

# What does the Bible say about cancel culture?

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Niel L. Golightly resigned recently as Boeing’s communications chief. The cause: he wrote an article nearly thirty-three years ago that said women should not serve in combat.

His article appeared in the December 1987 issue of *Proceedings*, a monthly publication of the US Naval Institute. Golightly was a twenty-nine-year-old Navy pilot when he wrote: “Introducing women into combat would destroy the exclusively male intangibles of war fighting and the feminine images of what men fight for—peace, home, family.” He added that, on a five-thousand-man aircraft carrier, “There is simply no room for the problem of sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, pregnancy, love triangles, and adolescent emotional crises.”

In an interview, he stated that these views in no way represent what he believes today. Nonetheless, after employee complaints about the 1987 article, he chose to resign for the sake of the company.

## Canceling Jimmy Fallon

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Cancel culture” has been described as “removing of support for public figures in response to their objectionable behavior or opinions. This can include boycotts or refusal to promote their work.”

Examples:

- An editorial page editor at the *New York Times* resigned in the wake of fierce criticism after publishing an opinion piece by the conservative Sen. Tom Cotton.
- professor at UCLA is under investigation for reading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in his class since it included the N-word.
- Comedian Jimmy Fallon issued a public apology after the hashtag #jimmyfallonisoverparty went viral, protesting a video clip that surfaced from twenty years ago in which he wore blackface to impersonate Chris Rock.

Any of these issues could be addressed through conventional means. By contrast, “cancel culture” approaches use social media to organize an outcry that threatens swift reprisals if its demands are not met immediately. Anyone can organize such a protest, whether their outrage and called-for response are justified or not.

This phenomenon is causing alarm even on the cultural left. Harper’s magazine published “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate,” which was initially signed by 153 well-known writers and public intellectuals. (Two later withdrew their names.) They warn about “a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity.”

In their view, “The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted.” As a result, “it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought.”

Among their examples: “Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes.”

The result, they believe, “has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal.” In their view, “The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away.”



## Canceling Abraham Lincoln

Criticism on social media is not “cancel culture” unless it tries to “cancel” its subject in some way. As *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat writes: “You are not being canceled if you are merely being heckled or insulted . . . no matter how vivid and threatening the heckling becomes. You are decidedly at risk of cancellation, however, if your critics are calling for you to be de-platformed or fired or put out of business.”

For example, former Gov. Howard Dean recently tweeted: “Unfortunately Christians don’t have much [of] a reputation for anything but hate these days thanks to Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell and other trump [sic] friends.” His statement, however offensive it might be to Christians, did not then call for a boycott or other actions against us.

By contrast, when Goya CEO Robert Unanue made positive statements about President Trump, there were quick calls to boycott his company and its products. (This despite his company’s donation of two million pounds of food to food banks during the pandemic and his earlier work with the Obama administration.)

Calls for reprisals against alleged offenses are evident throughout human history. One could say that Saul sought to “cancel” David when he called upon his son and servants to kill his perceived rival (1 Samuel 19:1). In the presidential election of 1800, surrogates of John Adams tried to “cancel” Thomas Jefferson’s candidacy by issuing claims against him that make many of today’s tweets pale by comparison; surrogates of Jefferson did the same to Adams.

It’s inconceivable today, but many newspaper editorials about President Abraham Lincoln and calls for his removal were scathing and vociferous in the Union prior to his assassination.

What makes this moment different is that, as Douthat notes, “the heat of the cancel-culture debate reflects the intersection of the internet as a medium for cancellation with the increasing power of left-wing moral norms as a justification for cancellation.”

He writes: “The emergent, youthful left wants to take current taboos against racism and anti-Semitism and use them as a model for a wider range of limits—with more expansive definitions of what counts as racism and sexism and homophobia, a more sweeping theory of what sorts of speech and behavior threaten ‘harm,’ and a more precise linguistic etiquette for respectable professionals to follow.”

Digital technology makes it possible to call for the cancellation of those who do not adhere to these “moral norms” on an unprecedented level of reach and immediacy. Anyone with access to the internet can post their outrage at perceived offenses. Anyone who “likes” or forwards these posts can join in the instant conflagration.

Villanova professor Jill McCorkel adds that this collective canceling of someone creates a sense of community. “It reinforces, at a time of political division, a sense of shared solidarity, at least among the people who are doing the canceling,” she said. “It’s psychologically intoxicating to feel part of a group and to feel a part of something larger than yourself.”

## **What Christians should expect**

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Cancel culture is rooted in the postmodern assertion that all truth claims are individual and subjective. Each of us interprets our experiences of the world in ways that are unique to us. As a result, we are told, there can be no such thing as “objective” truth.

Conventional wisdom therefore claims that there is only “your truth” and “my truth.” (Of course, to deny objective truth is to make an objective truth claim.) As Ravi Zacharias noted, “With no fact as a referent, what is normative is purely a matter of preference.”

Tolerance is therefore the great value of our society. We are told that we must tolerate and affirm any behavior that does not harm others. However, our “tolerant” culture is highly intolerant of anyone it perceives to be intolerant.

Cancel culture is just the latest expression of this contradiction.

As I have noted, recent Supreme Court rulings have protected religious liberty with regard to contraceptives and religious teaching at religious schools. However, these rulings have not addressed the merits of the religious beliefs under such protection. In the minds of many, these rulings have merely protected our “right to discriminate.”

Cancel culture picks up where the courts have left off.

If you believe that life begins at conception, many will accuse you of waging a “war on women.” If you have stated these beliefs publicly, you should not be surprised if abortion advocates surface your statements and use social media to call for reprisals against you and your company, school, church, etc.

If you have stated that marriage should be a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, your “homophobia” and “bigotry” may be used against you. If you have made the biblical statement that Jesus is the only way to heaven, your “intolerance” may likewise lead to reprisals.

The more visible your social status and leadership, the more a target you are likely to become.

I often make reference to Richard Niebuhr’s classic, *Christ and Culture*, and his five ways that the two have related historically. His model is useful for this discussion as well.

- A “Christ against culture” approach is to retreat from engagement with the fallen world. We are less likely to “canceled” if we don’t make statements or take stands on social issues. But this approach is difficult to reconcile with our call to be salt and light in our culture (Matthew 5:13–16).
- A “Christ of culture” approach is to adopt the shifting cultural norms of the day. If we change our minds on homosexual activity, for instance, we cannot be accused of homophobia and may be applauded for our tolerance. But the biblical prohibition against such activity is clear, despite claims to the contrary.
- A “Christ above culture” approach is to divorce Sunday from Monday and religion from the “real world.” However, to the degree that we are clear about our biblical beliefs, at least with our Christian friends, we risk being criticized for them by secular culture.
- A “Christ and culture in paradox” approach engages cultural issues for the sake of evangelism and ministry but focuses less on cultural transformation. To speak biblical truth on controversial issues, however, is to open ourselves to cancellation, even if we are not attempting to change the culture itself.
- A “Christ transforming culture” approach seeks to change minds, lives, and society. Such initiative will especially face opprobrium and worse.

Jesus was blunt: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18–19). Paul added his warning: “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Timothy 3:12–13).

Francis Chan noted: “Something is wrong when our lives make sense to unbelievers.” As my youth minister used to say, if you and the devil aren’t opposing each other, you’re probably going in the same direction.



# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT **CANCEL CULTURE?**

BY DR. JIM DENISON

## What Christians should do

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How should followers of Christ respond to the “cancel culture” phenomenon?

### **One: See persecution as a call to courageous perseverance.**

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David said to the Lord, “Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me” (Psalm 25:19). This was the experience of someone the Lord described as “a man after my heart” (Acts 13:22). If he faced “violent hatred,” we should expect the same. And we should pray for God’s protection as we continue to share God’s word.

Here was the secret to David’s courage: “I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken” (Psalm 16:8). Let’s do the same.

### **Two: Seek the reward of God before the acclaim of the culture.**

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It is often possible to serve both Christ and Caesar (cf. Matthew 22:21). Joseph was able to serve the Egyptian pharaoh and his Jewish family. Nehemiah was cupbearer to the Persian king and governor of Jerusalem. Esther was queen in Persia as well as her people’s protector.

But when we must choose, we must choose Christ over Caesar.

Peter and John said to the Sanhedrin’s demand that the apostles cease preaching: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19–20). Daniel continued praying to God in defiance of the king’s edict (Daniel 6:10). Jeremiah risked his life to speak prophetic truth to the king (cf. Jeremiah 38:14–23).

It is a paradoxical fact that the less we seek the acclaim of people, the more faithfully we can minister to them. Henri Nouwen noted: “We can really be in the world, involved in the world, and actively engaged in the world precisely because we do not belong to it, precisely

because that is not where our dwelling place is. Precisely because our home is in God, we can be in the world and speak words of healing, of confrontation, of invitation, and of challenge.”

### **Three: Choose to engage the culture with truth and grace.**

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Jesus’ words are emblazoned on libraries and universities across the land: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). But context is vital.

In the previous verse, our Lord “said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples’” (v. 31). Only on this condition would they know the truth and be set free by it.

Here we learn this vital fact: humans find true freedom only in obedience to the word of God.

As a result, when we speak truth to culture, we are giving others a gift they desperately need but can find nowhere else. Counter to the postmodern claim that all truth is personal and subjective, which makes evangelism and ministry an “imposition” of our beliefs on others, we are sharing good news that is vital and transforming.

An oncologist is not intolerant when she tells her patient that he needs lifesaving surgery. An attorney is not intolerant when he advises his client that she needs to plead guilty to avoid an even harsher sentence.

It is urgent that we continue to speak biblical truth to cultural issues. But it is also urgent that we speak the truth “in love” (Ephesians 4:15). In fact, such kindness is especially important as our response to the unkindness of others.

Jesus told his followers, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, ‘Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also’” (Matthew 5:38–39). In Jesus’ day, the left hand was never used in public. As a result, if I were to slap you “on the right cheek” with my right hand, I must employ a backhanded motion. This is obviously a shaming action rather than a life-threatening attack.

Jesus’ words depict physically what “cancel culture” through social media attempts to do verbally. According to our Lord, we must not respond in kind.

Scripture is clear: we are to “put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” (1 Peter 2:1). Instead, we are “to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (Titus 3:2).

With our words and attitudes, we are to reflect the truth and grace of our Lord.

## Conclusion

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Paul encouraged Timothy to “fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Timothy 6:12).

We do this by our personal character: “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness” (v. 11). To “pursue” (the Greek word means to “run hard after”) these virtues in our fallen culture is indeed a “fight.”

And we do it by our public words: “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13).

I’m convinced that if Paul were alive today, he would be using social media to spread the good news of God’s love and the truth of his word. And he would face criticism and worse.

Cardinal Newman was right: “Nothing would be done at all, if a man waited till he could do it so well, that no one could find fault with it.” Those who oppose biblical truth may try to cancel those who proclaim it, but we know how the story ends. As my college professor said, we can summarize the book of Revelation in two words: “We win.”

In the meantime, let’s be faithful to speak biblical truth with biblical grace. Let’s remember that those who reject this truth need it the most. And let’s choose the courage that honors Jesus and demonstrates the relevance and power of our faith to our fallen world.

Albert Schweitzer testified, “Truth has no special time of its own. Its hour is now—always.”

Do you agree?