

# A preacher's (well-bridled) tongue (James 3:1-12)

## When is a pastor obliged to speak about their own theological shifts? Or obliged not to?

by [Ron Adams](#)

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I've been a working preacher for 27 years. I've preached around 25 Christmas and Easter sermons, nearly 60 funerals, and close to 25 weddings. I've been through the lectionary cycle almost 9 times. You'd think I'd know how to preach by now.

Much as I generally love the process of sermon writing and delivery, it can still feel like a stretch. Like I have to use different muscles from one Sunday to the next. The goal, if I can claim one, is to vary my content, my approach, and my style so as to keep myself and my congregation interested.

What I've struggled with in recent years is discerning how to be honest about how my theology has changed without causing offense or showing off. I have no interest in trying to be the smartest person in the room, or the edgiest or most unpredictable. Neither do I aim to shake someone's faith.

At the same time, there are occasions when the distance between where I stand theologically and where many of our members stand feels too wide to safely bridge. Spending time with James and his admonition to manage my tongue has sharpened my awareness of that distance. And it has heightened my sensitivity about just how hard it may be to build that bridge. A well-bridled tongue is essential to any such

effort.

My prayer is that my community will hear a word from the Holy Spirit each week, given through me but not from me. How to know the difference is its own challenge. I'm reluctant to get too comfortable with the idea that my sermon process is Spirit led. Which adds to my struggle. How to tell the truth I gather from the scriptures, without it sounding like I'm claiming to preach The Truth?

Unlike some preachers, I don't have an overabundance of confidence. Unlike others, I don't have an abundance of overconfidence. In my context, where we insist that the voice of the preacher is not privileged over other voices, that lack doesn't bother me. Speaking with a godlike voice would not be welcomed by our congregation. Some of my lack of confidence in preaching comes from that contextual reality. And I believe that's a good thing.

But it also stems from my awareness that I am fallible in every way. As James might have it, I am just as capable of spewing brackish water as I am pouring forth sweet. I can forget to check my ego, or to get down from my hobby horse, or in other ways put too much me in the sermon. Because of that awareness, I typically qualify any assertions with an "I believe" or "In my opinion." All in an attempt to make clear whose voice is being heard. I'd like to think James would approve.

To be sure, I am capable of speaking confidently. I share many convictions with my community, and many with my Anabaptist tradition. I don't hesitate to speak them clearly and without qualifiers. But when our theological paths diverge, things are much muddier.

Which brings me back to my internal struggle with whether or not I ought to be more forthright about where my theology has shifted and changed. Is such sharing important? Necessary? Or do I keep it to myself for the good of the whole, and avoid any risk of causing distress in the community? Which way does my pastoral obligation go?

I suspect such questions are not unique to me. Though, as I said, as a working pastor for 27 years you'd think I'd have gotten it sorted by now. How to communicate those developments, those changes, in ways that encourage and nurture faith in my community? I'm still trying to figure that out.