

# ***Swear not at all!***

What really bugs you?

On one memorable Spokesman Club<sup>i</sup> ladies' night, some years ago, during the Table Topics session, the Topics-Master asked the question, "What really bugs you?"

I racked my brain for the duration of the topic, but I was unable to come up with a worthwhile response. Thinking about it later, after the club session had finished, it came to me!

What really bugs me – Mr. Topics-Master – is swearing!

More particularly: swearing in public, swearing in mixed company, and swearing in the media. I'm not talking about the type of swearing such as the oaths normally taken in a court of law. That is a different subject altogether. I'm talking about cursing, blasphemy, and profanity... in simple terms – bad language:

- Bad language on TV, radio and in the movies,
- Bad language in newspapers, magazines and books,
- Bad language in music,
- Bad language in our workplaces,
- Bad language in public places,
- Bad language in the world,
- Bad language in God's church!

Bad language in God's church? Surely not!

It appears that there are some differences of opinion regarding certain coarse words that some church members judge to be acceptable and others find offensive. Despite our varied backgrounds, the scriptures tell us that this should not be:

**Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. (James 3:10)**

**Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God.  
(I Corinthians 10:32)**

The purpose of this article is to show you that God's people should not be using bad language; also to show you that God says so, plainly, in His Word – the Holy Bible!

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<sup>i</sup> *Spokesman Club was a Toastmasters-type speech club for members of the Worldwide Church of God*

## ***I'm sick of the F word***

The following is part of a Readers' Digest article entitled "I'm sick of the F word" by Anita Bateman. The author prefaces her article with these words: "What was once taboo is now the trend. It's time we said, "enough.""

**Recently some friends who hadn't been to a movie for years treated themselves to a picture that had received rave reviews and several Academy Awards. I asked how they had enjoyed their night out. "It was a good movie," Judy said. An excellent story line and great acting, but... "When she hesitated, I had a good idea what she would say next. "But the language was foul! The foulest I've ever heard, and I've been around. Things sure have changed."**

**Yes, they have. Words once reserved for rest-room walls are now common stuff in films, plays, books and even on television.**

**The "F word," long taboo, is now high fashion. As columnist John Leo noted recently in *U.S. News and World Report*, stand-up comedian Eddie Murphy tosses out hundreds of four-letter words in a single performance; New York Mets baseball star Lenny Dykstra, in a book snatched up by many a young fan, uses the F word the way others use punctuation; and David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, is littered with the you-know-what word.**

**Moviemakers are in the thick of the expletive explosion. But, whatever the medium, the message seems to be that foul language is in, so get used to it.**

**I realize there are those who contend that entertainment merely depicts life as it is. "It's the real world," they say. "It's how people talk!" Indeed, my friend noticed that others in the theatre hadn't appeared offended by the on-screen obscenities. In fact, the people behind her were using much the same language. "Is it us?" she asked. "Are we the different ones?"**

**I admit that sometimes it seems to be the case. Not long ago, I was sitting on a bus behind two women who apparently believe that no noun is complete without an obscene adjective attached. And many of us have worked in offices that can best be described as a locker room after a big loss.**

**Basing an impression on looks can be risky. Words reveal much more about a person. Wise employers know this. A business manager told me of an attractive job applicant who not only "dressed for success," but had the background and training to land a job with the organization. Why wasn't he hired? His language. Said the manager, "If he felt no qualms about using expletives in our interview, he'd probably use them with our customers."**

**Sadly, this applicant may have thought that profanity would make him appear tough and aggressive – leadership material. Not so. Such language implies an inability to communicate well and to discern what is inappropriate.**

"But they're only words," we hear some people say. Only words? Words are the way we communicate our most precious thoughts – our feelings about ourselves, about each other, about life. No wonder they can inflict so much lasting pain. I will never forget the young woman whose mother once called her foul names during an argument. She later confided, "It would have hurt less if she had slapped me. I'll never get over those things she called me."

A friend told me about a commuter who grew so tired of the stream of obscenities coming from members of his car pool that he planned to quit the group. He tried to think up excuses, but they all sounded phoney. Finally, he decided that the others should know his real reason. He levelled with them. To his surprise, the two worst offenders immediately promised to clean up their act, and insisted he continue with the car pool.

I still regret that a number of years ago I failed to speak out as language pollution became the norm in a writing class I was taking. It began when one of the students asked our instructor if it was permissible to use a certain word in his story. "By all means," he said. "It's real life; it's how people talk." Soon others began lacing their prose with "real life." Of course, it wasn't real life at all, but what the students thought was expected.

**I copped out by not objecting. I was afraid of what the others would think of me, fearful that if I spoke up I would appear unsophisticated.**

What happened in that classroom probably reflects what is happening in society at large. Isn't language pollution increasing because we are too eager to follow what others tell us is fashionable? Because we are not exercising our right – and obligation – to speak out against it?

When a filmmaker I know put together a short documentary about his young son's soccer heroics, his mother was appalled to find the script riddled with profanity. "But Craig," she objected, "my grandson just doesn't talk this way. He never has."

"Oh, Mom, I know that," Craig replied. "But you've got to put that kind of thing in nowadays. People expect it. It's the *trend*."

I rest my case.

Those certainly are wise words from a lady who had the courage enough to speak out against the growing acceptance of bad language in today's world.

## **What is bad language?**

There are different types of bad language. There are cursing, swearing, blasphemy, profanity, and probably even more types. But I homed in on these four and looked them up in the dictionary:

**Cursing** is to call upon divine power to send injury or damnation upon someone. We know what Jesus' thought of such curses by His response to James and John when they wanted to call fire down from heaven on some Samaritans who did not welcome Him:

**And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did? But he turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)**

**Swearing** is to use profane or obscene language. Swearing may have had its origins in Old Testament times when people sincerely called on God's name to back up oaths, promises or vows. In the 1990's the people of modern Israel have discarded God as well as the practice of making sincere promises, vows and oaths before Him; but they have retained His holy name to throw around as a common exclamation!

**Blasphemy** is defined as the act of expressing a lack of reverence for God. Surprisingly, blasphemy is still technically a civil crime in some U.S. states and in Britain. But it goes almost without saying that, with each passing year, with the steep slide in morals, charges and convictions of the crime of blasphemy have become fewer and fewer until today they are virtually non-existent.

**Profanity** is the use of profane language – serving to debase what is holy. It seems that many types of bad language are related to God or to holy things. The modern Israelite of the early twenty-first century seems to think he's a real big-shot if he can say anything foul about God or about what is holy and sacred without being struck down on the spot. How far from God our nations have fallen!

I am sure that the vast majority of church members are not using "the F word" and I am sure that they are not using blasphemy or profanity – not taking God's name in vain. Rather, from what I can gather, the words that have been complained of are of another type – mild or watered down substitute swear-words or crude, common words for certain body parts or bodily functions. I don't wish to embarrass anyone by discussing this sensitive theme, but it needs to be covered.

For those of you who might be new to this subject, I should also warn you to beware of "substitute" swear-words such as "Gosh," "Golly," "Jeez," "Shoot," "Shucks" and others. A recent, embarrassing addition to this list is the misuse of the word "Freaking." It doesn't take much thought to find out what words these exclamations are substitutes for. But they are unnecessary! We don't need them!

I know that it is hard. It is hard when many of us have used bad language freely and frequently before conversion. It is hard for those who are surrounded by foul language in work every day. A friend of mine told me that when he started a job "in the world" after spending four years at Ambassador College, he was plagued by swearwords constantly coming to the tip of his tongue for the least little problem!

I don't wish to appear self-righteous in discussing this sensitive subject. I'm not pointing the finger at others. I'm directing the contents of this article myself too. Like many church members, I worked in an office where I was even unable to have coffee with my work-mates because the air so frequently turns blue with bad language and filthy subject matter. Some of the women were as bad as the men. In some cases – worse! It can rub off on us so easily and, like the frog in the hot water, we can gradually come to accept gutter-language as the norm. We can become callused to it and we can allow it to creep into our everyday conversation.

## **What does God say we should do about bad language?**

If you look up the Old Testament verses dealing with swearing in your concordance, you will find that, although a certain amount of respectful and sincere swearing of oaths and vows was permitted, swearing of the coarse language kind was repeatedly and soundly condemned. Of course, the third commandment warns against blasphemy and profanity in Exodus 20:7:

**Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.**

Cursing and swearing, along with other broken commandments, are frequently cited as contributing causes of the captivities of Israel and Judah. Here is one example:

**Hear the word of the LORD, ye children of Israel: for the LORD hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood. Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away. (Hosea 4:1-3)**

History is repeating itself. Our nations are headed for a worse captivity than those suffered by ancient Israel and Judah in Assyria and Babylon – and our foul language is partly to blame! Notice that swearing is included in a list of sins that includes lying, killing, stealing, adultery and violence. This is no laughing matter! What does the New Testament have to say on the subject? Jesus Christ gives us clear instruction in Matthew 5:33-37:

**Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: but I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.**

Jesus says that His brothers and sisters should not even be using such seemingly mild exclamations as "Good heavens!" They are unnecessary. The book of James has much to say about sins of the tongue, including swearing:

**Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls... If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. (James 1:21, 26 RSV)**

**For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so.**

**(James 3:2-10 RSV)**

**But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation. (James 5:12 RSV)**

A swear-word does not have to actually come out of a person's mouth verbally to be a sin. If we allow these words continually to come, unchecked to the forefront of our minds, then we are sinning! But what can we do about it? How can we stop ourselves from even thinking swear-words? It has been said that there are four stages in the development of a sin – and we need to cut off the sin of swearing at the earliest stage possible by guarding what comes into our minds:

**Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. (Philippians 4:8)**

God, through Paul, tells us to think on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy. As much as possible, we should avoid things that do not fit into these categories. Ask yourself these questions, all of which have a great effect on our thoughts and our words:

What kind of movies and TV shows do I watch?

What kind of music do I listen to?

What kind of books and magazines do I read?

What kind of company do I keep?

Do they all fit in with God's instruction in Philippians 4:8? Or are they liberally sprinkled with foul language?

Jesus Christ is leading His church to prepare for His return and, by all appearances, that time is very near. We have lots of areas of our Christian lives to be working on and this is a very important one.

Swear not at all!

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