

Can You Say Shibboleth?

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When I first began driving a school bus shortly after moving to Cincinnati in 1987 the students on my bus would often make fun of the way I talked. 'Howdy', 'Ya'll', and a few other words were a dead give-away that I wasn't from that part of the country. Even "normal" words were spoken with a certain parlance that folks in the Midwest new that I was from Texas or Oklahoma. Admittedly, when Ruth and I first met there was an obvious difference in some of the ways we communicated. If I didn't hear or understand something she said, I would say, "Excuse me?", "Pardon me?", or just plain "Huh?" to indicate that I needed her to repeat what she had said. On the other hand, if Ruth didn't hear or understand something I said, she would say, "Please?" We were dating when I first heard her use this term and it was obvious that she wasn't from this part of the country.

Our speech often reveals to others who we are and whose we are. This was true when the men of Ephraim decided to battle Jephthah and the men of Gilead (Judges 12). The Gileadites managed to secure the shallow crossings of the Jordan River before the Ephraimites arrived. When any of the fugitives of Ephraim came to the water crossings and wanted to go over, the men of Gilead said to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said 'No', they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth'. The Ephraimite, however, could not pronounce it correctly and would say 'Sibboleth' instead.. The Gideonites would then capture and slay him. A total of forty-two thousand Ephraimites" were slain because of their improper speech (Judges 12:5-6). The acid test of the matter was in one's ability to say 'Shibboleth' correctly. If a man did so, he was safe; if he said 'Sibboleth' it was the last word he ever spoke.

The word, 'Shibboleth' is from a Hebrew word which means, 'A turbulent, swift-flowing stream'. While there was nothing inherent within the word that would bring condemnation, it was employed to distinguish members of a group (Gideonites) from those who were outsiders (Ephraimites). Interestingly, a person can still be judged by his speech today in the same manner; the use of one's speech must distinguish him as a member of the Lord's church from those who are outside the church. Our words should not give us away or associate us with those who are not following the Lord. The words we use should not be that which would profane the Lord or His name. To profane something means "to cause something highly revered to become identified with the commonplace, to violate sanctity, to desecrate" (Danker, p. 173).

It is important that Christians only use the name of God, Jesus, Christ, Lord, Holy Spirit, and other sacred names in a most reverential fashion. God has always demanded that there be a difference between that which is holy and that which is unholy (Leviticus 10:10), and the holy things are to always be kept sacred (Ezekiel 22:26). Belshazzar, King of Babylon, met his demise soon after the handwriting of God on the wall had revealed his fate because he profaned that which God had made sacred (Daniel 5).

Many who would not consider cursing and swearing to proceed from their lips will, with very little thought or consideration, take the Lord's name and use it flippantly, facetiously, and perhaps even jokingly. "Holy" is His name (Luke 1:49) and to profane it is sinful (Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Deuteronomy 5:11; James 5:12; 1 Peter 2:17). All around us, and through various avenues, we are exposed to such frivolous usage of the Lord's name - secular songs, movies, television, literature, the internet, at work, at school, in neighborhoods, among peers, and even family members. So surrounded are we by the lighthearted use of the names of Deity that a Christian could easily be influenced to incorporate them into his own verbiage; however, we are to be examples in word (1 Timothy 4:12) and irreverent expressions should not be named among the believers and followers of Christ (James 3:10).

Listed below are a number of words along with their meanings that a Christian needs to refrain from saying. With much prayer, attentiveness, and self-control, these words can be eliminated.

The following words can either be found in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Webster's New World Dictionary, Webster's International Dictionary, Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, or A Dictionary of American Usage by Margaret Nicholson. [Note that a form of the word, 'euphemism', is used in describing these words and mean, "a substitution of an agreeable or non-offensive word or expression for one that is harsh, indelicate or otherwise unpleasant" (Webster's Dictionary)].

Gee is a euphemistic contraction of the name of Jesus, a minced form of Jesus, used in mild oaths. Other forms of this word are Gee Whilikers, Jeminy Christmas (Jesus Christ), Gees, Jees, and Gee Whiz (where the name 'Jesus' is joined with a wizard).

Gosh is an interjection and is used euphemistically for God. A minced form of God used as a mild oath. Other forms of this word are Gosh-awful, O my Gosh, and By-Gosh.

Golly is an exclamation of surprise, a euphemism for God. A minced form of God used as a mild oath. Another form of this word is By-Golly.

Good Gracious! Good Grief! My Goodness! Goodness Knows! Goodness Sakes!, Thank Goodness! are all ejaculatory and exclamatory expressions in reference to the goodness of God but used slangily and for emphasis. It is where the word 'good' or 'goodness' is used euphemistically for God. Similar expressions as Heavens!, Good Heavens!, For Heaven's Sake! are used slangily and call upon the dwelling place of God to witness to the truth of a statement made.

Darn is a euphemism for 'damn', Dickens is a euphemism for 'devil', Heck is a euphemism for 'hell', Dad-gum, Dad-blast, Dad-blame, Doggone are all euphemistic oaths for God.

It really doesn't make any difference if a person says "Excuse me?" or "Please?" when he doesn't understand a statement someone might make; it's inconsequential, other than the turning of heads by those who think it strange. And today there may not be any repercussions to the one who doesn't have the ability to say 'Shibboleth' as was the case with the Ephraimites. However, nearly 1200 years after the scene depicted at the Jordan water crossings, the Lord said something that is very consequential, "...for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37).

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