

A Theology of Profanity

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December 6, 2007

Postmodern Theology, Film, and Youth Culture

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Introduction

On March 5, 2007, the Christian broadcasting company *VCY America* ceased broadcasting *Insight for Living*, the radio program of Charles Swindoll, reformed preacher, author, and former president and Professor Emeritus of Dallas Seminary. *VCY America* issued a comment that began with this:

Since 1979 *VCY America* has aired *Insight For Living*. Increasingly over recent years, *VCY* has been concerned about the content and direction of the IFL broadcasts with Chuck Swindoll. Through the years we have had multiple conversations with IFL regarding objections to content in their broadcasts. It is *VCY*'s position that certain language and illustrations used have been crude, vulgar, and from the gutter and have no place on Christian radio. [Rhoades 2007]

VCY's detailed statement listed many instances in which Swindoll had used language that the company considered "unbecoming a pastor, and...inappropriate for our listeners" [Rhoades 2007]. This language included words such as 'crap', 'buns', 'heck', and 'balls' [Rhoades 2007]. This language was not only seen as offensive and crude, but a barrier to ministry [Rhoades 2007]. *VCY* affirmed their stance that Christian radio is a "witnessing tool" [Rhoades 2007], and such inappropriate language abases Christian radio, interfering with its ability to minister effectively [Rhoades 2007].

In January of 2007, author and pastor John Piper, preaching to college students at a Christian conference, said that God "kicks our ass," referring to God's discipline for his children [Piper 2007]. Reflecting on his slip of the tongue, Piper stated that he might have used it to try to be "gutsy and real and not middle-class pious" [Piper 2007], but

wished he hadn't used it, reasoning that, "It backfires if one becomes unholy to make people holy" [Piper 2007].

Mark Driscoll is the pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, made famous in Donald Miller's *Blue Like Jazz* for being the "cussing pastor" [Miller 134]. He has been labeled a "grunge Christian" by John MacArthur, who states that preachers and ministers like Driscoll have "adopted both the style and the language of the world – including lavish use of language that used to be deemed inappropriate in polite society, much less in the pulpit" [1].

These three examples, though quite different, all reflect the difficulty facing the church: what is profanity and how is the church to deal with it appropriately? Swindoll's 'crap' got him kicked off the air, yet most would not equate this mild profanity with words like 'shit' or 'fuck'. But what is it that makes language crude or "middle-class pious" or unholy? A sound created by the mouth is certainly not intrinsically good or evil, but it is the connotation carried by that sound that can be profane. Yet, even a connotation can be malleable from setting to setting or change over time. The word *boner* used to refer to an embarrassing public faux pas, while today refers to an erect penis¹, and when the famous preacher C.H. Spurgeon wrote, "If we had a gracious revival, good people would find better things to do than get up nigger entertainments, and theatricals," he certainly did not mean 'nigger' as it is used today [Jones 2007].

For profanities to be truly profane, the connotation of a word must be irreverent and insulting. One modern author writes, "Obscenity is determined, then, by the whims of those in power" [Mohr 271]. A profanity, therefore, is a form of rebellion against

¹ Which could still be an embarrassing public faux pas.

someone or something in power. Common profanities are traditionally religious in nature, as in ‘God damn’ or ‘Jesus Christ’, or excremental and sexual in nature, like ‘shit’ or ‘fuck’. All three examples reflect a rebellion against the culture of their time; a rebellion against religion and a rebellion against the prim, high culture concerned with hiding bodily functions and sex. But this has not always been the case and is no longer the case today. When religion is not the dominant institution, and in a society unashamed of sexual and excremental behavior, relevant obscenities are no longer profane. Modern profanity is not about sex or bodily functions but is racial, minorital, and misogynistic. It rebels against the development of cultural sensitivity towards race relations and minorities, using words like ‘nigger’, ‘faggot’, and ‘cunt’.

Holding to an antiquated view of language, an unwitting church will anathematize devout Christians and will exclude nonbelievers whom the church inappropriately deems profane. Furthermore, as new profanities develop, the church must remain culturally sensitive and adjust her language in order to avoid damaging her witness.

Andrew Jones, a leader in the Emerging Church movement and progressive theologian, argues that profanity can be divided into three categories: excommunicatory, explicit, and exclusionary [Jones 2007]. Excommunicatory are those religious words which condemn, curse, or damn others in the name of God [Jones 2007]. These religious words were most profane during the height of church power. The Explicit are those words that refer to body parts and functions, most often sexual and excremental in nature [Jones 2007]. These words arose out of the development of social behavior and the subsequent class divide that began to happen during the sixteenth century. Exclusionary terms are racial, minorital, and misogynistic in nature, offensively used to label and

marginalize [Jones 2007]. These terms reduce their subjects to a specific category, implying limited mobility and often a history of prejudice.

Excommunicatory: Religious Oaths

Today, many words are used interchangeably to define obscene language: profanities, vulgarities, expletives, obscenities, oaths, swears, cussing, cursing, etc. But these words are not all synonymous. Profanity is generally used to refer to any language used irreverently, religious or nonreligious, while cursing is most specifically used in reference to calling on God to curse someone or something. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the religious profanities and the nonreligious profanities. Oaths, swears, and cursing are all religious profanities, while vulgarities and obscenities are non-religious in nature, usually referring to excremental and sexual functions. Yet all profane forms of language serve a simple purpose; to use language irreverently.

In her article, *Defining dirt: three early modern views of obscenity*, Melissa Mohr writes that “oaths are always religious, or irreligious, in nature” [254]. An oath is “solemn religious language that calls God to witness and that can be perverted, used to curse, to express anger, even to show surprise” [253]. These oaths can be found in some writings about the church as early as the thirteen and fourteenth centuries [Sharman 77]. The Christian ethos of the time focused heavily on the wounds of Christ and people were called to constantly remember the “divine agony” [Sharman 79]. What developed was the language of religious rebellion. Sharman writes:

Not mere words of intemperate anger came bubbling to the surface, but sullen and defiant blasphemies, execrations that proclaimed open warfare with authority and a lasting separation from everything that was tender in a man's faith. Imprecations were continued from every incident in the narrative of the Crucifixion. The limbs and members of the slain Christ were made the vehicle of revolting profanity. [79]

As a result, a popular profanity during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was the word 'zounds' [Sharman 82]. While this word has no connotation to the modern mind, 'zounds' (better rendered in modern in English as 'swounds' or 'his wounds') was a powerful profanity. Sharman says, "It was absolutely impossible to surpass in blasphemy" [82].

But the church, cognizant of Jesus' command to make no oaths [Matthew 5:36-37], condemned the use of any type of oath, declaring such language a sin. In a response to his seventeenth century contemporary John Tomb, who apparently argued that some oaths were lawful, Richard Hubberthorn universally condemned oaths as a sin against Christ and as ungodly behavior [Hubberthorn 8].

To demonstrate the intolerable nature of such language Edmond Bicknoll amended his 1618 A.D. work, *A Sword Against Swearers and Blasphemers*, with this story:

Another example no lesse memorable, happened not long agoe in a Prince's Court here by, where a certaine Gentleman being charged with many injurious words, spoken at randome, for to cover the matter, and to persuade that the accusation was false, he began to protest and swaere: adding that he desired of God if he had [committed] any such speeches, to shein some token on him, even

at that very instant; or if God would not, that then the Diuel would. Presently upon these words and other such like imprecations, he fell downe flat on his face, being to grievously taken with the falling sicknesse (which hee had never before) that after he had tormented and beaten himselfe against the grownd, where he lay foaming at the mouth like one half dead, hee was carried to a Chamber, and there continued very sicke, being justly punished for his rashnesse, and impious imprecation. [Bicknoll F6, 1618]

Whether or not the account is true, it shows the religious view of the time; to swear, to make oaths, was to blaspheme God and was an invitation for God's judgment.

Manners and the Explicit

In the sixteenth century, an entirely new class of words referring to the body, both in parts and in functions, became publicly inappropriate. These obscenities had not yet developed because it was only in the sixteenth century that society began to develop rules about social conduct [Bryson 153].

The sixteenth century theologian and scholar Erasmus writes, "There are certain parts of the body which are not dishonourable in themselves yet are kept covered because of a sense of decency peculiar to civilized man" [315]. But the concept of "civilized man" was a recent development. In *The History of Manners*, German sociologist Norbert Elias writes that the public bathing and sleeping habits prior to the sixteenth century demonstrate the social unconcern with showing the naked body [163]. While the bedroom today is a private room, prior to the sixteenth century the bedroom was a shared sleeping room: "the master with his servants, the mistress with her maid or maids; in other classes, even men and women [slept] in the same room" [163]. Everyone would

completely undress before going to bed, and to sleep clothed was unusual and “aroused suspicion that one might have some bodily defect” [163]. Public bathing habits demonstrated a similar attitude toward the body. One early account even notes that families would undress at home before going to the public baths and walk to and from, parents and children of all ages, completely naked [164].

This general indifference slowly began to change in the sixteenth century, and rapidly changed throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries [Elias 164]. This attitude change first occurred in the upper class, followed by the lower classes of society [Elias 164]. By the eighteenth century, the development of manners became a class divide. Holding to proper manners was a practice of the elite upper class [Bryson 159]. Bryson writes, “Indecencies of vocabulary [were] attributed to the lower class” [159]. When tracing the use of vulgar terms, Erasmus wrote, “Words derived from low trades and occupations...are usually vulgar, but we must of necessity use these words if we have to discuss such subjects” [309]. Like the rebellion of religious oaths, explicit language was the new rebellious language of the time. Mohr writes, “In early modern English, while both were condemned, the [religious] profane is the worse...oaths by God’s name, or curses, have real effects...whereas obscenity is merely a violation of social norms. By the eighteenth century, however, the situation is almost reversed” [253].

Two major works of the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Governor* and Erasmus’s *De Copia*, address and define these new words and didactically approach their appropriate use or necessary censorship. Concerned about the proper education of young

men, Elyot defines many excremental words, and hesitantly defines a forbidden class of sexual words, labeling them as ‘wanton’, ‘unclean’, and ‘lascivious’ [Mohr 255].

Erasmus also identifies these two classes of obscenities. Erasmus writes, “Some words are vulgar of themselves, others only in the wrong context” [309]. Erasmus uses the word ‘dung’ as an example. Though appropriate on a farm, it would be obscene to use in the “presence of a ruler” [309]. He continues, “Vulgar words are those which will strike the hearer as rather too common for the dignity of the context” [309].

According to Bryson, these texts “constitute a new development in the theory of social conduct” [153]. Elias agrees, “The primary concern is the necessity of instilling ‘modesty’ (i.e. feelings of shame, fear, embarrassment, and guilt) or more precisely, behavior conforming to the social standard” [181]. Society, from the upper class down, was beginning to shift towards a “shame standard” [Elias 130], and was becoming focused on concealing those things that caused shame, namely certain parts of the body and their excremental and sexual functions. Elias writes, “The feeling of shame is clearly a social function molded according to the social structure” [138].

Not unexpectedly, with the advent of a “shame standard”, sexual and excremental obscenities began to develop. Prior to this cultural shift, Mohr tells us, “English very rarely uses sexual words as exclamation or expletives” [254]. Mohr writes of the language of the time, “Respectable words conceal while obscene ones reveal” [Mohr 266].

By the late seventeenth century, religious institutions, along with religious oaths, had lost their cultural power [Mohr 276]. Mohr tells us that by the eighteenth century “obscene words have supplanted oaths as the language of truth – they become more

powerful, the more dangerous, the worse words” [276], and are used because they “peel back layers of polite disguise to reveal the truth about people” [276].

Modern Expletives

After publicly using the word ‘ass’, John Piper confessed on his blog that he was not proud of his word choice, and could have just as easily said “backside” [Piper 2007]. Reflecting on the moment, Piper admitted that, given a second chance, he would not say it. To this, theologian Wayne Grudem responded favorably.

Grudem, compelled by Piper’s blog post, wrote an email to Piper thanking him for his confession [Piper 2007]. But in addition to this congeniality, Grudem offered some of his own thoughts on offensive language, as well as some scripture references that he claimed “commanded [us] to maintain a reputation for cleanliness” [Piper 2007].

I’ve thought of such language as a question of having a reputation for “cleanliness” in our speech, as in the rest of life, out of concern for how that reflects on the gospel and on God whom we represent. A number of different words can denote the same thing but have different connotations, some of them recognized as “unclean” or “offensive” by the culture. Examples: urination: taking a leak, pee, “p---”; defecation: poop, “cr--”, “sh--”; sexual intercourse: sleeping with someone, “f---”; rear end: backside, “a--”. [Piper 2007]

Grudem then offers these scriptures (all ESV translation):

Titus 2:10 – not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior;

Ephesians 5:4 – Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving; Ephesians 4:29 – Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear; Philippians 4:8 – Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [Piper 2007]

Grudem presents two issues: a biblical command for ‘clean’ language, which will be addressed later in the paper and the use of substitute words for words he believes to be commonly found obscene. But his use of substitutes shows the transient nature of language. Erasmus and especially Elyot also used substitutes for words they felt uncomfortable printing when writing their dictionaries [Mohr 262]. While Grudem types “p---” for the word ‘piss’, Elyot defines “urina” as “uryne or pisse” [Mohr 264], and Erasmus writes “‘To Piss’ is not an indecent word” [315]. Even the King James Bible uses the word ‘piss’ in I Kings 18:27. What is more, while Grudem writes “s---” for the word ‘shit’, Elyot defines the antiquated verb “caco” as “to shyte” [Mohr 264]. Though used acceptably by Erasmus and Elyot three hundred years ago, Grudem’s censorship shows these words, in his interpretation, to be unclean and offensive to society.

Though this may have been true during most of Grudem’s life, recent studies have shown a shift in culture away from these, and other, unclean and offensive excremental and sexual words. A study done in the United Kingdom, called *Delete Expletives?*, traced the use of broadcasted expletives over a two year period from 1998 to 2000 and surveyed viewer attitudes of 1033 people towards those expletives by age,

gender, race, sexual preference, and geographical location. Viewers were asked to rate the severity of twenty-eight broadcasted profane words on a scale of four: “not swearing”, “quite mild”, “fairly severe”, and “very severe” [56]. When asked about the word ‘crap’, thirty-two percent said it was “not swearing”, while forty-eight percent considered it “quite mild” [56]. In 1998, ‘crap’ was ranked twenty-five of twenty-eight as most severe, while in 2000 it ranked twenty-six. In 2000, nine percent of respondents considered the word ‘shit’ as “not swearing” while forty-nine percent considered it “quite mild” [56]. From 1998 to 2000, the word ‘shit’ was ranked fifteen and seventeen respectively [56]. The word ‘ass’ was not surveyed. ‘Arse’, however, ranked twentieth both years. Studies in the U.S. show similar results [Kaye 2004].

In 1993, the premier of *NYPD Blue* was met with outcries from many conservative organizations for its use of language and edgy content [Kaye 556]. By 2003, *NYPD Blue* was considered one of the most successful programs of all time and by newer network standards, most of its content was considered tame [Kaye 556]. In only ten years, the societal view of language and explicit material had shifted dramatically. Researcher Barbara Kaye writes, “In the early days of live television there were few incidents of actors and television personalities uttering expletives...the 1980’s saw the rise of sexual puns and double entendres on situation comedies” [555]. By the 2001 season, seventy-four percent of all sitcoms mentioned sex [Detweiler 42].

In a ground breaking moment of television, the popular and controversial show *South Park* broadcasted an episode cleverly called “It Hits the Fan.” In the episode, the fictional broadcasting company goes from broadcasting ‘shit’ once, to twice, to seven times, to doing an entire live broadcast where every character says nothing but the word

‘shit’ – which they call “Must Shit TV.” A counter on the lower corner of the screen keeps track of how many times the word ‘shit’ is spoken. The final count: 162.

The episode begins with this dialogue amongst the children:

Cartman: “Tonight...on Cop Drama...on TV...they’re gonna say shit”

Kyle: “They’re gonna say shit on television?”

Stan: “You can’t say shit on television!”

Cartman: “It was just on the news! People are freaking out dude!”

Stan: “Holy f#\$ing² shit!” [*South Park* 502]

Midway through the episode, this dialogue occurs:

Stan: “This sucks. Now that shit’s out it isn’t fun to say anymore.”

Cartman: “Yah they’ve taken all the fun out of shit. We’re gonna have to say other bad words like cock and f#\$k and meecrob³.”

[*South Park* 502]

When interviewed about the episode, Trey Parker and Matt Stone said, “It all started because NYPD Blue said “Shit happens” on the air and there was a big deal about how bold and artistic forward thinking [ABC] was. Used in that way it was seen as respectable but in comedy it’s seen as low brow. So we wanted to make a political statement about saying shit” [*South Park* 502]. As a result, this dialogue happens between two father characters in the bar:

Father 1: “Are you guys gonna let your kids watch?”

Stan’s Dad: “Oh sure, I mean well you know, Cop Drama’s a very artsy, dramatic show.” [*South Park* 502]

² ‘Fuck’ was humorously beeped out of the broadcast

³ An ongoing, esoteric reference to a type of food Cartman despises

What this reflects is that our culture, especially its young people, has accepted a more lenient stance on sexual and excremental expletives than ever before. Kaye points out that broadcast networks are quickly changing their programming “by attracting a younger audience that grew up hearing expletives in their everyday lives” [557]. To the bane of the older audience, *South Park’s* Cartman is right, “shit’s out and it isn’t fun anymore”, it’s normal.

In their book, *A Matrix of Meanings*, Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor argue that our society has moved into a “post-sexual” time [40]. Unlike the 1960’s, when sexual intercourse was a chief pursuit of young people, today’s youth are less likely to be as sexually active [41]. The sexual rebellion of today is a rebellion against promiscuity [41]. Examples of this change can be found in many teen films, such as *American Pie* (1999), *40 Days and 40 Nights* (2002), and *Superbad* (2007), where the protagonists realize that sex “just isn’t that important” [41].

This partially explains the more common use and acceptance of sexual expletives; when sexuality is no longer held sacred, no longer treated as taboo, it is impossible to treat it profanely. The common acceptance of excremental expletives, however, is not explained by this theory.

It may be better said that we have moved into a ‘post-shame’ culture. If what was shameful and hidden is now exposed and accepted, the related profanities cease to carry powerful connotations. Bryson writes, “In modern society, where social contract is relatively confined within broad separate classes and status groups...our obligation to physical propriety seems to vary less, although not negligibly. The number of people in

front of whom a modern middle-class adult would spit, belch, fart, etc, freely is very limited, perhaps to his close family, intimate male friends, fellow rugby players” [158].

This limited “social contract” is arguably less strict today than when Bryson wrote in 1998. In an article dated July 19, 2006, the *New Yorker* called the *Blue Collar Comedy Tour* “America’s most popular comedians” [Friend 2006]. Consisting of four comedians, the tour celebrates the stereotypical ‘blue-collar’ lifestyle, i.e. beer drinking, flag waving, cigar smoking, masculinity, heterosexuality, etc, and laughs at lowbrow humor, often excremental or sexual in nature. Writing about one comedian, Friend even states, “Engvall, a spaniel-eyed Texan...got big laughs earlier when he acted out trying to hold back a fart while receiving a massage” [Friend 2006]. Jeff Foxworthy, one of the four, has sold fifteen million albums. The *New Yorker* reports that this is “more than twice as many as Steven Martin and Richard Pryor combined” [Friend 2006]. If sales are any example, America clearly no longer holds to any “shame standard” and what was once considered lowbrow is now glorified.

Exclusionary

The *Delete Expletives?* study noted that in just two years, the words with the greatest increase in offensiveness were racial abuse words. “The abuse of minorities belonged to its own category. The data show this to be an area of increasing offense. [It] is at the very top of the scale of severity” [11]. The word ‘nigger’ had the most movement, increasing 10 percentage points among those who considered it very severe and of the twenty-eight, moved from eleventh to fifth most severe in just two years [Delete Expletives? 19].

During his stand-up comedy routine at the “Laugh Factory” on November 17, 2006, Michael Richards, a *Seinfeld* costar, responded to a heckler by repeatedly using the term ‘nigger’ [Smith 2006]. Richards was met by both an immediate negative reaction from his audience and by a negative media onslaught. Fellow comedian Paul Rodriguez, who was present at the event, said he was shocked by the use of the word. “Freedom of speech has its limitations, and I think Michael Richards found those limitations” [Smith 2006]. Richards, trying to save his career, apologized through many media but not before he was banned from the “Laugh Factory” [Smith 2006].

The “Laugh Factory”, concerned about its reputation, not only banned Richards, but also banned the word ‘nigger’ [Salkin 2006]. Any comedian caught using ‘nigger’ on the “Laugh Factory” stage is subject to a possible fine and a performance ban of four to six months [Salkin 2006].

On November 10, 2007, nearly a year after the Richards incident, the L.A. City Council voted to place a symbolic ban on the word ‘nigger’ [Zahniser 2007]. One council member, a homosexual, voted in favor because of his memories of being called a ‘faggot’, while another member, a Mexican, voted because of his memories of being called a ‘wetback’ [Zahniser 2007]. The council passed the resolution unanimously, admitting that the ban was unbinding and would do little to stop hate crime [Zahniser 2007]. Regardless, the council felt the ban sent a message about discrimination and was a symbolic way of saying “stop it” [Zahniser 2007].

While ‘nigger’ may be the most prominent racial abuse word, Russell Simons, the well known hip-hop executive, proposed banning “extreme curse words” which he listed as ‘bitch’, ‘ho’, and ‘nigger’ [Sydney Morning Herald 2007]. Simons’ proposal followed

the highly publicized redundancy of Don Imus, for using “nappy-headed ho’s” on live radio [Nichols 2007]. The Daily News of New York reported, “The Rev. Al Sharpton...said the firing was just the first step in ‘a long fight’ against misogyny and racism in the media and the rap music industry” [Nichols 2007].

Delete Expletives? also showed a trend in the use of derogatory sexual abuse words [25]. Younger homosexual men were less tolerant towards the use of sexual abuse words, while older homosexual men were more ambivalent [*Delete Expletives?* 25]. While the slang ‘faggot’ was not surveyed, the report showed that British derogatory sexual abuse words, like ‘poof’, were only surpassed in severity by racial abuse words [*Delete Expletives?* 12].

Despite the UK study categorically ranked racial abuse words as the most severe, participants still ranked sexual obscenities as the top four most severe expletives [*Delete Expletives?* 56]. The misogynistic word ‘cunt’ was number one, followed by ‘motherfucker’, ‘fuck’, and ‘wanker’ [56]. ‘Nigger’ was ranked five, replacing ‘bastard’ in the 2000 survey [*Delete Expletives?* 56].

Though these sexual terms retain severity, there is still a traceable movement away from their perceived connotations. Jesse Sheildhower, editor of *The F-Word*, a collection of slang based on the word ‘fuck’, wrote in his introduction, “It is becoming more and more acceptable to use ‘fuck’ in social contexts that would have been unthinkable even a generation ago” [Sheildhower 1999]. So while ‘fuck’ is still considered profane, it is less profane today than it has been in the past.

Moreover, the UK study does not reflect an American rating of the severity of the word ‘nigger.’ Only 50 years from the Civil Rights movement, it is arguable that race

relations in the US are more sensitive than those in the UK, and a result, ‘nigger’ may be viewed even more severely this side of the Atlantic. The aforementioned recent media coverage seems to support this premise.

The Church

The scriptures are not silent on this issue. According to Jones, one passage that gives a specific example of a cultural expletive of the time can be found in Matthew 5:22, where Jesus tells his listeners to not call one other “Raca” [Jones 2007]. This is translated in English as empty-headed. Few today would consider empty-headed a severe profanity, but Jones says, “This is the kind of exclusionary and demeaning insult that makes up the harshest offensive language...the equivalent of “Raca” will be different in every language” [Jones 2007].

Of the four scriptures shared by Grudem to demonstrate the Biblical precedent for ‘cleanliness’ [Piper], Ephesians 4:29 and 5:4 are the most relevant. Ephesians 4:29 says, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (ESV). And Ephesians 5:4 says, “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (ESV).

These scriptures identify certain language as “corrupting”, “filthiness”, “foolish”, and “crude”. Another translation uses the words “unwholesome”, “silly”, and “coarse” (NAS). But wisely, the scriptures do not specifically identify what words are to be avoided. Had it done so, the words would have been culturally and historically specific,

and today, would unlikely be profane. Rather, the passage stays culturally relevant and applicable to whatever each society deems inappropriate.

As a result, it may be argued that language is intrinsically morally neutral. Though referring to food sacrificed to idols, Romans 14:14 is a provocative scripture for morally neutral issues, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (NAS). It is likely then, for one person the word ‘crap’ might be common, accepted, and not ‘crude’ or in violation of Ephesians 5:4, yet for another, ‘crap’ is unacceptable, profane, and even a sin.

How then, is the church to deal with and respond to profanity? First, the church must recognize that language changes over time and profanity is not stagnant. A word held in disrepute to one generation is not necessarily profane to another. The *Delete Expletives?* study revealed that while only twenty-three percent of people ages fifty-five and above approved of the transmission of expletives, fifty-three percent of people ages eighteen to thirty-four approved of the transmission [37]. It is obvious that young people are more tolerant and accepting of language which was previously forbidden. Their language is no longer censored by the “shame standard” of the past and former profanities, especially excremental words, are an accepted part of the vernacular.

Second, the church must understand demographic sensitivity. Age, gender, race, geography, etc, are all variants that will affect language. For example, Jones mentions a time when he used the term ‘girl’ rather than ‘woman’. He writes, “The uproar was global and the judgment swift. People still remind me of it” [2007].

A humorous, but insightful, example of geographical sensitivity can be found at the end of the movie *Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang* (2005). The main character, Gay Perry, played by Val Kilmer, says to the audience, “Thanks for coming, please stay for the end credits, if you're wondering who the best boy is, it's somebody's nephew, um, don't forget to validate your parking, and to all you good people in the Midwest, sorry we said ‘fuck’ so much” [Halliday]. But some geographic examples are not so nuanced. Few in the US have heard the word ‘Paki’, while in the UK it is a highly offensive racial slur [Jones 2007].

In formulating its message, the church must package the gospel in a way that is sensitive to its audience. Having learned his lesson, Jones continues, “When it comes to choosing words to express oneself, I try to keep in mind my audience. If I am invited to preach at a traditional church and there is a lot of grey hair in the front rows, I figure their list of bad words is from an earlier historical period than mine and the language I choose will hopefully fit the situation and will not cause offense. Why offend when we have a message to get across?” [2007]

Reciprocally, the church must now be more accepting of profane language than it has in the past. Many authentic believers now commonly use terms the church once deemed inappropriate. These believers, however, are not using the terms to be profane, but rather are using them because they are colloquial. To foist upon them an irrelevant rubric of purity and to anathematize them based on their language reflects a misguided view of cultural trends. Like VCY Radio and Chuck Swindoll, many true believers are censored for words they themselves do not view as profane.

One might object in view of Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (NAS) At first glance, this seems rather condemning, inferring that the use of even mild profanities is a form of conformation to the world. In so far as profanity is used to be irreverent, this is very true. Yet, many are growing up in a time when these words are, from the same verse, “acceptable.” These words are not used irreverently, but colloquially. It is not conformation, it is ordinary.

Perhaps a more appropriate scripture for this cultural shift is I Corinthians 6:12, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable.” (NAS) Having expressed his own confession, it is clear that Piper was not satisfied with his own word choice. While for some it might seem silly, it was an authentic expression of his self-disappointment. It was not wrong for him to use ‘ass,’ but in his view, it was not profitable. His contrition should be emulated and respected by every Christian demographic, no matter how common or profane his language choice.

Not all changes in cultural language, however, are to be reflected or accepted by the church. Trends show that less young people today believe that ‘Jesus Christ’ is a severe profanity [*Delete Expletives?* 21]. Regarding religious oaths, the Bible is unwaveringly clear. We are told to not take the name of our Lord in vain [Exodus 20:7], and Jesus tells us to make no oaths and to let our yes be yes [Matthew 5:36-37]. Our language must also not be used to slander or cause harm [Ephesians 4:31]. It is easy to see how someone might innocently say, “I fell on my ass” but might maliciously say, “He is such an ass.” The Bible is clear, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving

each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” [Ephesians 4:32 NAS]. We need to be careful how we speak, no matter what language we choose. But we are also called to forgive when spoken to badly or when we are offended by someone’s choice of language. Jones says, “If the person I am listening to uses a word that offends me, I will be quick to believe the best and assume that they have walked a different path, and what I consider offensive may not necessarily be the same standard by which they judge their words” [Jones 2007].

Conclusion

Language changes, as does connotation and the definition of profane. If the church remains unawares, more and more young people will be unbiblically condemned for using language that is for them completely normal and acceptable. Grudem expresses his concern, “Using words commonly thought to be offensive in the culture seems to me to be sort of the verbal equivalent of not wearing deodorant – or of going around with spilled food on our shirts” [Piper]. Yet, even within the church, Grudem would be hard pressed to find young people who hold the same words irreverent as he does. This is not to say that profanity is something for which the church should aspire. But history proves that what was once profane is no longer, and what is now profane may not have always been and will not always be.

Rather than fight these changes, the church has the opportunity to lead the way in cultural language trends, showing sensitivity, awareness, and acceptance to formerly marginalized people. By using gender inclusive language, refraining from new and

developing curse words, and even allowing the use of former profane explicit expletives, the church can demonstrate its acceptance of an entirely new generation of people.

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