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Fire Eater! Editor

An Old Cuss

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The fight is on. My wife, bless her heart, is trying to get me to stop my cussing. "But how?" I whine. "I'm hardly even aware I'm cussing." She's not impressed. "Just drop the adjectives," she says. Now, you have to understand that when I reach for a cold beer, I generally reach for an expletive-deleted beverage. When I search for my lost keys, I search for my expletive-deleted keys.

To put it mildly, it's an old habit.

Not being entirely dim of wit, I realise that it is not a good thing to take the name of the Lord in vain (Ex. 20:7). Naturally, though, we all stumble in many ways (James 3:2), and it is given to us to change our ways. So off I go to change my ways.

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Most cussing, it would seem, is learned. It's not as if a baby is born with a mouthful of handy swear words: "Where's my BLANK bottle?" So it is with me. I look back now and can see that most of my swearing behaviour derives from my daddy primarily, and from friends and acquaintances secondarily. I never heard my grandpa swear, though. A God-fearing man, the most I ever heard from grandpa was "Dang", which, in Okie terms, is more an intensive adverb than a cuss word: "That's for dang sure." Nevertheless, the realisation that my cussing comes from my own family made me also realise that, to the extent that the actual words are not mine, not of me, there is something false, then, that I am carrying about with me when I swear. This something is not essentially who I am, yet I persist in it anyway. Why?

Why do people swear? Now there's an interesting question. One thought is that people swear because of deep-rooted human behaviour connected with magic words, taboo, and calling upon divinities to punish their enemies. Just saying the name of the punishing divinity became taboo. I dont know; sounds kind of complicated to me.

Another theory is that swearing began as a form of entertainment, especially in Norse cultures. "People would show off their creative skills, inventing clever insults for each other, in front of an appreciative audience." *(Paul Baker, http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk, 13 September 2004)* Now there's one of the few competitive contests that I actually might win.

Yet another explanation "locates" swearing in the brain. Swear words come out spontaneously when we hit our thumbs with hammers because, in short, we are "wired" that way. The idea there is that we use swear words as a substitute for actual violence. This idea, of course, is a form of the argument from evolution, and suffers from the usual defects of that theory. If swearing, for example, "evolved" for a "purpose", and if by "evolve" one means, as one should, that things evolve toward something rather than

nothing, then the ultimate reason for swearing is left untouched, unexplained, for the larger question of "Why?" remains.

But maybe the explanation of cussing is not as important as the actual act of cussing anyway. For whatever reasons, people do swear. And not all of them are men. According to Leon James and Diane Nahl at DrDriving.org, "Women out-swear and out-cuss drivers behind the wheel? Yes, indeed: 65% vs. 58% (a highly significant difference statistically)."

Somehow, I suspect my wife wouldn't accept it if I patiently explained to her that women cuss also. The old "But honey" just wouldn't wash.

If we take, however, the Decalogue seriously, there is a reason, other than blind obedience, not to take the Lord's name in vain. I read a sermon on the subject from the Bridgewood Church (apparently even Yankees go to church):

"'Misusing God's name' is on the top 10 list of commands from God, right up there with adultery and murder. That's astonishing. Here's why it merits such consideration: The way we respond to a person's name can't be separated from how we respond to that person." (Bridgewood.org)

In other words, when I cuss, using the Lord's name to do so, my relation to my God is defined in the act itself. I dishonour not only God, but myself as well. As the sermon says: "Taking God seriously means taking God's name seriously. It means that we don't use God's name to insult, to intimidate, to impress, or impulsively." Well, amen. Even an old cuss like me can understand that simple moral point.

And I've finally (after many a moon) realised that my wife is right. She might not care about the relation of Norse creativity to cussing, or the neural locus of swearing, but she does care about the actual effect of cussing. On our family, in our lives. And, most important, she grasps, albeit intuitively, the moral point. My relation to my God is spelled out not only in what I do, but also in what I say.

So I stand convicted. As much as I am loathe to admit it, my wife is right and I am wrong. I come from a traditional, Christian, Southern family, where such things are frowned upon, so I must stop the cussing.

And I will.

Soon, dang it.