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Recommended Citation

Roth, Donald, "Problem with Cussing Christians and Easy Answers" (2016). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List.* Paper 495.
http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/495

Problem with Cussing Christians and Easy Answers

Abstract

"While banned words might make sense for our young children, failing to update that rule as our children mature outsources that facet of morality to worldly influences."

Posting about appropriate use of language from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

http://inallthings.org/the-problem-with-cussing-christians-and-easy-answers/

Keywords

In All Things, swearing, emotions, rules, language

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College.

The Problem with Cussing Christians and Easy Answers

Donald Roth

Growing up, if I used certain words, I had to scrub some dish soap on my tongue and wash it off. That practice was instructive: if my hands were dirty, I had to wash them; if my words were dirty, I had to wash my mouth out. Most of us were taught from a young age that there are certain words that Christians just shouldn't say, and as we grew up, these lessons were probably reinforced from Scripture with passages like Ephesians 5:4 ("Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.") or Colossians 3:8 ("But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips."). In class, I hear many of my students apply these verses to generate a list of banned words. The rule is easy —don't cuss—but easy rules can be deceptive: not because they contain nothing of the truth, but because they too easily outsource the hard work of Christian discernment at the cost of other virtues.

The Problem of Paul

A key reason to be careful about the easy rule is because the author of our proof texts also wrote Philippians 3:8. ("What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.") Our sanitized NIV translation loses something in this: "garbage" in the King James Version is rendered as "dung," and many commentators have mentioned that Paul is using "strong" or "earthy" language. This is the nice, euphemistic way of saying that Paul uses the ancient Greek equivalent of "shit." In fact, Martin Luther's German Bible explicitly translates it that way.[1] Of course, depending on your upbringing, you may or may not consider "shit" a curse word, but since it made comedian George Carlin's list of "7 words you can't say on TV," I don't buy the dodge. For me, this flies in the face of the simple interpretation of Ephesians 5:4 and Colossians 3:8. However our English translations render the various passages, we should prefer an interpretation of Paul that does not put him at odds with himself: we can either sanitize Philippians or alter our understanding of Ephesians and Colossians. Looking at the context of the passages, I think we should favor the latter option, as Paul's prohibitions seem more tied to banned uses of language than banned words.[2]

"No Cussing" Is an Inadequate Rule

Ultimately, it makes sense that Paul would be more concerned with the use of language than a list of naughty words. I remember getting in trouble once in elementary school for using the word "ass" on the playground. Devious child that I was, I explained to the teacher that I just meant "donkey," and I didn't see how that was a bad word. As a result, I received a lecture about double meanings and saying nice things to others rather than facing a more serious punishment for swearing. Leaving aside the sins of my youth, this only underscores the fact that language naturally carries a level of fluidity and ambiguity that makes a banned-word approach virtually unworkable.

While banned words might make sense for our young children, failing to update that rule as our children mature outsources that facet of morality to worldly influences. When we teach children that certain words are, of themselves, immoral, that makes that one piece of morality completely contingent on what the world thinks of it. The world already largely maintains that morality is purely a social construct without any inherent tie to some fundamental value, and this only concedes that point.

Perhaps instead of naughty words, we say that the command in these verses is about being proper and respectable; however, this argument ultimately falls prey to the same problem. Again, society's standards of propriety become arbiters of morality. Perhaps worse, when we refer to such words as "vulgar," "blue," or "low class," we teach an association of lower social class with lower value, and it would be odd indeed if Paul was calling us to

use speech that avoids making it look like we associate with the poor. Thus, reducing Paul's message to advocacy of propriety risks buying into classism and a moral enshrinement of the status quo that compromises the integrity of our witness far more than uttering a few curse words.

Finally, we could take the context I mention above and say that Paul's message is about avoiding strong emotions or failing to take things seriously. This is closer to what I think we should take from Paul, but it's still problematic as it buys into false notions that we are ruled by our minds and that reason stands in opposition to emotion. I've always found it striking that C.S. Lewis describes hell in many of his writings as a land devoid of emotion. He saw emotion as the vibrancy of true life, and he thought things like laughter were inimical to the "realism, dignity, and austerity of Hell."[3] Beyond deep joy, Christians are welcomed to feel and express deep sorrow, as our Lord Himself expressed on the cross. We may even express anger, like Paul, who, in Galatians 5:12, expresses frustration with Judaizers seeking to force Gentile Christians to be circumcised, saying he wishes they'd just go the whole way and castrate themselves. Clearly, we are not cautioned about cursing because it expresses strong emotions.

Let's Not Get Carried Away

However, I am not writing a ringing endorsement of swear words. I favor some strict rules (avoiding taking the Lord's name in vain comes to mind). There is also merit in a softer version of all of the arguments I've critiqued: we shouldn't look exactly like the world around us, and, particularly in our outrage-obsessed culture, we should be careful about overindulging our sense of righteous outrage. Even further, I think there's wisdom in teaching our young children not to say certain words; however, as childhood progresses into adulthood, I think it's equally important to move our emphasis from clear rules to the purposes behind them.

The road to hell is paved with easy answers. If we can automatically file someone away as a sinner because they say certain words, it's all too easy to become prideful because we avoid them, sliding off into legalism. At the same time, we can easily license ourselves to abandon any pretense of self-regulation, authorizing sin by rejecting legalism. If we look to Paul's exhortations and his language, we see that strong language may have its uses precisely because it is strong, but that strength may be diluted by overuse.

Christians are called to discernment and confession. My profession turns on being able to reach sometimes disengaged and disinterested students, and there are times and contexts where I have, after careful consideration, chosen to employ stronger language to make a point.[4] There are also occasions where I intentionally try to make fairly technical or philosophical content more accessible by speaking more flippantly about it. However, I have to openly confess that I don't always walk that line perfectly in class, and I struggle with reining in my tongue when I'm around my wife or old friends. I'm not a perfect example of Christian practice when it comes to using curse words, but I don't intend to abandon the effort, and while there might be a list of naughty words for my children not to repeat when they're young, I hope to be able to shift those rules toward understanding *why* and *how* we use language as they get older. Ultimately, the training wheels that simple rules provide need to come off, and we all have to embrace the much harder task of seeking to live in true faithfulness.

Footnotes

1. For this assertion, I'm relying on both internet resources and colleagues with more familiarity with the German language than I possess, both of whom say "shit" is a proper translation for the German term *kot*. ↩

2. For one, a regular rule of construction says that we should read more general words in the context of the words that surround them. In fancy legal analysis, we would call this *noscitur a sociis*, but the concept is simple: when there is some ambiguity to a term, we should limit it based on context. Applied to these verses,

this means that the sense of "obscenity" is tied to the broader argument Paul is making. That is, in Ephesians, the related context of foolish talk and coarse joking suggests an attitude of flippancy, and in Corinthians, the emphasis on hatred suggests the more literal meaning of using a curse word. In other words, Paul's words here are not about banned language so much as banned uses for it. ↵

3. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter 11. ↵

4. For another example, I have a colleague who discusses sexual ethics in an upper-level class section by asking whether there is a difference between "making love" and "f—ing." I think that discussion would lose something important in terms of its impact with students if it was about "making love" and "doinking" (feel free to substitute your own euphemism). ↵