

Does the Bible Prohibit Profanity?

Most Christians take for granted that profanity is sinful, but does the Bible actually address it? Back in 2013, I noted with concern that “it is increasingly common to hear about worship leaders getting drunk after church services and dropping f-bombs while they boast about their ‘liberty’ in the Lord.”

Now, my good friend, John Cooper, the frontman for the Christian rock band Skillet, has confronted the use of profanity in “Christian” music.

Cooper’s podcast was titled, “The Rot in Christian Music,” which, for him, was reflective of a larger spirit of compromise in the church that starts with leaders and works its way down through the body. And he referenced a recent article by Kevin McNeese titled, “What the Bleep Is Happening in Christian Music,” where McNeese “revisits the continuing trend of Christian artists including adult language and themes in their music.”

But are we all overreacting? Perhaps this is simply a matter of us trying to impose our spiritual preferences on others? Worse still, perhaps we are acting as legalistic judges?

Many believers would immediately point to Ephesians 4:29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Surely, we would reason, profanity is unwholesome. Case closed. Or is it?

According to one Christian podcaster (and former pastor), this is a misinterpretation of the word “unwholesome,” which, he claims simply referred things like gossip, which would grieve

the Spirit. As for profanity, while this leader was convicted by the Lord to stop using it publicly, since it offends many of his Christian followers (and thereby violates the second half of Ephesians 4:29), he felt no conviction from the Lord to stop using “strong language” privately if he felt strongly about something.

Plus, he argued, the very words we refer to today as “profanity” didn’t exist in Paul’s day.

Was he right?

As to his second point, it is patently absurd.

The English language didn’t exist in Paul’s day, so of course, Paul was not referring to words that are considered profane in English. That is beyond obvious. That would be like saying, “Paul was not against internet porn, since the internet didn’t even exist yet.” Seriously!

As with all Scripture, Paul was laying out a principle, which is then worked out and interpreted in every age and cultural context.

In our day and in every culture, everyone knows what profanity is.

Here in America, certain words cannot be used on regular TV networks or in G-rated movies. Those same words will be “bleeped” out by censors.

This is not in dispute. The question is whether Ephesians 4:29 explicitly addresses the issue.

The Greek word translated “unwholesome” in the NIV is *sarpos*, which is normally used in the New Testament in the sense of “pertaining to being of poor or bad quality and hence of little or no value (particularly in reference to plants, either in the sense of seriously diseased or of seedling stock, that is, not budded or grafted) . . .” (Louw-Nida

Lexicon).

In Ephesians 4:29, where it is speaking of words rather than of the fruit of a tree, the Louw-Nida Lexicon explains that this pertains “to that which is harmful in view of its being unwholesome and corrupting. . . . In Eph 4:29 *sarpos* is in contrast with that which is *agathos* ‘good’ for building up what is necessary. In such a context *agathos* may be interpreted as that which is helpful, and by contrast *sarpos* may be understood to mean ‘harmful.’”

But what, exactly, does this mean?

New Testament scholar Andrew T. Lincoln, author of one of the leading commentaries on Ephesians, noted that the word “is employed elsewhere in the NT in its literal sense of ‘rotten’ or ‘decaying’—of a tree and in contrast to *agathos* [good] in Matt 7:17, 18.”

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As for here in Ephesians, “What is prohibited under the category of evil talk (cf. Col. 3:8; Eph. 5:4) *includes obscenity*, abusive language and spreading malicious gossip. The focus is on the destructive power of words and the harm they can produce in communal life” (my emphasis).

Ironically, the Christian podcaster I just mentioned rebuked those who sent him Ephesians 4:29 regarding his use of profanity, urging them to do their studies properly before sending him a verse. It was actually he who failed to exegete the verse properly and understand the semantic domain of *sarpos*.

So, in the opinion of Prof. Lincoln, a top New Testament scholar, “unwholesome” words *would* include “obscenity” (such as using the f- word, for example). He also referenced

Colossians 3:8, which reads, “But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and *filthy language* from your lips” (my emphasis).

Would anyone argue that profanity is not included under the category of “filthy language”? Greek scholar Robert Mounce defines the word *aischrologia*, which is translated as “filthy,” to mean “vile or obscene language, foul talk.” Without a doubt, *aischrologia* includes profanity.

Not only so, but just a few verses after Ephesians 4:29, Paul wrote this (also cited by Lincoln): “Nor should there be [among you] *obscenity*, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (Eph. 5:4, my emphasis).

The Greek word translated “obscenity” is *aischrote`s*, defined by the authoritative BDAG New Testament Greek Dictionary as “behavior that flouts social and moral standards, *shamefulness, obscenity*” (their emphasis).

Just think of a politician dropping an f-bomb, getting a raucous response from the crowd, precisely *because* it flouts social and moral standards. That is the very thing Paul is forbidding. This should not be found among you as followers of Jesus!

☒ So, in just three verses, Paul urges believers to get rid of any speech that is unwholesome, that is filthy, or that is obscene. Case closed indeed! He also writes, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col. 4:6). This cannot possibly apply to profane speech.

Whether a Christian feels “convicted” about this or not is immaterial. (A cheating husband might say, “I don’t feel convicted by the Spirit about my affair,” but that would be meaningless.)

The Word of God, reflecting the heart and mind of God, clearly prohibits profanity. Let us, then, be raised up to His pure standards, starting with the purification of our hearts and minds, rather than trying to bring Him down to ours.

There are far worse sins than the use of profanity, and a Christian who slips up should not feel condemned. But under no circumstances should we try to justify our fleshly behavior by twisting the Word of God.

Why Have So Many Christians Left the Faith? **Dr. Michael Brown** explains why. {eo}

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