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Oaths and Slang

"Bathroom" and sexual slang, especially as put-downs, are related problems. One cannot make an absolute prohibition of it, for Scripture doesn't prohibit it. Indeed, one finds it in Scripture. In Phil. 3:8, Paul considers his works-righteousness to be *skubala*, dung. (English contains progressively stronger and more profane terms for this substance: feces, dung, cr--, sh--; probably "cr--" is the closest to *skubala*.) As for sexual slang as reproach, consider Galatians, where the enemies of Paul are the "*tous ek peritomes*," the "circumcision guys." Concerning them, Paul expresses the angry wish that they would "go all the way and castrate themselves," as one translation has it (5:12). In Phil. 3:2, he calls them "dogs" and *katatome*, a play on *peritome*, and possibly a made-up word which might be rendered in English "deconcision." (Once a critic of the Dooyeweerdian journal *Philosophia Reformata* wrote an article called "Philosophia Deformata." The word-play is similar.) Perhaps that term, like the language in Gal. 5:12, suggested castration to Paul.

Yet we must be aware that such instances are very unusual in scripture. They occur in cases where some kind of extreme judgment must be expressed and where there is some justified anger. And they always make a godly point.

In that respect, of course, the Scriptural language is worlds apart from the street language of today, perhaps from the street language of its own time as well. We all know people who cannot utter a sentence without including a sexual or bathroom reproach, and this kind of talk has been immortalized in the current genre of ghetto-movies. The problem with that is not the utterance of a word that should be "taboo." The problem, simply, is that it shows an attitude of unmitigated contempt for others and for God's creation. It expresses an ungodly hatred for one's environment, for humans made in God's image, for God himself for putting the speaker into such circumstances (remember our connection between dishonoring God and dishonoring his creation, also implicit in the Fifth Commandment). There is here no love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control. There is no thankfulness. This is the "coarse" language of Eph. 5:4.

Even granting the grimness of the conditions in which many of these people live, and granting our responsibility to help in some way, we cannot condone the hatred that festers in their hearts. The "poor" in scripture are righteous, though oppressed. Their remedy is not to hate, but to cry out to the Lord. And he delivers them. Their language is not profane, although to be sure it is frequently imprecatory!

Between the extreme of the street language and the extreme of a total abstinence from such expressions, there are lines that are hard to draw.

As in all questions of linguistic usage, much depends on one's upbringing, the perceptions of his own culture, subculture, etc. What is seen as coarse in one society will be routinely accepted in another; what is seen in one society as a Christian "given" will be seen in another society as self-righteous. There is a place for flexibility and sensitivity, as we seek to contextualize the gospel to all cultures and subcultures. Perhaps the absolute principle is this: The Christian should always be, and be perceived as, one who, while not self-righteous and legalistic, nevertheless avoids contemptuous or irreverent attitudes and the language which in the "target subculture" expresses those attitudes.

What of "gosh, golly, gee," etc.? Historically and etymologically, these are substitutes for the divine names, invoked to avoid the possible devastating results of "taking God's name in vain." Jesus' teaching, however, is that substituting some other expression for the divine name is to no avail, Matt. 23:16-22, cf. 5:33-37.

Still, in many subcultures, the connection between these and the divine name is not recognized, and the meaning of terms, after all, is determined by use, not etymology. Again, forbearance and flexibility are called for. I used these words while growing up in an evangelical church; all my teachers and pastors used them too. We avoided, however, profane uses of the literal divine names like the plague. Were we guilty of "substituting" something else for the divine name in order to escape God's judgment? Well, that's hard to say. Of course, the etymology is irrelevant. "Shucks" and "fiddlesticks" can also function as substitutes for the divine name. (As the outline says, all creation bears God's name.) In my early behavior there was doubtless some ambiguity, some sinful motive, as is always the case. But I don't think that on the whole we had an unworthy motive in using these terms. Generally, we used them simply to indicate surprise or to emphasize what we were saying. It is proper to use language for these purposes. I think it would be disrespectful to use the name of God, or a self-conscious substitute, for such a common purpose; but our use of those terms was not very self-conscious.

Nevertheless, when I left my boyhood church and joined the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, I discovered a very different subculture, a subculture in which the etymologies of "Gosh," etc. were taken very seriously. In that subculture, *the meanings of these terms were different*. And, wishing to maintain fellowship with these brothers and sisters, I soon eliminated these terms from my vocabulary. Be imitators of me! In "things indifferent" we should be as Jews among the Jews and as Gentiles among the Gentiles (I Cor. 9).

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