning, why you should care, or what you are supposed to do about it.

Unlike *New!* and *Improved!* where a single word stands in for a sentence, the content of which is understood, *Ablaze!* stands in for a sentence, the content of which is unknown.

Now I ask, what is that sentence for which the one word, *Ablaze!* stands? “ _____ is/are ablaze!” How should we fill in the blank?



One would think the best place to look for an answer would be the *Ablaze!* website. Indeed, the website has a section dedicated to answering the question, “What is Ablaze!?” The careful reader will notice the ambiguity in the question and in the punctuation.

I’m sure that the *Ablaze!* people meant to ask, *What is “Ablaze!”?* --that is, *What is this program called, “Ablaze!”?* Instead, the poorly punctuated question asks, *What is Ablaze!?* --that is, *What is on fire!?*

Poor punctuation in the question also produces an unintentional combination of an exclamation mark and a question mark (!?) called an *interrobang*. The interrobang is used to express excited, incredulous or rhetorical questions --nuances I’m sure the *Ablaze!* people never considered when they decided to add that exclamation mark.

In any event, under the grammatically confused question, “What is Ablaze!?” we read:

The vision of igniting a worldwide Lutheran mission movement to share the Gospel with 100 million people is expressed by the word, Ablaze! LCMS World Mission’s goal is to ignite a movement that will change the culture of our Lutheran church bodies to be one in which every member is fully engaged in personal mission involvement ... Ablaze! is not a program or a campaign. It began as a mission vision with the hope of starting a mission movement... Ablaze! is not an answer... it’s an invitation!

As an aside, why must church leaders talk like the boss in a Dilbert cartoon? Only mediocre midlevel managers use terms like “change the culture” or “fully engaged” anymore. And, unless you’re a black civil rights leader from the 1960s, or you just came off a mountain with two stone tablets, keep your “vision” to yourself.

The website explanation tells us what the program *Ablaze!* is: a vision and an invitation. The website explanation tells us what the program *Ablaze!* is not: a program, a campaign or an answer.

In fact, the promoters of *Ablaze!* seem very concerned that *Ablaze!* **not** be perceived as a program. Elsewhere they caution, “*Ablaze!* is not a program-- it is a movement.” For some reason they seem anxious that *Ablaze!* be perceived as unsolicited and spontaneous.

But for a movement, *Ablaze!* bears an uncanny resemblance to a program. A movement isn't announced in advance. A movement doesn't come out of a boardroom at church headquarters. A movement doesn't have to tell you that it is a movement; it just is. A program is announced in advance. A program comes out of a boardroom at church headquarters. A program tries to pass itself off as a movement; but it isn't.

A careful study of the *Ablaze!* program and promotional materials reveals some ambivalence. Some of these materials speak as though there is a three alarm fire under way. Other materials speak as though we are still hopelessly rubbing two soggy sticks together over damp kindling. In one bizarre case, a newsletter of a large, midwest LCMS district (south of Iowa, north of Arkansas) recently had a front-page feature subtitled, “Setting Intentional Fires.” The image is still with me of an arsonist, wearing a synodical logo lapel pin, gas can in hand, fleeing a burning building.



Apparently, spontaneous combustion is a rare phenomenon. For a program that appears to have been started on no greater theological foundation than the lyrics of *Pass It On*, the message of *Ablaze!* seems less optimistic about ignition than that old campfire song.

The Bible passage most often quoted in *Ablaze!* materials is Luke 24:32-34,

They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.”

Here is an answer to our question. The sentence embodied in the single word, *Ablaze!*, “_____ is/are ablaze!” is “Our hearts are ablaze!” This is confirmed by the *Ablaze!* worship materials:

WORSHIP THEME: Hearts ABLAZE to ignite the World with Christ’s Love! When our hearts are ablaze with God’s love, our concern for others motivates us to give witness to the

hope within us. Since Jesus shed His blood for ALL, we are passionate to find those who are out in the cold – to bring them near the warmth of the roaring fire of God’s love.

“Our hearts are ablaze!” Finally, we know what is on fire: our hearts. Finally, we know what that word *Ablaze!* and its exclamation mark are trying to tell us.

Back to that exclamation mark.

Writers and grammarians remind us that the exclamation mark should be used sparingly, only when necessary. Elmore Leonard advises, “Keep your exclamation points under control. You are allowed no more than two or three per 100,000 words of prose.” (“Writers on Writing; Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hoopedoodle,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2001) Strunk and White likewise caution, “Do not attempt to emphasize simple statements by using a mark of exclamation. The exclamation mark is to be reserved for use after true exclamations and commands.” (William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, p. 41)

In other words, not just any old statement deserves an exclamation mark.

There’s no doubt about it, someone at LCMS Inc. loves his exclamation marks. The author of the LCMS’s July 2006 *Report of the Blue Ribbon Task Force for Funding the Mission* uses the exclamation mark 18 times in the 13,396 word document --twice in triplicate (!!!). That’s 44 times Leonard’s more generous allowance. The same author has a penchant for capitalizing and/or bolding whole words, phrases and sentences. **WHEN EVERYTHING IS EMPHASIZED, NOTHING IS.**

In the case of *Ablaze!* the problem isn’t overuse of the exclamation mark; the problem is misuse. Remember, not just any old statement deserves an exclamation mark.

Consider this. If you were going to build an evangelism program around Luke 24:32-34, and you wanted to emphasize the most important thing in that passage by reducing it to a single word with an exclamation mark, what would that most important thing be? Look again at the passage:

They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.”

What is the most important thing in that passage? Is it the disciples’ burning hearts?



Or, think of it this way: what did all those burning-hearted disciples in Luke 24 consider the most important thing? When they had gathered in Jerusalem, did they say, “It is true! Our hearts are burning! Our hearts are Ablaze!”? No, they didn’t. They said, “It is true! The Lord has risen.” They considered the objective truth of Jesus’ resurrection more important than their subjective experience of hearts ablaze. The disciples’ witness wasn’t “We are Ablaze!” it was “The Lord has Risen!”

Ablaze! puts the exclamation mark in the wrong place.

Unlike the clear witness “The Lord has risen!” the word *Ablaze!* says nothing about the crucified and risen Jesus at all. It only says something about us.

C.S. Lewis famously observed, “You can’t get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first.” *Ablaze!* puts the second thing first.

Ablaze! is designed to ignite hearts (the second thing), but what ignites hearts in the first place (the first thing)? What caused the hearts of the Emmaus disciples to burn? “Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” And, what did Jesus say to them on the road?

*“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”
And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.*

Did Jesus say, “I have a vision of igniting a worldwide mission movement”? No. Did He tell them, “I have a goal to ignite a movement that will change the culture to be one in which every member is fully engaged in personal mission involvement”? No. Did He say, “This is not an answer... it’s an invitation!”? No.

Jesus didn’t tell the Emmaus disciples about a mission movement, He told them about His death and resurrection for sinners. That is why their hearts burned within them.

Ablaze! puts the exclamation mark in the wrong place.

Typical of many so-called evangelism programs, *Ablaze!* puts the emphasis on our vision of, movement toward, invitation to, and involvement in the mission. *Ablaze!* puts the emphasis on our work to share the Good News; rather than on the Good News itself. *Ablaze!* puts the emphasis on our response to the Gospel; rather than on the Gospel.

I call it “missionalism” rather than “evangelism.” It’s when the good news about the mission replaces the Good News about Jesus.

Look again at the *Ablaze!* homepage. What do you find? How many we have reached. How much we have raised. How many congregations or districts are involved. How many critical events have occurred. “Help us spread the *Ablaze!* Movement. Help us spread the word about the *Ablaze!* vision.”

Ablaze! seems to do a better job of promoting itself than promoting the Gospel. It’s almost as though the inventors of *Ablaze!* have confused *Ablaze!* with the Gospel.

That would explain that exclamation mark ...and many other things.

