

ON SLANDER

AN INTERVIEW WITH CRAIG KEENER AND MIMI HADDAD



We sat down with Craig Keener—leading NT scholar and CBE colleague—for an in-depth look at slander. Craig explored what the Bible says about slander and how we can respond to it in our lives and work.



Mimi Haddad: Craig, could you please share what you believe Scripture teaches us, as the church, about slander? What is slander, first of all?

Craig Keener: There are multiple Hebrew and Greek words that are translated as “slander” because there’s more than one way to commit it. Slander has to do with speaking against somebody maliciously; misrepresenting them is normally part of it. It’s not just being negative towards somebody, but being negative towards somebody with deliberate falsehood or misrepresentation. That’s pretty frequent throughout history—even before modern politics.

In Romans chapter one, gossip—which actually doesn’t always have to be false, but definitely isn’t well-informed—is what we might call a mortal sin. It’s death-worthy. The psalmist gets slandered by others (Ps. 31:13) and treats slander as a terrible (Ps. 50:20), even a death-worthy (Ps. 101:5) sin. Jesus talks about it; it’s in his vice list in Mark 7:22. Then it’s picked up in several other vice lists in the New Testament. Slander is listed with gossip in Romans 1; in 2 Corinthians 12:20, we find slander and gossip; in Ephesians 4:31, there’s slander with bitterness, wrath, and anger; in Colossians 3:8, the instructions for how to live a godly life, as in Titus 3:2, include “don’t slander anybody,” and there’s the vice list in 1 Peter 2:1.

Christians are the object of slander at various times, like in 1 Peter 2:12 and 1 Peter 4:4. Paul also gets slandered; he mentions it just briefly in 2 Corinthians 6:8. In Romans 3:8 he says the people misrepresent his teaching about grace, claiming he says, “Let us do evil, that good may come.” We read about it in Acts 21:21. James and the elders at Jerusalem are telling Paul and his colleagues, including Luke: “You see brothers, how many Jewish believers are devout in the law, but they’ve been told that you teach

Jewish people not to circumcise their children and not to follow the law. The agreement was that Gentiles don’t have to do this, but your critics wrongly think you’re telling even Jewish people not to do this.” People often think in binary terms, so instead of recognizing that Paul was just telling Gentiles they didn’t have to do this, his critics were accusing him of telling Jewish people they also didn’t need to continue circumcising their children or following Jewish practices. A single narrative misrepresents what Paul was teaching his people.

Mimi Haddad: When speaking of the severity of slander, you said that it was death-worthy. Would it lead to an execution?

Craig Keener: In Romans 1, yes, spiritually it’s death-worthy, like disobedience to parents and all sorts of other things in that list, arrogance and so on. Under Old Testament law, accusing somebody else and supporting that accusation with a false oath in God’s name was bearing false witness. If you did that in a capital case, you were committing a capital offense yourself and could be executed (Deut. 19:16–20). Jezebel arranges for false witnesses so that innocent Naboth can get killed and Ahab can seize his vineyard. Elijah consequently prophesies that God will destroy Ahab’s house and dogs will devour Jezebel (1 Kgs. 21:21–24). One gets the impression that God did not like this behavior.

The New Testament treatment of slander goes to the heart. Maybe you aren’t urging a court to execute someone, but if you falsely accuse them of committing offenses that merit death (such as blasphemy or idolatry), you have committed a death-worthy offense in God’s sight. Jesus’s critics accused him of blasphemy, for example (Mark 14:64), but their criticism of him was itself blasphemous (Mark uses

the same Greek term for their ridicule in Mark 15:29). It's also dangerous when people may think they're right, but they haven't researched the claims for themselves. They're just passing on somebody else's slander.

MH: Gossip.

CK: When we pass on misinformation that we've heard from others without first checking the information out, we participate in a web of slander. Gossip and slander can get people killed. In the 1800s, local malicious slander endangered Hudson Taylor's group of missionaries in China, followed by misrepresentation in the British Press, though God protected them.¹ In one case in Tajikistan, misrepresentation in local media led first to more inquirers about the gospel, but then to a church planter's martyrdom. That, in turn, precipitated the conversion of the martyr's son.² In Egypt, local gossip distorted a church's teaching as insulting Muhammad, leading to some 5,000 surrounding a church, with several killed and 90 injured.³

MH: I would say that places the burden on the shoulders of the church and of our judicial systems to do a careful investigation. It's important to remember that many of our laws in this country and elsewhere are based on Judeo-Christian principles—to hear not just the accused but both sides. Why must Christians address the issue of slander with sincerity, prayer, goodwill, and hard work?

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CK: Sincerity is pretty much opposed to slander in the New Testament. 1 Peter 2:1 says to rid yourself of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. The next verse speaks of desiring God's honest (Greek *adolos*, "without deceit") milk.

MH: How has slander impacted your work?

CK: There are times when my work is neglected or rejected because I'm an evangelical, and people have their assumptions of what that means. There are times

in other circles where my work is neglected or rejected because I'm egalitarian, or because I'm charismatic—those are probably the two biggest things. Now I should say that there are plenty of complementarians and cessationists who read my work and are nice. They like the other things I write, at least. Having said that, there are some who aren't. I'll give an example from my first book on miracles.

When it first came out, *Christianity Today* did a story on it that included pictures of my wife and me, my wife being from Congo. Somebody on Amazon (who clearly hadn't read the book) said, "This guy is citing testimonies from Congo where they murder children as witches."

First of all, that was the wrong Congo; there are two Congos in Africa, and they got the wrong one. Secondly, only a minority of the book has to do with Congo, either Congo. Further, none of the circles I was citing murder child witches; they were all against that. It just basically came down to a racist thing.

There was a guy who reviewed my later book, *Miracles Today*, who totally misrepresented the book. Either he didn't read it, or he slandered it the whole way through the review. I found an average of four or five errors on every page of his review—blatant errors. I really didn't want to have to dialogue with him because he clearly wasn't approaching it from a scholarly standpoint. I'd rather dialogue with somebody who understands the rules of scholarly discourse, and, therefore, is able to have careful dialogue.

Then there was someone who went after my John commentary, as well as some other evangelical scholars' work. This critic repeatedly assumed the worst about our motives, painting us as liberal, but in so doing repeatedly misunderstood the literary conventions used in scholarly discourse. I don't suppose it was deliberate in my case, but some of the misunderstandings were so severe that I felt embarrassed for the critic and ultimately decided it was better not to respond. I would have had to use a level of discourse with which I felt uncomfortable, and it would have felt uncharitable.

I've had that a number of times in different spheres. The hardest I've been hit with in Christian circles, though, has been for *Paul, Women, and Wives*. It's the most controversial. I didn't know that when I wrote it. I figured it was more controversial that I was charismatic or that I held to a somewhat controversial eschatology, but being egalitarian turned out to be the most controversial at that time. Twenty years before, it would have been different, but in the mid-to-late 1990s, that was the dividing issue.

MH: Well, you were a hero at CBE and I'm sorry that things became painful. Can you explain the slander leveled at you because of your egalitarian views?

CK: Some of the people were nice about my views, and they didn't slander. They thought it was wrong, but they weren't deliberately misrepresenting. They may have misunderstood, but there's a difference between misunderstanding and deliberately misrepresenting or misrepresenting because they're ignorant. You see this a lot in comments sections online: people just exposing their ignorance, bringing up things that the author had already responded to in their work. It's frustrating when people do that. It's been so long since I wrote *Paul, Women, and Wives*. I got so much backlash for it; I became persona non grata in a lot of circles. That's mostly in the past now.

MH: On the back of your pain was a bridge to women's dignity, value, and leadership that was desperately needed and which the UN says is the basis for human flourishing. The UN found three years ago that it's the church's support that people rely on. They don't care what's published by the UN or by the NIH.⁴ What matters to them is what their pastors are teaching, and that's why your book led to spiritual and physical healing for so many. That's what makes it worth it.

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MISUNDERSTANDING AND DELIBERATELY MISREPRESENTING.

Have you seen slander regarding the work of CBE or more broadly in egalitarian activism?

CK: Well, a lot of our time is spent cleaning up messes that have been made by incorrect teaching, misrepresentation of what the Bible teaches, and misrepresentation of what we teach as well. The big one is the "slippery slope" argument that if you start ordaining women, next thing you know, you'll approve of same-sex marriage. That's one of the big arguments.

MH: Slander squanders our resources, and that is part of why slander is so hard to manage. You end up having to clean up so many misrepresentations, like the "slippery slope" argument.

CK: You have so many people who are antagonistic toward the faith because they say that Paul was against women.

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That's a misrepresentation of Paul, especially in his cultural context, but it's something that a lot of people originally learned because of the way they heard Paul taught in the church, or because they read Paul outside of his original cultural context. They read him in our cultural context as if he were directly addressing us, and they misunderstood him. That's not slander, that's misunderstanding, but it often leads to slandering the gospel.

In the Roman world, Christians were suspect because they appealed to slaves, they appealed to women, and so on. In our day, they get the opposite rap. So where Paul is trying to respond to the objections of his day, people today hear it in our cultural context. That's why it's so important to read the Scriptures in their own cultural setting: to see what Paul is doing, what he was saying, what he was responding to.

There is a slippery slope, but it's not what they think. Critics point to all these more liberal churches and say that they started ordaining women and lost any compass regarding sexual morality. The slippery slope there wasn't that they changed their view to say, "Oh, Paul didn't mean what we used to say he meant." The slippery slope there was, "Who cares what Paul thought?"

That's it. That's the slippery slope. Whereas there were people ordaining women who were evangelical long

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before the liberals thought of it; Pentecostal and holiness movements had women in ministry way before. Over 27 percent of ordained ministers are women in the Assemblies of God. Try calling the Assemblies of God liberal. It's absurd. Or Church of the Nazarene, and so on.

MH: In the Global Methodist Church, they can't make enough gowns for women pastors. They're out of material and there are so many orders to fulfill. We also know the majority of abolitionists in the 1800s were Protestant evangelicals. The slippery slope idea came after the presentation of egalitarian theology by our good friends and leaders in the 1800s, not just in the US, but in India, in Great Britain, and around the world.

Getting back to your points, what can we do about people who slander us and our ministries? What have you done?

CK: Sometimes I try to ignore them and just pray, pray the Psalms. What I try to do, especially when it's a fellow Christian, is to try to reach out to them. Back when I had more time, certainly on the egalitarian issue, I tried to reach out and build bridges, and I found that to be fruitful because it broke down some level of misunderstanding, at least about me and sometimes about egalitarians more generally.

Sometimes they would say, "No, some egalitarians think this," so you can't always change people's minds, but at least you can turn the other cheek and show Christian love, and hopefully there'll be a Christian response.

MH: Is there anything we can do to prevent slander, Craig, do you think?

CK: It helps to make sure we're not guilty of it ourselves. Once our words get out there, we can't control what's done with them. At least we can help if in the context, we try to make sure we're not misrepresenting them. I've seen this in a current topic I'm working on where there are some people who are very conciliatory on either side, and they'll sometimes mention each other as being conciliatory.

MH: So being conciliatory, not slandering them ourselves, and being open to correcting caricatures if we're proven wrong is key. How do we respond when people slander us? It's one thing to work to prevent slander, but when someone intentionally and cruelly misrepresents you? I'm guessing you have felt this way.

CK: Yeah. What I found I need to do is to pray, let it go for long enough to cool down, pray, and often talk with a close confidant, usually my wife. When I pray, I get things in perspective about what really matters eternally. Sometimes the Lord will give me direction while I'm praying; sometimes he'll just give me perspective.

There was one issue where I'd been really misrepresented in a review, I didn't really want to dialogue with the

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reviewer, but somebody kept trying to set up a debate. The reviewer kept saying, “No, you should do this with me. We should go at this together.” I said, “Look, I’m not going to do it with you. You misrepresented me, and you’ve misrepresented everybody else where I’ve checked your sources.” So there comes a point where you turn the cheek, but there also comes a point where you tell the truth. I don’t go into it assuming that the person has bad motives, and even in that case, my assumption is more that the person is so fixated on their theory that they have a problem understanding other things rather than that they were deliberately misrepresenting.

Somebody else recently asked me to endorse his book. I get so many book endorsement requests, I can’t keep up, but I did take a look at this one and found that he misrepresented me as well as some other people. I thought, “I don’t think I’d better.”

MH: What did you do?

CK: I didn’t do anything. Next time I see him, if we’re chatting and it happens to come up, I’ll talk about it.

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If not, I’ll let it go, because I don’t think I’m the only person who has experienced that. I don’t think he was deliberately trying to. In this case, I think it was a misunderstanding. So, in my own writing, I need to make sure to be more explicit about what I don’t mean the next time I say something like that. I think it was explicit in the context, but not clear enough to prevent that misunderstanding.

MH: I’m wondering about how to make reparations when one has been slandered or if there was a lack of clarity and understanding. The person may not be as well educated or alert to the sources that you are alert to and conversant with. It could be intentional and cruel, but have we a right to ask for reparations? Have we a right to say, “Okay, these things have happened and only God can question our motives, but what can we do now to make amends?”

CK: There was one time where I asked for a correction where something was really public. Then there was a different case where I didn’t ask for public repudiation, but the person spoke in front of about a thousand people and I was there. He said, “Craig Keener’s view is this,

but the correct view instead is this.” Well, the view that he described as the correct one was actually my view. I caught up with him afterwards and said, “The view that you presented as mine is not my view. The other view is my view.” He said, “Oh, I guess I should have read your book.” He had taken his understanding of my book from a misrepresentation by one of my detractors.

This also happened to me with the Asbury revival, the Asbury outpouring. I wrote a Facebook post and somebody interpreted it one way, then someone else saw that interpretation and it ended up in a major news article. I had people writing to me while I was participating in the outpouring asking me why I was against the outpouring! It was the exact opposite.

MH: That’s why investigative journalists and theologians, academics, and lawyers invest enormous time hearing from all parties. When you’re praying for God’s wisdom on all of this, how has God responded?

CK: He doesn’t always give me wisdom on how to deal with it. Sometimes he just comforts me, and I don’t really suppose that I have to deal with it. I just depend on his comfort. It depends on how influential the misrepresentation is. Sometimes it also depends on if I have time. One brother wrote me about somebody who misrepresented me, and I hadn’t seen the misrepresentation. To respond to it, I would have to go and watch the videos, but I don’t have time to do that. So I was glad this other person was responding for me as to what he thought I meant. I’m also not sure how much good it would do, because this person has an audience of hundreds of thousands. I’m not going to make a big difference responding to him. If I can get into a dialogue with him that his followers can hear, that’d be worth it, but I don’t really have that many people who listen to me.

MH: Well, thank you very, very much. We appreciate you so much.

Notes

1. Howard Taylor, Geraldine Taylor, *Hudson Taylor’s Spiritual Secrets* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 141–145.
2. Voice of Martyrs, *Hearts of Fire* 2:187–93. For other cases of slanderous misrepresentation, see e.g., 204–5.
3. Rupert Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith Under Attack* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 13.
4. 17 Rooms Global Flagship, “Gender Equality,” *2021 Room Documents* (2021): https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-Room-documents_Room5.pdf.