



# Taking the Lord's name in vain

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One day last summer, I was making my way to our allotment with my wife and father-in-law. I bumped down a kerb in my powerchair and got quite a jolt. I exclaimed, 'Oh my G\*d!' My father-in-law, who has a Free Church background, immediately chastised me saying, 'That is blasphemy!' In this article I want to ponder the meaning of my words and suggest that there is something deeper going on than simply swearing. I make no apologies for the fact that this is a very biographical piece.

The foregoing may seem very trivial to the average reader, but the nature of kerbs is the bane of many a disabled person's life. Raised kerbs cause many a detour and often force you on to the road. It can be quite serious going along Hanover Street or George Street in Edinburgh on the road during the rush hour because it is simply impossible to get on to the pavement. Actually, if this were the sum total of my misdemeanours there would be little point to this article. However, I, like most disabled people, suffer many frustrations in the course of the day. Most of them are too intimate and personal to mention in this type of journal but they occur every day with monotonous regularity and grow more frequent with the severity of one's disability. I am fortunate in that I have only cerebral palsy and am not really classified as having a degenerative condition. It is only with age that tasks become slower and more difficult to perform with independence. In my case, the indignity of choking on food is one important example of change.

Bad language is a vexed issue for Christians. There are so many forms of it: from Anglo-Saxon expletives to what we would recognise as 'taking the Lord's name in vain'.

Offensive language falls into several categories: epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity. Epithets are various types

of slurs, such as *wop*, *raghead*, *bitch*, or *fag*. Usually these refer to race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, but they may also refer to appearance, disabilities, or other characteristics (as for example with the epithets *midget*, *gimp*, and *retard*). Profanity is religious cursing. This ranges from a mild *hell* or *damn* to a more emphatic *goddamn*, and it involves the coarse use of what is taken to be sacred.<sup>1</sup>

Some have no difficulties in dividing the two, whilst others believe that any bad language defiles our speech. There is also a degree of snobbery involved. Some people have very restricted codes of language and resort to expletives to fill in the gaps, whilst the literati amongst us know that we are perfectly capable of filling in the gaps, sometimes in devastating ways which are far more effective than the easier expletive.

Ruth Wajnryb has devoted a chapter in her book *Language Most Foul*<sup>2</sup> to the attitude of Christians and those of other religions to swearing and bad language. She argues that most religions have a concern for cleanliness of our bodies and similarly of our tongues. We are concerned about all aspects of cleanliness and tend to be embarrassed by the products of unseemly nature of many of our orifices. St Paul makes the point very clearly in his discussion of the body in 1 Corinthians 12, and in this context verses 22–24b in particular. In these, Paul makes special mention of our ‘lesser parts’ when talking of our private areas. If we are concerned with the issue from certain orifices, it must be the case that we are concerned with the output of the mouth. To swear is to defile our bodies through the mouth. Such is the import of Jesus’ concern in his discussion of clean and unclean in relation to the body.

He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’” (Mark 7:20–23)

There is therefore an understandable blanket dislike of bad language and the reluctance, or inability, to recognise that there may be different dynamics within our speech which may involve words which we regard as profane. Christians have to set themselves apart from the rest of the population by choosing to ‘shun evil companions, bad language disdain’.

Yet for some, there is still a distinction between words which take the Lord’s name in vain and Anglo-Saxon expletives which have little to do with religion. Yet these words too are dragged into the condemnation of being unclean. By their very nature, they too defile our mouths by their very subject matter. Whilst it may be wrong to make excuses for people who are addicted to bad language, a theory was put forward in the 1970s which in some way excuses people’s use of such language patterns. Types of language within society often have codes attached to it. These codes are named by Basil Bernstein as ‘restricted’ or ‘elaborated’.<sup>3</sup> Those of us with the benefit of a good education tend to speak in elaborated codes using words fluently to describe our feelings and to produce memos of our work etc. However, we also use restricted codes when we resort to jargon, in our case theological jargon, to truncate our descriptions of a theological problem and shorten our commonly held discourse.

Swearing is not dissimilar to this. Expletives fill in gaps which people either do not want to expand or cannot. Bad language becomes expressive to those who are dependent upon these restricted codes of language. In our educational system, many are being turned out of school without a good mastery of literacy and they become dependent on the language which pervades much of the media. This is not an excuse for indulging in bad language but it does mitigate it and challenges our ability to pass on good education to many people.



### **An alternative view**

It would seem that I was ‘banged to rights’ by my father-in-law. Swearing is offensive to Christians in that a) it offends God; b) it defiles the mouth; and c) it is a sign of linguistic laziness or inability to produce better. However, I want to meditate on the words of Jesus from the cross which can be seen as a prayer or a moment of weakness

when his anger with God expressed itself in what we now consider to be inappropriate language in others. The verse to which I refer is:

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46)

Richard Patterson has suggested that we should treat Psalm 22 as a messianic psalm which looks forward to the events surrounding the Passion. This may or may not be the case, but there is evidence that much of the reaction of Jesus and the onlookers to the events on the cross may be shaped around this psalm.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the verse quoted, one can be persuaded that the fifth set of words from the Cross, ‘I thirst’, may also stem from the narrative of the psalm (v. 15). Later, Jesus’ clothes and possessions are divided by lots amongst the centurions (v. 18). Unfortunately, we are not made aware in the gospels whether Jesus moves on in his thought to the optimistic verses of the psalm which ends in triumphant salvation.

There is a darker side to the forsakenness of Jesus on the cross. According to Deuteronomy 21:22–23, someone who was executed for a capital offence was hung on a tree after death. It is suggested that such an act showed the desertion of God from that person, that he was ‘under God’s curse’. The theme of exposure is taken up by several minor prophets and suggests that Jesus had every reason to fear that he would be left exposed in death upon the cross. Deuteronomy explicitly says that the body must be taken down and buried before nightfall but Jesus would have been aware that this was not the Roman custom. He was rescued by the goodness of Nicodemus. Such may have been the heavy weight which Jesus felt upon the cross, and it is something that we all may carry from time to time. I do not like the idea that we all have a cross to bear and often domesticate the meaning of this, but can understand our feeling of oppression in certain circumstances of life.

Nancy Eiesland captured the imagination of disabled people when she wrote about the ‘disabled God’.<sup>5</sup> She suggested that Jesus experienced the same problems as disabled people as he hung broken and paralysed on the cross. In the tradition of Jean Vanier and others<sup>6</sup> she built on the brokenness of the body of Christ as Jesus experienced

the pain and the anxiety of his torture. I think there are issues about the Trinity which get blurred and confused by Eiesland's doctrine, and would prefer to suggest that we all enter into existential experiences which make us doubt the presence of God in our situation. Jesus experienced this; so should we.

It has been suggested that, perhaps, we lack the courage to express our anger at God when we are frustrated by our worst existential experiences. I want to suggest, however, that we must learn how to understand God when we are *in extremis* and can only express our negativities towards him in the way the psalmist did. The psalmist worked through his desertion by God. The redemption which the psalmist found was similar to the outworking of God's plan for salvation which extended over three agonising days, through the pain of death and the experience of hell to the glorious resurrection.



### **A personal conundrum**

Throughout my life, I have been told that I do not indulge in self-pity. Someone who reviewed my autobiographical essay, *Visibly Invisible*,<sup>7</sup> commended it for its lack of self-pity. The problem is that some people might argue that to upbraid God as Jesus may have done on the cross is the essence of self-pity. I would argue that it is an active dialogue with God about the intolerable experiences which come in your life, not least when you are disabled.

I believe that it is only by having a dialogue with God about your darkest moments and admitting to anger and disappointment in him that you can begin to come through and live a life which reflects a reasonable faith in him. A faith which has moments of doubt and anger is alive and believes in a God who is big enough to understand such moments and not only take them to himself but help us through them.

I have enjoyed this creative dialogue for many years and will probably do so until my end. My use of language which may seem displeasing to God may well be the only way I can express my dialogue in terms which reflect both the desperation of the cross and of the psalmist in Psalm 22. Despite such a pessimistic view on the cross, Jesus died with hope on his lips. 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46) signifies not only resignation but confident

acceptance in the love of God to bring about redemption. If we can offer such hope to all who suffer misfortune and become angry, we are fulfilling a major role in ministry.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Edwin L. Battistella, *Bad Language: Are Some Words Better Than Others?* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.
- <sup>2</sup> Ruth Wajnryb, *Language Most Foul* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes, and Control* (4 vols.; New York; London: Routledge, 2003–09). Although Bernstein wrote in the 1970s his theories were sufficiently popular to be republished in the 1990s and again in the 2000s.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard D. Patterson, “Psalm 22: From Trial to Triumph”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 47 (2004): 213–33.
- <sup>5</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988).
- <sup>7</sup> W. Graham Monteith, *Visibly Invisible: A Pilgrimage as a Disabled Minister* (Guildford: Grosvenor House Publishing, 2010).