

LANGUAGE OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE: AN EVALUATION OF PROFANITY IN THE
CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Christians might faithfully navigate the presence of profanity in today's world. It begins by exploring the central question of whether certain words are inherently sinful or whether their moral weight depends on intention, context, and effect. Using a combination of linguistic, historical, theological, and practical evaluations, the research investigates how profanity functions in human speech and how Scripture and the Christian tradition have handled coarse or taboo language. The study uses different approaches to evaluate both the nature of profane speech and the responsibilities of Christian speakers and hearers. The findings suggest that while language itself is not inherently right or wrong, Christian speech is called to serve God and neighbor. This requires discernment in how believers use words and respond to the words of others. The study concludes by offering principles meant to guide Christians toward speech that reflects wisdom, biblical principles, and identity in Christ within a profane world.

INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Profanity

In an era where words fly across screens, stages, and streets with little thought, profanity has become an inescapable trend in modern communication. From blockbuster films to viral social media posts, from workplace banter to the lyrics of chart-topping songs, coarse language permeates daily life. For Christians navigating this cultural landscape, a question emerges: Is it sinful to use profanity? This strikes at the heart of how believers live out their faith in a world that often blurs the lines between the sacred and the profane. The very word profanity, from the Latin *pro fanum*, meaning “outside the temple,” denotes words or acts that desecrate the holy.¹ Yet it is precisely in this “outside” space that God calls Christian to live. As society evolves, so too does language, raising further questions about whether consuming media laced with obscenities constitutes sin, or if there are contexts where such words might serve a non-sinful purpose. The author of this thesis seeks to address these questions by examining profanity through multiple lenses.

The ubiquity and excess of profanity in modern culture heed the urgency of these questions. Modern Christians cannot easily shield themselves from it. Words that society deems dirty saturate books, films, music, and even casual conversations. Consider the average

1. Benjamin K. Bergen, *What the F: What Swearing Reveals about Our Language, Our Brains, and Ourselves*, (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 17.

streaming service or radio playlist: explicit content warnings are commonplace. This reality extends beyond personal consumption to interpersonal communication, such as parenting children exposed to profane language at school or coworkers chatting at the office around the coffee pot. The lack of scriptural prohibitions complicates matters further.

There is no biblical list of “dirty” words. That list we leave to George Carlin’s “Seven Words You Can’t Say on TV.” However, Scripture grants freedom in language for serving God and our neighbor. Yet, warnings against “unwholesome talk” (Eph 4:29, NIV), “obscene talk” (Col 3:8), “coarse joking” (Eph 5:4), and “empty words” (Matt 12:36) suggest boundaries.

Linguistically, profanity has not been a cut-and-dry issue that Christians have had to deal with. Words become profane through cultural shifts, not inherent moral corruption. Terms once neutral can turn taboo based on societal norms, power dynamics, and historical context. This fluidity means a word profane in one era or culture may lose its edge in another. Desensitization can even render it acceptable.

In Christian history, revered figures used earthy language without apparent condemnation. The Reformers were no strangers to vivid, sometimes vulgar rhetoric to defend doctrine. The Apostle Paul used a term akin to “dung” in Philippians 3:8 to stress the worthlessness of human works compared to Christ. Such examples show strong language can serve truth without sin, urging evaluation based on intent and audience rather than absolute bans.

Theologically, the key passages mentioned above frame speech around edification. Ephesians 4–5 calls for words that build up; Colossians 3:8 ties obscene talk to the old self; James 3 warns of the tongue’s power; Matthew 12:36–37 demands accountability for careless words. The focus is the heart, not specific vocabulary.

Practically, this thesis also explores how Christians might navigate profane language in real-world contexts such as workplaces, online discourse, intercultural settings, and everyday relationships. The ethical question is rarely whether a particular word appears on a forbidden list, but rather how language choices affect one's witness, relationships, and conformity to Christian living. Profanity can, in some environments, communicate urgency, authenticity, or emotional intensity with greater precision than sanitized alternatives; in others, the same words may cause unnecessary offense, undermine credibility, or violate community expectations. The practical aim, therefore, is to evaluate when strong speech might legitimately serve communicative or pastoral purposes, and when it reflects a failure of self-control, charity, or wisdom. By examining case studies and contemporary linguistic norms, the thesis seeks to provide Christians with a nuanced framework for navigating speech in a way that honors both truth and love.

An additional practical point arises when we consider how parents are to go about raising children in a profane world. Christian parents must teach discernment, helping their children understand not only which words may be unwise to use, but why certain words carry social and moral weight. This involves modeling thoughtful language, explaining cultural contexts, and guiding children toward a biblical vision of speech that reflects both wisdom and compassion. In a world where profanity saturates media, peer interactions, and online spaces, parents face the responsibility of shaping their children's hearts rather than simply enforcing external rules that say, "You can't use those words because they're bad and that's that!" Parents, therefore, have a great privilege to form in their children an understanding of language that reflects love of God and neighbor, demonstrates integrity, and contributes to the formation of Christlike character.

This thesis evaluates profanity through these four lenses: linguistic, historical, theological, and practical. Linguistically, it examines how words acquire and lose taboo status

through cultural evolution. Historically, it traces Christian engagement with coarse speech, from biblical precedents to the Reformers' bold rhetoric, as well as how the Christian Church has dealt with profanity throughout the centuries. Theologically, it centers on scriptural mandates for edifying speech, emphasizing the heart's intent over certain vocabularies. Practically, it equips believers to wield language wisely in profane settings.

The author of this thesis feels the need to address one final note on the nature of this topic. Because this thesis deals directly with the topic of profanity, it is at times necessary to refer to specific profane words to analyze their meaning, social function, and theological significance. However, the author will present these words in censored form. This approach preserves the ability to speak clearly about the words themselves while also mitigating unnecessary offense that might arise in the reader's heart. Moreover, this decision reflects the trajectory of the thesis. As stated below, the author will argue that, although there is nothing inherently sinful about the words themselves, a Christian should avoid their use when such words are likely to cause harm or discomfort to others. The author of this thesis does not wish to cause any harm or discomfort to the reader due to the sight of uncensored profanity. Therefore, the use of censored forms represents a deliberate and consistent application of the thesis's guiding principles.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with profanity across linguistics, history, and Christian theology reveals that the moral status of profane language cannot be determined by the words themselves. Instead, profanity emerges as a socially constructed, emotionally potent linguistic category whose ethical significance depends on context, intention, and use. The literature demonstrates how taboo

language forms, why it persists, and how its psychological and social functions intersect with Christian concerns. Examining this body of research clarifies why Christians today must approach profanity with understanding in order to best navigate in a profane world.

The linguistic and cultural histories of profanity establish the groundwork for understanding why certain words become morally profane. Geoffrey Hughes's *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language* provides a comprehensive account of profanity's cultural evolution, arguing that taboo language reflects the shifting boundaries of what society considers bad words. In medieval contexts, blasphemous invocations of the divine dominated the realm of profanity; in later periods, bodily and sexual vocabulary became the most shocking; and today, identity-based slurs occupy the highest taboo position. Hughes shows that profanity functions socially. Oaths invoke power, insults enforce hierarchies, and taboo words govern group identity and behavior. His work underscores that words are not inherently sinful. Their force arises from cultural boundaries that shift over time.

Benjamin Bergen's cognitive and neurological study, *What the F*, complicates moral judgments even further by demonstrating that profanity occupies a distinct place in the human brain. Bergen argues that swear words interact deeply with our psyche. This is why individuals with certain brain injuries retain the ability to curse even when other language capacities are impaired. He also shows that profanity produces measurable physiological and psychological effects, such as increased pain tolerance during stress tests. This indicates that swearing serves cathartic and coping functions.

John McWhorter's work, *Nine Nasty Words*, again speaks to the linguistic flexibility of profanity. McWhorter highlights how swear words vary in grammar, becoming intensifiers, pronoun-like words, or emotional exclamations beyond their literal meanings. His analysis

shows that profanity tends to consist of short syllables ending in stop consonants. They lend themselves to emotional emphasis. Like Hughes, McWhorter traces the shifting centers of taboo, arguing that modern societies treat slurs as the most morally charged domain because they directly harm real people in identifiable groups. This distinction proves essential for Christian moral reasoning: whereas bodily-function profanity may express frustration or solidarity, identity-based slurs violate the biblical call to protect a neighbor's dignity.

Richard Beck's article *Profanity: The Gnostic Affront* speaks to the psychological and theological applications. Beck argues that modern discomfort from vulgar language, especially among Christians, often stems from a Gnostic shame toward the body.² Because profane words tend to reference bodily functions, sexuality, or mortality, they trigger discomfort. Beck concludes that profanity is powerful precisely because it touches on these topics that remind us of mortality. His analysis does not defend profanity's use, but it warns Christians not to confuse cultural taboos with divine commands. This provides a crucial foundation for evaluating whether profanity is inherently sinful or merely socially taboo.

Christian engagement with media is another source of practical questions. Peter Fraser's *Notes Toward a Christian Approach to Film* argues that Christians ought to evaluate works of art not by the presence or absence of profane words, but rather by the artistic and moral intentions of the piece. Fraser argues that profanity can serve legitimate narrative purposes, such as depicting realism or revealing character. He urges Christians to embrace mature discernment rather than immediate censorship. He argues for grounding evaluation in the overall vision of a work rather than in the profane expressions themselves.

2. Gnosticism refers to a heretical movement in Christianity that viewed the physical world and especially the human body as inferior or corrupt compared to the spiritual realm. Today these ideas still manifest themselves in subtle ways that the human body is inherently bad.

Schmudlach's thesis on secular music further demonstrates that exposure to profanity is inevitable in today's life and therefore requires discernment rather than withdrawal. Schmudlach emphasizes teaching youth about adiaphora, temptation, and sanctification so they can evaluate media content with wisdom rather than fear. His work highlights the pastoral dimension of the discussion of profanity. Young Christians will undoubtedly have to make decisions not only about what profanity is but also how to interpret its presence in art, entertainment, and everyday speech.

Systematic theology contributes crucial criteria for evaluating speech, even though theologians like Lange, Winger, Koren, Gibbs, and Kolb do not treat profanity as a standalone topic. Their writings speak to a biblical understanding of speech. Winger's commentary on Ephesians, for example, clarifies that Paul's condemnation of "unwholesome talk" refers not to culturally taboo words but to speech that is rotten, harmful, or harmful to others. In Paul's framework, words are judged by whether they build up the body of Christ.

Similarly, Lange's writing focuses on sanctification, emphasizing the believer's renewal of the will and intellect. Logically, this entails renewed patterns of speech ordered toward love and education. For Lange, Christian freedom does not allow for the use of any word in any way but rather enables the believer to discern whether a believer's speech aligns with the biblical principles of language. Koren and Kolb's work emphasizes that sin in speech arises from misuse of God's gifts, through deceit, irreverence, or harm to a neighbor's reputation, and not from the sound of a particular word. Gibbs likewise roots language as sin through Jesus's teaching that words reveal the heart. Sin manifests not in vocabulary choices alone but in the underlying intention of the speaker.

Understanding these theological perspectives together with what linguists and historians say about profanity helps make clearer what's really going on when people use these kinds of words. It shows that profanity isn't just a fixed list of "bad words," but language that gains its force from the moment, the speaker's intent, and the community's shared sense of what certain words mean. Linguistic studies show how these words pick up emotional weight and mark social boundaries, while historical work reminds us that what counts as offensive has changed a lot over time. Theological reflection then helps sort out the difference between speech that simply breaks social norms and speech that actually harms others or misuses God's name. Taken together, these perspectives help paint a fuller picture of profanity as something shaped by relationships, context, and purpose, not just vocabulary.

THE LINGUISTICS OF PROFANITY

Profanity is often framed primarily as a moral or spiritual concern, yet long before it becomes an ethical question, it is already a linguistic one. Words themselves are not inherently holy or unholy. Again, you won't find a list of prohibited words in Scripture. Their ethical force arises from the patterns of sound, cultural phenomena, and historical developments. A Christian evaluation of profanity must therefore begin with a clear account of what profanity is as language. This clarity can help Christians responsibly navigate through a profane world.

Profanity is structured, meaningful, and socially regulated. They are not linguistic accidents that form out of thin air. They emerge from shared cultural taboos and develop in predictable ways. They follow consistent phonetic and semantic patterns, serve certain functions in our communication, and carry emotional force that speakers intrinsically recognize.

Profanity as a Structured Linguistic System

The first essential insight is that profanity is a real subsystem within language. This insight is essential because profanity isn't simply a linguistic fad or passing phase. Bergen even sees swear words grouped into four categories: religion, sex, bodily functions, and slurs.³ Think of an English swear word, and you'll most likely be able to fit it into one or several of these categories. A vain use of the Lord's name, the familiar "H-E-double-hokey-stick," and "godd*mn" would fit into the religious category. The *f-word* and its many variants fit into the sex category. Words that

3. Bergen, *What the F*, 17.

reference the things that come out of the body or the parts of the body from which they come out fit into the bodily functions category. And lastly, words that reference certain races, sexes or sexual orientations, and mental illnesses like the N-word, “f*gg*t”, and “r*t*rd” fit into the slurs category. These categories appear across many cultures because they correspond to taboo aspects of certain human experiences. For instance, “Anthropology teaches us that there are no human societies in which feces is not considered repulsive.”⁴ Humans recognize certain moral boundaries with these aspects, and profanity obtains its force by toeing the line of these boundaries or crossing them completely.

These categories are fluid, and although they are generally common for most people in the world, the level of profanity and offensiveness varies between cultures. For instance, an American child sitting at the dinner table who says, “That was a *bloody* good meal,” may simply receive a raised eyebrow from their parents, confused why their child is imitating an Englishman, while a child who says the same thing in the United Kingdom may receive a harsher punishment. This happens even with non-profane words. In the past, linguists have observed that German speakers hear the French word for horse, “cheval,” and consider it rather silly compared to their word for a horse, “Pferd.”⁵

Profanity changes with the times as well. The offensiveness of some words dwindles over time, and it increases over time for other words, thus new profane words rise and fall over the years. We can see this in words such as “zounds” or “gadzooks.”⁶ While most English speakers wouldn’t bat an eye after hearing them today, a few hundred years ago, they wouldn’t have been

4. John H. McWhorter, *Nine Nasty W*rd*s: English in the Gutter : Then, Now, and Forever*, First trade paperback edition. (New York: Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2023), 82.

5. Bergen, *What the F*, 34.

6. Bergen, *What the F*, 17.

able to help but hear the offensive connotation of these words. In reality, their origin is quite blasphemous and would fit into the religious category of profanity mentioned above. “Zounds” is short for “God’s wounds,” specifically on the cross, and “gadzooks” is short for either “God’s eyes” or “God’s hooks,” meaning the nails of the crucifixion. Another word that modern English speakers may recognize is “blimey.” Again, most Americans today likely wouldn’t bat an eye if they heard this in public. This word just isn’t shocking anymore, “since the original meaning of the phrase (‘God blind me’) is now quite opaque.”⁷ However, any religious context of these words or even the word itself has been lost in the present age, and therefore, the offensive and profane connotation is no more.

Another characteristic of these words goes beyond the taboo nature, but also the mere sound and structure of these words. Studies show that many of the strongest profanities in English are short, blunt, monosyllabic words ending with the harsher consonant sounds like “-k,” “-t,” or “-r”.⁸ Of course, this is speaking in general; however, there’s a reason why society refers to them as “4-letter words,” and there’s a reason why they sound harsh and explosive.

Grammar adds another striking dimension. Profanity is unusually flexible. McWhorter shows how words like “a*s” and others can operate as nouns, intensifiers, adverbs, or even pronoun-like markers (“get you’re a*s over here”).⁹ This adaptability makes profanity effective for emotional expression and emphasis. Linguistically, these words thrive because they are grammatically easy to slip into any sentence.

⁷ Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*, 1. publ. in paperb. in the USA., The Language Library (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 182.

8. Bergen, *What the F*, 32, 42.

9. McWhorter, *Nine Nasty W*rds*, 116-7.

Recognizing profanity as a structured linguistic system helps Christians avoid flattening all bad words into a single moral category. Linguistically, not all profane uses communicate the same way. Some invoke taboo meaning, others merely intensify. This is not to say that Christians can draw a line in the profanity pantheon and conclude that you can use the swear words from the bodily function category but not from the religious category, or that you can use them as nouns but not as adjectives. However, understanding the linguistics of profanity can help a Christian discern the true implications of profane speech and respond with wisdom rather than harsh reflex or confusion.

Instead of collapsing all bad words into a single moral pile, Christians can ask what a particular word is actually doing. Is it vainly invoking something that is holy, demeaning a neighbor, expressing contempt, or merely functioning as an intensifier born of habit? This kind of careful attention aligns with the words of James 3 to guard the tongue and to let your conversations be full of grace from Colossians 4. By understanding how language works, a Christian can evaluate not just the surface form of a word, but its meaning, intent, and effect. These discernments can help aid a Christian's response to these words.

How Words Become "Bad"

Much like the words themselves, the nature of the badness of these words changes over time as well. The content of English profanity has shifted over time because cultural taboos have shifted. If a society had a taboo about flowers, but over time it developed one more focused on trees, then its profane language would also shift from flowers to trees. In medieval Christian culture, the

greatest offenses were irreverent and blasphemous uses of divine names or attributes.¹⁰ As society secularized, the taboo center moved from the religious category of profanity to the sexuality and bodily functions category.¹¹ In modern secular society, identity-based slurs now occupy the highest taboo position.¹²

Additionally, words are rarely born inherently bad from the start. They tend to go through a series of steps before becoming profane. Bergen sees seven steps in this process.¹³ 1) *A word extends its meaning*. For example, the *f-word*, which has connections to several Indo-European words meaning “to strike,” “stab,” or “stuff.” It has roots in relatively simple, inoffensive actions, which have since then taken on a whole new meaning that we now see as profanity.

2) *Dissemination*. Once a word has extended to a new profane meaning, it must catch on. Mass media and the internet have certainly played a role in modern times in this step. 3) *All the action is in the reaction*. A word that goes through steps one and two does not automatically make the word profane. It’s society’s negative reaction that makes the word profane. If you were a word trying to become profane, you would know that you would have succeeded once people started taking offense at you. This is subject to an individual society, which is evidence that “becoming profane is a social change, not a semantic one.”¹⁴ 4) *The balance shifts*. Multiple meanings can balance on one word. If this balance shifts to the newly profane meaning of a word, so that the other meanings are more or less lost, the bad word has truly cemented itself in

10. Hughes, *Swearing*, 55.

11. Hughes, *Swearing*, 206-34.

12. Hughes, *Swearing*, 256.

13. Bergen, *What the F*, 145-64.

14. Bergen, *What the F*, 154.

society. This is the case for words like “c*ck” or “d*ck.” These are words with genuine and inoffensive meanings. However, the balance has shifted in today’s society, so that when people hear these words, they tend not to think of an adult male chicken or a man named “Richard.”

5) *The replacements*. Once the old meaning of a profane word has been ushered out of use, there needs to be replacements. We need a new way to refer to an adult male chicken, or a new nickname for all the “Richards” in the world. Thus, we adopt the replacement words “rooster,” and we see an increase in baby boys named “Rick” instead of “D*ck.”¹⁵ 6) *Minced oaths*. Another way to get around using the profane words would be saying something that sounds similar to the taboo word. These are called minced oaths, and you likely have heard these many times. “Frick,” “dang,” and “shoot” are all examples. Much creativity has been used to produce these minced oaths, not excluding references to Jesus Christ, “sheesh,” “gee whiz,” and even “crickey.”¹⁶

Finally, 7) *Change is the only constant*. The bad word will continue to adapt, find new meanings, and find new usages, until ultimately it fades from our society. Another bad word that has been lost to time is “swive.” We already have “zounds” and “gadzooks” in this collection. This word, literally meaning “to screw,” was used in the 15th century, similar to how today’s society uses the *f-word*. But you likely didn’t jump out of your seat when reading it since it has come to the end of this seven-step process.

Words do not carry intrinsic badness; their profane status emerges through cultural processes. This seven-step process shows that society, not the word itself, creates profanity by reacting with offense and reshaping meaning.

15. Bergen, *What the F*, 158.

16. Bergen, *What the F*, 160.

Profanity as Emotional and Cognitive and Social Expression

In addition to linguistic connotations, profanity is tied to the brain in an emotional and social manner. This helps explain why profanity often bursts out involuntarily in moments of pain, fear, or frustration. The internal censor that normally suppresses taboo language is often disregarded by sudden emotional stimulation. According to Bergen, profanity is not always a calculated choice; sometimes it is an emotional reflex.¹⁷

Studies have been done to calculate the emotional and cognitive effects that swearing has on people:

People performed something called the “cold pressor,” a task in which they’re instructed to stick a hand into very cold water... What happens when people swear during the cold-pressor test? In one experiment, people were told to say a swearword (like *sh*t*) or a control word (a word that could be used to describe a table, like *wood*) during the task. And sure enough, the people told to swear tolerated the painfully cold water significantly longer than those told to say the control word.¹⁸

Bergen sees this as a cathartic benefit of swearing, saying that maybe a well-placed *f-word* is a better outlet for your anger than a physical or violent retaliation. He uses the example of road rage, arguing that swearing when cut off on the freeway may be a better alternative than rearending the offending car.¹⁹

Finally, profanity also has social power. Words drawn from taboo domains consistently perform recognizable functions in communication. Profanity can express intense emotion or

17. Bergen, *What the F*, 223-4.

18. Bergen, *What the F*, 223-4, censorship added.

19. Bergen, *What the F*, 224, censorship added.

vividness, build rapport within a group, add humor, exaggeration, or inflict harm.^{20 21} Profanity, then, is not merely expressive but relational. At the same time, profanity can be violently harmful. Identity-based slurs weaponize language by degrading entire categories of people. As said earlier, society now sees these words as the most profane. For Christians, “we love because [Christ] first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). Slurs based on people’s ethnicity, sex, or mental cognitive ability are not loving in any way. The gravest linguistic offenses in modern society align with biblical principles of love.

Linguistic Insight for Christian Discernment

A Christian understanding of speech cannot ignore the linguistic realities that shape profanity. Linguistic analysis reveals that profanity forms a real subsystem within language, reflects shifting cultural taboos, arises from deep emotional pathways in the brain, and serves social functions. In other words, Christians live in a profane world and that isn’t going to stop any time soon.

These insights help believers avoid mistaking something that is merely socially frowned upon (a cultural taboo) for something that God actually calls sinful. Now, does proper linguistic understanding of profanity allow Christians to draw a line between which bad words we can and can’t say? No. As the author of this thesis will discuss below, even though God does not condemn the bad words of our 21st-century linguistic context and even though, in a vacuum, they are not inherently sinful, many factors come into play, making it unwise for Christians to use

20. McWhorter, *Nine Nasty W*rds*.

21. Hughes, *Swearing*.

such words. However, understanding how profanity works as language clarifies what is actually happening when a Christian hears someone utter a taboo word, whether they are expressing pain, seeking solidarity, intensifying a narrative, or inflicting harm.

Language is a gift entrusted to God's people to serve him and to serve our neighbor. Understanding its linguistic structure prepares us how to use language, how not to use it, and how to react when others use it around us.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIANITY AND PROFANITY

Profanity does not enter Christian ethical reflection in a vacuum. Long before twenty-first-century debates about bad words, Scripture itself employed startlingly blunt expressions, and figures in church history, including Martin Luther, used coarse and scatological language. If profanity describes “language outside the temple,” then both Scripture and Christian history show that God’s people, at the very least, were not afraid to approach the temple exit with their language. Scripture and the Reformers were not afraid of employing stark or earthy expressions to expose sin, confront evil, or emphasize the gospel. Neither Martin Luther nor Scripture itself always uses squeaky-clean language. Although these examples may challenge the assumption that Christian speech is equivalent to polite speech, they do not permit Christians to use whatever language they want in any way they want.

Christian Potty Mouths

Modern Christians can often imagine the Bible as a book of high wording and spiritualized vocabulary. While Scripture is the written Word of God, he gives it to us through inspired human authors. These authors were not strangers to strong language. The original Hebrew and Greek contain expressions that translators have frequently softened for modern hearers, “English readers are sometimes unaware of these jarring statements because English translations sometimes hide them behind euphemistic softening of the biblical language.”²² This means the

22. “The Problem of Blunt Language in the Bible,” *The Wartburg Project*, n.d., 1.

blunt or shocking speech is not a blemish in Scripture; it is part of God's Word for us. Although it is inspired, this does not necessarily mean it should be normative for our lives today.

Few examples illustrate this better than the idiom *mashtin bekir*, literally "one who pisses against the wall," occurring six times in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., 1 Sam 25:22; 1 Kgs 14:10). Modern translations often replace this with a sanitized "every male," but Duane Smith's study shows the vulgarity is deliberate and its intention by the authors of Scripture has never been questioned.²³

The idiom functions rhetorically to underscore humiliation and annihilation. Smith emphasizes this point, "This is the language of total annihilation... not a single "*mashtin bekir*" will be left."²⁴

The prophetic declarations against the houses of Jeroboam, Ahab, and Baasha thus rely on a jarring vulgarity that intensifies the divine judgment. Importantly, this expression does not arise from sinful human impulsiveness; it is intentionally written in Scripture as part of God's inspired Word.

An even more forceful example occurs in Isaiah 36:12, where the Assyrian envoy taunts Jerusalem's defenders, "But the commander replied, "Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the people sitting on the wall—who, like you, will have to eat their own excrement and drink their own urine?" These terms, as the article demonstrates, are blunt and vulgar. Early bible editors recognized their shock value and, "the scribes... found the vulgar threat of the Assyrian envoy too crude to be read out loud, [so] they

23. Duane E Smith, "'Pisser against a Wall': An Echo of Divination in Biblical Hebrew," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72.4 (n.d.): 700.

24. Smith, "'Pisser against a Wall': An Echo of Divination in Biblical Hebrew," 702.

substituted euphemisms.”²⁵ Isaiah, however, retains the vulgar terms because they convey the brutality of the enemy and the desperation of the warfare. Scripture does not shield readers from the rawness of human conflict.

Ezekiel’s use of the plural *gillulim*, often translated “idols,” provides another example. The article explains, “*Gillul* is the round thing that comes out of the east end of a west-bound horse.”²⁶ So, the prophet labels the idols of Israel not with a neutral term but with one intended to provoke disgust—“dung-gods.” As the article concludes, “‘Idols’ is not a very good translation... ‘dung-ball deities’ is probably the most accurate.”²⁷ Here, vulgarity functions theologically by stripping idolatry of its glamour. Ezekiel uses disgust to reorient the moral imagination.

Several prophetic texts also contain explicit sexual imagery—Ezekiel 16 and 23 being the most prominent examples. These chapters describe Israel’s unfaithfulness with references to body parts, emissions, arousal, and promiscuous actions so graphic that early rabbis often debated whether or not they should be read publicly.²⁸ Yet these passages use sexual bluntness not for humor or malice but for repentance. The physical vulgarity mirrors spiritual vulgarity; the shocking metaphors aim to awaken the dull conscience.

In the New Testament, Paul’s use of the Greek noun *skúbala* provides an important example to study. John David Punch’s analysis emphasizes its roughness, “*Skúbala* is a coarse,

25. “The Problem of Blunt Language in the Bible,” *The Wartburg Project*, 2.

26. “The Problem of Blunt Language in the Bible,” *The Wartburg Project*, 3-4.

27. “The Problem of Blunt Language in the Bible,” *The Wartburg Project*, 4.

28. Berger Shalom Zvi et al., *Koren Talmud Bavli* (Jerusalem: Shefa Foundation : Koren Publishers, 2012), 25b:9.

ugly, violent word implying worthlessness, uselessness, and repulsiveness.”²⁹ Punch notes the range of scholarly opinions but highlights that several modern interpreters argue that even “dung” is too gentle, “Richard Hays declares ‘crap’ or ‘sh*t to be the most relevant translation.”³⁰

Paul selects this word to communicate the utter worthlessness of his pre-Christian achievements compared to “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). Punch concludes, “Paul is making the strongest possible contrast... skúbala stresses the full force and totality of his renunciation.”³¹ So, even in apostolic teaching, a shocking term can function as a rhetorical intensifier to serve the gospel.

Across these examples, a pattern emerges. 1) Profanity serves prophetic or rhetorical clarity. Scripture employs shocking speech to awaken the conscience; expose lies or portray judgment vividly. 2) The Bible does not shy away from human earthy language. It records vulgar statements when they serve narrative truth or theological force. 3) Scripture’s strong language is sparing, intentional, and never flippant. It is always subordinate to a larger divine purpose. Therefore, the Bible’s use of profanity does not legitimize casual Christian swearing. It instead demonstrates that strong language can, in rare and purposeful contexts, serve truth.

Among Christian figures, none is more famous (perhaps infamous) for his use of coarse language than Martin Luther. Yet Luther’s rhetoric cannot be regarded merely as personal crudeness; it must be understood within his context, rhetorical strategy, and sense of theological urgency.

29. John David Punch, “Σκββαλα Happens: Edification from a Four-Letter Word in the Word of God?,” *The Bible Translator* 65.3 (2014): 369–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2051677014553532>, 371.

30. Punch, “Σκββαλα Happens,” 372, censorship added.

31. Punch, “Σκββαλα Happens,” 372.

Heiko Oberman's influential article dismantles the common assumption that Luther's coarse language was a byproduct of age or grumpiness. He says, "Even as early as 1515 Luther was using scatological language against that great foe, the devil."³² Scatology refers to the use of language or imagery related to excrement, filth, and bodily waste. Luther's use of scatological language serves not as crude entertainment but as a rhetorical strategy that exposes false doctrine as spiritual "filth" worthy of rejection.

Luther used earthy and scatological imagery as part of spiritual warfare with terminology that he himself called *Teufelsdreck* ("the Devil's filth"). Oberman provides a clear example, "And now, Luther breaks into German, when the great slanderer comes and says, 'Sehet wie hat sich der beschissen;' see how he covered himself with sh*t. Then the effective answer is, 'Das frissestu!' – stuff it, eat it yourself."³³ Oberman argues that this was not a lapse into immaturity but a conscious method to mock and disarm what Luther believed to be demonic deception.

Oberman warns modern interpreters not to reduce Luther's rhetoric to personal psychological flaws. He claims that Luther would never recognize such a caricature of himself.³⁴ We ought not to think that this profane speech from Luther means he was simply turning into an old cranky man who had no regard for what he was saying in his elder years. Rather than viewing his coarse speech in this way, Oberman argues that Luther must be understood as a preacher placed at a crossroads, "standing between God and the devil at the end of time."³⁵

32. Heiko Oberman, "Teufelsdreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the 'Old' Luther," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 19.3 (1988): 435–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2540472>, 435.

33. Oberman, "Teufelsdreck," 443, censorship added.

34. Oberman, "Teufelsdreck," 438.

35. Oberman, "Teufelsdreck," 435.

Within this cosmic struggle, Luther believed that sharp, humiliating language was appropriate, not toward the weak or repentant, but toward the Devil and those he saw as threatening the gospel.

Luther wanted people to see the truth of the Devil's lies as *Teufelsdreck*; the Devil's filth, and he certainly used what some would consider filthy language to do so. With this, he urged Christians to throw false doctrines into the sewer and occasionally told the Devil to "eat" what he himself excreted. Far from trivial humor, these insults were rhetorical tools designed to expose the spiritual filth that Luther was fighting by slinging filth back at the Devil. "Thus the traditional picture of Luther as old, vile, and bitterly resigned is misleading and should be revised."³⁶ This places Luther's profanity: not a lapse or sin, but an expression of spiritual combat.

What does this mean for Christians today? Luther's example does not forgo the command of Christians to speak in love. But it does complicate modern assumptions that *Christian speech* always sounds polite. Christians today can take away several discernment principles from Luther's use of profanity:

1. The object matters: harsh language is never aimed at the vulnerable, but at the deceiving.
2. The purpose matters: Luther uses vulgarity to defend the gospel, not to vent personal anger.
3. The context matters: theological polemics in crisis differ from everyday conversation.

In the end, Luther's use of strong language points Christians back to the deeper calling of Scripture: to let their words arise from hearts renewed by the gospel.

36. Oberman, "Teufelsdreck," 435.

The Christian's task is not to test the limits of vocabulary, but to speak as one whose identity is rooted in Christ, seeking always to honor God, serve others, and reflect the character of the One who is "full of grace and truth."

Historical Insight for Christian Discernment

Both Scripture and Christian history reveal moments when blunt, shocking, or vulgar language serves God's purposes. Biblical authors employ profanity not to indulge sin but to confront it, by stripping idols of their allure, portraying judgment vividly, or magnifying the surpassing worth of Christ. Luther, following the pattern, uses scatology not for entertainment but as a theological weapon against the Devil and false doctrine.

For Christians today, these examples do not offer permission for casual swearing. Instead, they teach discernment. Speech must be evaluated not by whether a word appears on a cultural taboo list, but by whether it serves love of God and neighbor. Holiness in speech is measured by purpose, audience, and the heart behind the words. This discernment equips believers to navigate a profane world, neither mimicking the careless speech that runs rampant on our television screens and in our Spotify playlists, nor shrinking from strong words when they are necessary to speak truth with clarity and conviction. When and if they are necessary will be discussed below.

THEOLOGY AND PROFANITY

Profanity is a universal human phenomenon, cutting across cultures, languages, and historical periods. Scripture itself acknowledges the major impact that human speech can have on a person, “the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark” (Jas 3:5). Yet Christian reflection on profanity requires more than moral disapproval or cultural discomfort. A theology of profanity must wrestle with the nature of words, the human body, the effects of sin, and the redeemed purpose of Christian speech. While no particular word is inherently sinful, Christians should nevertheless refrain from profanity for the sake of holiness, love, and witness.

Language and The Old Adam

We begin with the fact that language is good, because it is a gift of God. Likewise, outside of context and intent, there is nothing inherently sinful about combining certain letters or forming certain sounds. Modern psychology reinforces this insight. Richard Beck’s study on profanity observes that the offensiveness of taboo words does not stem from the words themselves but from how they activate deep emotional and cultural associations, especially involving the human body, mortality, and shame. According to Beck, profanity “functions as a death/mortality reminder,” because many profane terms highlight this through references to “body parts, sexual

behaviors, [and] body effluvia.”³⁷ The sinful response and understanding of these words, which is embedded in our sinful Old Adam, is where the waters begin to muddy.

Although words are not inherently sinful, Scripture teaches that our use of words reveals the condition of our hearts and the sinful Old Adam living in every one of us. Jesus warns that “an unwholesome word” is one that is “by nature foul, because it proceeds from a heart that is bad” (Mt 12:34; 15:11, 18).³⁸ Winger explains that such speech is “spoilt, rotten,”³⁹ like a fish unfit to eat or a tree unable to bear good fruit. This perspective sets profanity within the broader biblical teaching about corrupted speech. Words that flow from anger, contempt, lust, or cruelty, regardless of whether they are culturally profane, are rooted in our sinful nature.

Several biblical categories, therefore, overlap with what modern people call profanity. Speech that tears down rather than builds up is one example. Paul commands believers to speak only what is “for building up” (Eph 4:29), and that Christian speech should communicate “mutual forgiveness” and “Spirit-directed worship.”⁴⁰

Paul forbids “foolish talk or coarse joking” (Eph 5:4), which Winger interprets as “sexual innuendo” or humor that trivializes sexuality and “diminishes the seriousness of the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit.”⁴¹ Likewise, Colossians 3:8 condemns “filthy language,” which

³⁷ Richard Allan Beck, “Profanity: The Gnostic Affront of the Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 37.4 (2009): 294-5.

³⁸ Thomas M. Winger, *Ephesians, Concordia Commentary: A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 526.

³⁹ Winger, *Ephesians*, 526.

⁴⁰ Winger, *Ephesians*, 527.

⁴¹ Winger, *Ephesians*, 554.

is most often interpreted as speech “which injures the neighbor, who hears it or of whom it is spoken.”⁴²

Now we turn to the only profane word that is addressed in the Ten Commandments: the Lord’s name. Martin Luther’s explanation of the Second Commandment in the Large Catechism frames it in this way, “It is a misuse of God’s name if we call upon the LORD God in any way whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind... From this all people can figure out for themselves when and in how many ways God’s name is abused.”⁴³ In other words, we use God’s name in vain anytime it isn’t used to praise him or promote his truth.

Could this not be said about any word (profane or otherwise) in our culture today? It is a misuse of God’s gift of language when we use it in any way whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind. The Christian’s concern, then, is not merely avoiding certain syllables but stewarding every word so that it reflects the truth, purity, and mercy of the God who speaks.

Even if a particular use of profanity is not, in itself, sinful, Christians must also consider the effect their words may have on others. Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 8 provides a helpful analogy. Eating meat sacrificed to idols was not inherently wrong, yet Paul urged believers to refrain if it might trouble the conscience of a fellow Christian. In the same way, profanity, in certain situations, may be morally neutral at the level of vocabulary. Still, it can easily become a stumbling block for others. Out of love, then, Christians willingly limit their freedom in order to avoid causing unnecessary offense. Our goal is not simply to avoid personal sin but to “build up” the body of Christ, choosing words that edify rather than perplex or unsettle.

42. John Peter Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Colossians*, ed. Philip Schaff and Karl Braune (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 65.

43. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis (Minn.): Fortress press, 2000), 393.

Together, these passages reveal that profanity is problematic not because a particular word is intrinsically evil but because profanity often functions as speech that corrodes rather than heals, that degrades God's gifts, and that injures our neighbor.

Beck's research provides an illuminating background to contemporary Christian discomfort with profanity. He argues that profanity often feels offensive in Christian contexts because it reminds us of our animal nature, such as our bodily functions, vulnerabilities, and mortality. In ideologies influenced by Gnostic ideas, where the body is viewed with negative connotations, profanity becomes especially charged. Beck concludes that in such theological mindsets, profanity speaks to "a Gnostic affront, as an insult to a creature aspiring to be more than an animal."⁴⁴ Now, Lutheranism and Scripture itself reject this Gnostic idea that the body is bad. The Incarnation, the resurrection of the body, and the sacraments all affirm that the physical is not shameful. Profanity merely referencing the body or its functions is, therefore, not inherently low or dirty.

Still, this does not mean profanity is harmless. Even if the body itself is not shameful, speech that mocks bodily creation or uses it to express anger, contempt, or degradation fails to honor the embodied life God sanctifies. Making light of sexuality or the body through coarse joking soils the Christian's mouth and diminishes God's creation.⁴⁵ Sex and our bodies are gifts from God. Just as a Christian should not mock Baptism or the Lord's Supper or make them the punchline for some careless joke, so a Christian should not carelessly joke about the blessings of sex or our bodies. These examples of God's grace deserve our reverence. The body itself is not

44. Beck, "Profanity." 294.

45. Winger, *Ephesians*, 554.

shameful, but speaking of it in crude or degrading ways cheapens what God has made and runs contrary to a Christian attitude toward his creation.

Theological Insights: Keeping Our Tongues Out of the Gutter

Scripture consistently presents speech as a divine gift entrusted to God's people for divine purposes. Words are meant to praise God (Eph 5:19–20), to teach and encourage (Col 3:16), to build up the body of Christ (Eph 4:29), and to proclaim the gospel (Rom 10:14–17). Gibbs comments that a Christian life of discipleship produces “good fruit of words about Jesus that are anything but worthless.”⁴⁶ Profanity, by contrast, rarely serves these purposes. Such speech often arises from anger, contempt, or impulsivity. It frequently wounds or degrades others. It seldom edifies the listener. Additionally, it can compromise Christian witness by giving others the impression that we don't hold God's creation of sex and human bodies in high regard, or even to the extent that we are not his called children, who have been redeemed by Christ. Because Christian ethics evaluates language not by a list of forbidden terms but by its impact, the guiding question becomes: Does this word serve love of God and neighbor? In most cases, profanity fails to meet that standard.

A careful theological synthesis leads to several important conclusions about Christian speech and the nature of profanity. First, no word is inherently sinful. Scripture affirms that God's creation is good, and that includes the human capacity for language. Words, syllables, and sounds possess no moral charge on their own. What gives speech its moral quality is the heart

46. Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 644.

from which it proceeds. Jesus Himself teaches that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks,” locating sin not in vocabulary but in the sinful desires that twist God’s good gift of language. Thus, at the most basic level, language is morally neutral; it is the use of language—not its raw material—that can honor or dishonor God.

At the same time, it becomes clear that profanity is ordinarily unwise and unloving for Christians. While not inherently sinful, profanity rarely functions in ways that align with the character of Christ. It commonly expresses anger, contempt, impulsivity, or mockery. It often tears down rather than builds up, wounds rather than heals, and degrades rather than dignifies. Scripture’s repeated warnings against coarse joking, corrupting talk, and sinful anger indicate that these patterns of speech are fundamentally at odds with the new life believers have in Christ. Even if a particular word has no intrinsic moral stain, the typical contexts and motivations surrounding profanity make it inconsistent with Christian maturity.

Profanity also fails to honor the body as God’s good creation. The human body is a profound gift, created by God and endowed with dignity. It is not shameful. Yet Christians dishonor this gift when they speak of the body in crude or degrading ways. Treating the body cheaply—whether through sexualized language, vulgar references, or demeaning expressions—contradicts the reverence Scripture teaches toward God’s handiwork. Holiness does not require avoiding all mention of the body; it requires speaking about the body in ways that reflect its goodness rather than trivialize or distort it.

In contrast to this, Christian speech is called to a higher, holier purpose. Paul urges believers to put away “shameful and foolish talk” and instead to fill their mouths with “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” giving thanks for God’s mercy (Eph 5:19–20). This does not mean Christians must always speak in pious or poetic phrases, but it does mean their speech

should consistently echo their identity in Christ. Christian language is meant to edify, encourage, teach, comfort, and proclaim the gospel. It should be marked by gratitude, truth, gentleness, and strength—virtues that rarely flourish in the soil of profane speech.

For these reasons, Christians should intentionally choose words that reflect their identity in Christ rather than ones that may confuse someone. After all, Paul encourages, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Eph 5:15-16). As Christians, we shudder at the thought of wasting an opportunity to be God’s representative in this world because of a careless outburst of an *f-word*.

The question arises, then, is it wrong to swear in your head or when you are all alone, and there’s no one around to be confused by your words? Let’s take the classic example of hitting your thumb with a hammer. After an uncoordinated swing, there’s a noticeable pain, and a Christian thinks to themselves or even murmurs, “Ah, sh*t, that hurt.” Must he or she ask for forgiveness? Is it any worse than saying, “Ah, poop, that hurt?” Linguistically, no, it is not different. However, could the devil be at work through a fleeting profane thought? Certainly. The ancient foe is always eager to exploit human weakness, turning momentary frustrations into occasions for bitterness, self-indulgence, or anger. A stray profane reaction, in itself, may not be sinful and a cause for forgiveness, but is there a danger that this could become a habit the devil uses to draw the heart away from a proper Christian use of language? The author leaves this question for readers to consider within their own circumstances. Paul’s warning applies greatly, “‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph 4:26-27).

Profanity may not be inherently sinful, but it is inconsistent with the redeemed purpose of Christian speech. Because believers bear the name of Christ, their words carry weight. They

can either reinforce the beauty of the gospel or obscure it. Thus, while Christians are free from legalistic word lists, they are called to use their freedom for the good of others and the glory of God. Profanity, in most cases, works against that calling and is therefore best avoided by those who seek to speak as Christ's redeemed people.

PRACTICAL GUIDES IN A PROFANE WORLD

A mere study of profanity in its linguistic, historical, and theological settings helps Christians understand the complex nuances of these words; however, the truth still remains. Christians will live in this world. Modern society normalizes coarse speech across nearly every sphere of life. The Christian's task, therefore, is not to escape it but to discern and navigate it. Understanding that Christian speech uses language that serves God and their neighbor, combined with an understanding of how profanity functions in the modern world, can only help to equip believers with practical guides to navigate a profane world.

Adults in a Profane World

Most Christian adults cannot avoid exposure to profanity. In many work environments, coarse language serves as humor, coworker bonding, or simply as a habit of colleagues. Believers may feel tension in these settings. Should the believer show disapproval of the profane language, potentially alienating the coworkers, or might silence unwillingly condone the coworkers' words, thus troubling the believer's conscience?

Discernment lies between these actions. What is really being communicated with the words of the fellow coworker?

A basic question to ask here is this: What does the cussing mean... Is it a knowing and deliberate abuse of the name or the prerogatives of God? Is it a serious invoking of the torments of hell on a person or a group or on some event or condition? What does it mean that it's a h*ll of a nice day, or that the medicine the doctor prescribed was just no godd*mn good?⁴⁷

47. Harry R. Boer, "Damn or Darn," *Reformed Journal* 37.7 (1987), 6.

The coworker likely means no offense with their language. If no offense is taken by the Christian, then they can be content with silence and find comfort in Jesus' words, "What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them" (Matt 15:11). Using Christ's words, it could rightfully be said that what goes into someone's ear does not defile them. The presence of profanity around a Christian does not constitute sin or the need for forgiveness. As for the Lord's name, however, it is not untrue that it is reduced to an empty statement when even an unbelieving (or believing) coworker uses it in vain, expressing "disbelief, distress, irritation...pleasure, joy, and relief."⁴⁸ One could not fault a Christian for approaching such a coworker with patience and Christ-like love to address their words if they do offend. This is all the truer and more necessary if the coworker uses profanity to intentionally hurt others or blaspheme the Lord's name. After all, language is a gift from God to be used to serve and love others and God.

In daily interaction, Christians witness not only through explicit confession but also by simply letting their light shine in their choice of language. It is not uncommon for users of profanity to sometimes apologize when they suddenly realize a Christian is listening.⁴⁹ It is a small but revealing indication that most people do not naturally associate Christianity with profane speech. Christians need not constantly rebuke others for offensive language, but they can quietly model a different way of speaking through their words of love that model Christ.

Adults also face decisions regarding media. Films, television, podcasts, and music often regularly use profanity for various reasons. Peter Fraser argues, Christian involvement with

48. Patrick Gallagher, "Don't Swear It Out," *U.S. Catholic* 78.12 (2013), 33.

49. Boer, "Damn or Darn," 7.

media must move beyond reflexive censorship or passive consumption to deliberate evaluation. He insists that film can be received as a “gift of God” when viewed according to its moral and artistic intent rather than the mere presence or absence of profane content.⁵⁰ While this is true, the opposite must not go unaddressed. As a Christian who struggles with alcohol would do best to avoid drinking, so too a situation could arise where a Christian might need to avoid such profane content. Personal discernment is necessary. Such discernment does not mean Christians must avoid all media containing profanity, but it does require them to be attentive to how that language shapes their lives, desensitizing them to its presence or subtly changing their vocabulary.

Finally, adults must discern profanity with their own hearts. Although it’s not inherently sinful, Christians must therefore ask not only, “Is this profane word choice permissible? Even if it is permissible, is it beneficial or constructive (1 Cor 10:23 NIV84)? Conversely, will it hurt or offend those around me?” Even beyond that, is it necessary, or would a tamer, less socially charged word suffice?

The same can be said of the minced oaths mentioned above. Words like “frick, heck, gosh, darn, shoot, gee whiz, jeez, and similar expressions are linguistically and historically substitutes for taboo words. From a linguistic standpoint, minced oaths carry no little to no moral weight. Many modern speakers do not even recognize their origins. Yet the same questions can be applied: “Is this minced oath permissible or beneficial and constructive? Might it harm or cause offense to those around me?” Although in the modern context, which has often removed most baggage from these terms, “Frick,” more often than not, may cause less offense than a

50. Dr Peter Fraser, “Notes Toward A Christian Approach To Film,” paper presented at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Ethics Conference 1990, 2.

blatant *f-word*. Certainly, one must address the context before blurting out any word, profane or not.

Additionally, minced oaths, even if their use is harmless, the reflex and motivation behind them may not be. A Christian uttering “darn!” in anger or hatred rather than something harsher may still have a spiritual issue that needs to be addressed. Minced oaths may also habituate the tongue to eventually say the harsher terms. Minced oaths may serve as the gateway into something even more dangerous. When speakers repeatedly use phonetic replacements, the mind can increasingly normalize the real word.⁵¹ One would be hard-pressed to say that they are justified when softening or even abbreviating the *f-word* to “WTF.” Minced oaths also may influence others. A believer may mean nothing problematic when saying “jeez,” but a young Christian or new believer might not recognize the distinction between euphemism and irreverence. As with meat sacrificed to idols, context and potential stumbling are key.

While minced oaths are not inherently sinful, it is not unwise to evaluate why they say them, when they say them, and what reproductions might arise from their constant use. They are neither categorically forbidden nor categorically harmless. They occupy a space where wisdom, self-awareness, and love for neighbor must serve as guides.

51. Bergen, *What the F*, 161.

Children in a Profane World

If adults require discernment, children require formation. Modern children grow in a linguistic environment more saturated with profanity than ever before. Music, movies, gaming culture, school hallways, and the internet abound with coarse language. Secular music, which is now easily accessible, often contains explicit language, sexual references, and themes that shape moral imagination long before children understand their significance.⁵²

Bergen highlights a difficult reality: parents cannot fully shield their children from profanity, because “children learn language based on what they hear around them,” and complete insulation is nearly impossible in a digital world where peer speech and media consumption are pervasive.⁵³ This means parents must aim not merely to restrict exposure but to shape children’s responses.

Christian parents and congregations must therefore help guide this formation. Schmudlach’s seven principles for guiding young Christians in their media choices offer a strong foundation:⁵⁴

1. Teach what Scripture says about speech, temptation, and sanctification.
2. Teach adiaphora rightly—not as freedom to indulge but as freedom to serve.
3. Address dangers openly rather than pretending all music or media is harmless.
4. Provide healthy alternatives, not merely prohibitions.
5. Encourage parental involvement and modeling.

52. Benjamin S Schmudlach, “Guiding Young Christians in Their Choice of Secular Music,” Senior Thesis submitted to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2015, i.

53. Bergen, *What the F*, 220.

54. Schmudlach, “Guiding Young Christians in Their Choice of Secular Music,” 30.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a 2011 study claiming that “profanity is dangerous because it’s a gateway form of aggression.”⁵⁵ Similar arguments have been made regarding violent movies and video games as gateway contributors to aggressive behavior.⁵⁶ Bergen, however, challenges and ultimately disproves the AAP’s conclusion.⁵⁷ If the AAP’s logic were correct, and if exposure to movies, music, and video games truly produced violent children on a large scale, we would expect far more serial offenders in a culture saturated with such media. However, whether or not Bergen is correct in his conclusion, a broader question arises for Christian parents: Does frequent exposure to media filled with profanity desensitize children to coarse speech? One could reasonably argue that this is already happening, just as desensitization has occurred in other societal vices such as violence, drinking, and sexual immorality. Proverbs 22:6 offers a fitting reminder: “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” It is difficult to imagine Christian parents intentionally starting their children off desensitized to profanity, especially knowing that those children will one day need wisdom to navigate a profane world.

At some point, children will inevitably encounter profanity; shielding them entirely is ultimately near impossible. The question, then, is not whether they will hear such language but how and from whom they will first learn to navigate it. The situation is not unlike the “birds-and-the-bees” conversation. Most parents would prefer their children to learn about sex from thoughtful, guided instruction rather than from the distortions of online content. Should their earliest lessons about navigating a profane world come from the internet, peers, or social media,

55. Bergen, *What the F*, 181.

56. Bergen, *What the F*, 189.

57. Bergen, *What the F*, 181-5.

or would it be better for parents to introduce and frame these realities within a controlled environment?

Now, handing a child a list of the most vulgar and profane words imaginable is not fitting. However, an appropriate conversation about the words they will undoubtedly hear and be tempted to use carelessly will certainly aid in how they will respond to such words. Additionally, one of the most important elements is modeling. Children will learn far more from the daily speech they hear than from abstract rules. A parent who habitually uses harsh minced oaths or casual profanity while simultaneously telling them, “Don’t say those words because they’re bad,” will only divide their understanding of how to navigate a profane world. Yet when parents themselves practice thoughtful, restrained, and gracious speech, modeled by Christ, they give their children a clear and hopeful pattern to follow and one that equips them to speak with wisdom and integrity amidst the world’s profane noise.

CONCLUSION

Profanity presents a unique challenge for Christians because it sits at the crossway of language, culture, morality, and discipleship. Understanding how believers should speak in a world that has moved language outside the temple requires more than identifying a list of forbidden words. It calls for a deeper grasp of how language works, how Scripture and Christian history have handled profanity, how theology directs our tongue, and how Christians can navigate a profane world. When these understandings, a clearer picture emerges of how Christians discern words in a way that honors God and serves their neighbor, even in a profane age.

A linguistic perspective makes it immediately clear that profanity is more than a certain combination of letters or sounds, making a word inherently evil. The cultural context and meaning play a role as well. Words become profane because societies treat certain subjects, such as the body, sex, bodily functions, or religion, as taboo. Because of these taboos, in addition to slurs that attack race, gender, or mental capacity, cultures assign emotional force and social restrictions to them. Over time, these taboos shift, and words gain or lose their profane nature. This means that profanity is a cultural construct rather than a spiritual category. Recognizing this helps Christians avoid assuming moral weight where Scripture assigns none. At the same time, linguistic insight underscores why profane words are so powerful and potentially damaging. They are designed to shock, intensify emotion, and signal belonging or rebellion within social groups. This power requires careful stewardship of Christians.

Historical examples reinforce that strong language is not automatically sinful. Scripture includes passages where prophets, narrators, or apostles employ blunt, earthy, or vulgar terms to expose idolatry, express judgment, or emphasize the results of the Gospel. These expressions are

never careless. They carry intentional rhetorical weight. Figures like Martin Luther likewise used striking language when confronting false doctrine or spiritual deception. His aim was never to hurt or amuse with these words, but to unmask error with clarity and force rather than indulge personal crudeness. These examples show that strong speech is not inherently sinful but can be used appropriately when serving God's truth. They do not, however, provide an excuse for Christians to use whatever type of profane language in everyday conversation. Instead, they demonstrate that the morality of speech depends on intention, audience, and context.

A theological lens gives Christians a framework for how they are to use their words. Language is a gift from God, given for praise, instruction, encouragement, confession, and witness. No particular word is inherently corrupt, yet Scripture teaches that speech reveals the heart. Words used in anger, contempt, lust, or mockery reflect the Old Adam rather than the new life given in Christ. Scripture's warnings against coarse joking, obscenity, corrupt talk, and careless use of God's name show that language can and has been used by Satan to drive people from a righteous use of God's gift. It carries the potential for great harm or great good. Christians are called to speak in ways that build up rather than tear down, that reflect gratitude rather than contempt, and that show reverence for God's creation. This includes the human body, which profanity often trivializes or distorts. Even when a profane word itself is not sinful, its common functions usually conflict with the character of Christian love.

In everyday life, believers must navigate environments where profanity is common, such as in workplaces, friendships, online spaces, entertainment, and especially in the raising of children. Complete avoidance is impossible. Therefore, a Christian requires proper discernment for how to react when a profane word enters their ear. A term that expresses frustration in private may confuse or offend in public. A phrase intended as lighthearted may undermine credibility or

harm Christian witness. Out of love for neighbor, Christians willingly forego words that might trouble another's conscience or close a door that the Gospel might enter. Parents, pastors, and mentors carry the added responsibility of shaping others, especially children, in understanding both the power and purpose of speech, teaching not only which words may be unwise but how to speak in love and truth, modeled by Christ.

Altogether, these insights point toward a simple but demanding principle: Christian speech is shaped not by cultural taboo lists but by the character of Christ. Profane words are not inherently sinful, yet they rarely align with the purposes for which God has redeemed the tongue. Believers, therefore, use speech that reflects their identity in Christ, avoiding language that wounds, degrades, or confuses, and embracing language that strengthens, clarifies, and comforts. In a world where profanity is common, the calling remains unchanged. God has entrusted his people with the gift of language. How could Christians use it in any other way other than to give praise to the one who saved them and love those whom he saved. This is how Christians are to navigate the gray area that profanity presents in this world.

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