

A Word of Caution to Fire Starters

Scripture: Matthew 12:36; Ephesians 4:29

Code: B110127

If you hadn't guessed it already, I work for Phil Johnson, the original [Pyromaniac](#). I'm sure you have your own view, but in my opinion he's not the Pyromaniac because he starts fires. No, he burns with a fire like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:9) and preaches God's Word, which is like fire, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces (Jeremiah 23:29).

Phil learned at least some of what he knows about preaching by watching another prophet-like preacher, John MacArthur. So, maybe *John* is the original Pyromaniac. But John doesn't set out to start fires either...it just happens. Like many of you, I've appreciated their ministries, and the ministries of many other faithful preachers around the world who are "worthy of double honor" because of their diligent "labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17).

So, speaking of starting fires, I was quite surprised that a passing comment John made in a [recent interview](#) received so much attention, while his comments on more significant, more controversial issues passed by unnoticed. Someone else made the [same point](#). In my view, a mountain was made out of a molehill (not the issue itself, but the comment), and the mountains were ignored.

Last Fall I attended a new media conference (secular) and listened to [Karen Hughes](#) and [Mark Penn](#), both very intelligent, competent, and accomplished communication experts, as they lamented the effect of social media on politics. Perhaps I'll post more about other points they made, but for now just a few things.

Mark Penn talked about the tendency in the current technological climate for small gaffes to become big news—everything is recorded and spread immediately through online, networked communications. The result is that the small and unintended becomes more important than big, intended policies, issues, and ideas. He believes that demonstrates the distracting influence of the Internet.

As I listened to Karen Hughes, I think she provided some good reasons for what Mark Penn had to say. Hughes said the anonymity of the Internet has a debasing, degrading effect on political conversation in particular, and conversations in general. That has had a dehumanizing effect—people seem readily willing to humiliate fellow human beings, sometimes ruthlessly.

(Incidentally, Hughes' point was later punctuated by a somewhat disheveled-looking woman from the audience who commandeered a microphone and lectured her, Mark Penn, and the moderator; she was crass, vulgar, and, well, ruthless. Hughes couldn't have paid for a better illustration of her point! Okay, back to *this* article . . .).

Hughes went on to talk about how the speed of the Internet makes it increasingly difficult to find out what is true, what is real, what has been verified. People no longer think in terms of the "24-hour news cycle," but rather the "1440 news cycle" (1440 = number of minutes in the day), so it's become

even more difficult to verify something. The demand of speed has become more paramount than veracity, at least in this Internet generation.

I know I'm not the only one to make this point, but it's worth bringing it up from time to time. Recent posts, tweets, and comments have highlighted for me the truth of Proverbs 18:21: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." It's not a stretch to see the reference to *tongue* in that verse as an example of synecdoche, in which the tongue stands for communication as a whole. That's how I take it anyway.

I can imagine James thinking about that proverb when he penned chapter 3 of his epistle, which he specifically applies to teachers in the church. Teachers, be warned—you *will* incur a stricter judgment because your tongue, your communication, speaks louder and goes further than that of the average person.

Now, I realize what happens on the Internet isn't exactly the same thing as being a teacher in a local church . . . in fact, it's quite different . . . okay, it's not even remotely close. A sermon is not a blog post, and it shouldn't resemble a blog post. A sermon is to be the product of the hard work of sound exegesis, based on a consistent historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

Blogs can sometimes be as thoughtful, but not always. Twitter posts? Uh, no—one hundred and forty characters or less. And comment threads? Some people show restraint, posting substantive, carefully crafted, biblically consistent comments as if God cares what we write, as if edifying speech matters (Ephesians 4:29).

So here's the point: Don't you think we—bloggers, tweeters, online communicators, digital dudes—will be held accountable for what we write and what we say online as well? Jesus said, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36).

I'm concerned about that. It's not that I think I'll be condemned in the end—"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). But I am concerned about pleasing the Lord and not grieving the Spirit in how I communicate, including how I blog, tweet, and comment. Brothers, our online communication must be governed by the fear of the Lord.

James says our communication is like the bit in the mouth of a great beast, able to put the power of the horse to great use in battle, in plowing a field, or in carrying a messenger. Or, it's like a small rudder, steering a massive ship according to the pilot (James 3:1-12). The tongue—a.k.a., our keyboards—is like that bit or that rudder. Very small, but very influential. It's that small spark that can set an entire forest ablaze.

As a kid, I loved to start fires and watch stuff burn. That's a boy thing, and to be honest, it's not quite out of me yet. But there are consequences to starting fires, literal ones or speaking metaphorically. And the fires that burn through cyberspace can move more quickly, with greater consequence than wildfires racing across thousands of acres of bone-dry tinder. (If you live in Southern California, you totally get that word picture.)

So, as we handle God's Word (which is like fire) on the Internet, let's be careful to strike our matches

responsibly. (I'm the target of my own warning.) God is watching, and so are others.

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