



Lake Wales  
Church of Christ  
463 N. Buck Moore Rd.  
Lake Wales, FL 33898  
[www.lakewalescoc.com](http://www.lakewalescoc.com)  
(863) 676-4114

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# Tower of Strength

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower  
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”

—Proverbs 18:10

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## Equivocal Language

**Equivocal** *adj.* Having a doubtful meaning; susceptible of varying interpretations; ambiguous.

**Equivocate** *v.* To use ambiguous language with intent to mislead or deceive.

Equivocation is the bread and butter of slippery politicians everywhere. While equivocal statements are often praised for being “highly nuanced,” they actually are designed carefully to sound bold, while providing so many escape hatches as to be practically meaningless.

Let me give an example, a sentence from a recent speech by the President, ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), “Statement by the President on Ukraine,” Press Briefing Room, Feb. 28, 2014, 5:05pm EST).

The United States will stand with the international community in affirming that there will be costs for any military intervention in Ukraine.

The overall intent of the speech is to assure the American people that the United States will prevent

Russian expansion into Europe. The gist of the speech might be rendered like this:

Russia, stay out of Ukraine, or we will fight you!

But really, if you carefully examine each phrase, you will discover that the president has not bound himself to do anything. The phrase “stand with the international community” allows the United States to blame other countries for its own lack of action. The phrase “there will be costs” is so amorphous as to mean nothing—it could mean air strikes, or it could mean taking away the travel visas of a few Russian businessmen. And even that is further weakened by the phrase “in affirming that there will be costs.”

This is like the kid at school saying to the bully: “Stop ... or I’ll say stop again!” I highly doubt that this statement caused Russia’s president Vladimir Putin to lose any sleep.

Let me give another example. The President recently said in response to the Ferguson riots, ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), “Statement by the President,” Edgartown, Mass, Aug. 14, 2014),

Today, I’d like us all to take a step back and think about how we’re going to be moving forward... I made clear to the Attorney General that we should do what is necessary to help determine exactly what happened, and to see that justice is done... I also just spoke with Governor Jay Nixon ... and underscored that now is the time for all of us to reflect on what’s happened, and to find a way to come together going forward... I’m confident that, working together, he is going to be able to communicate his desire to make sure that justice is done.

The overall intent of the speech is to communicate the sentiment,

We hear your protests, and we are coming in there to set things straight!

But, if you examine carefully each phrase, you will notice that little has been promised. The paragraph is a marvel of using a thousand words to say nothing at all. The phrase “moving forward” always makes me instantly suspicious. The phrase, “what is necessary,” could mean anything from holding a press conference to holding mass executions. The verb “to determine” is watered down into the even emptier “to help determine.” And while “doing justice” is rock-solid, it is here balanced precariously on four unconvincing scoops of verbal pudding, “he is going ... to be able ... to communicate ... his desire ... to make sure ... that justice is done.”

Now, I actually am not concerned about the politics or leanings of this or any other president. Nor am I suggesting that the US should invade Russia, or that the Justice Department should turn a blind eye to shootings in Missouri. I’m quite sure I could find other good examples of dodgy language from politicians on both sides of the aisle. I simply provide these as two especially good examples of equivocation raised to an art form. This is how one sounds tough without having to do anything.

Here’s why I bring this up. It should be the goal of every Christian to avoid equivocating. Not just to avoid lying (which we know) but even to avoid equivocating. Jesus said, “Let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes,’ or, ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil (Matt. 5:37). Paul said, “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) and “laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor” (Eph. 4:25).

Equivocation is the game of politicians trying to offend no one, trying to avoid being pinned down to a certain course of action, and trying to be accurate only on technicalities. But that’s not good enough for Christians, who are to be the very embodiment of truth. Our speech should be plain, clear, and obvious.

Parents should avoid equivocating. The other day, I watched a mom chase her child through a busy parking lot, screaming “I’ll make you wish you weren’t alive!” But, it was obvious the child had no fear of such threats. Either the threats were never followed through with, or the

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real consequence was something much less dramatic than a beating within inches of death. This, by the way, was not a young mother, and it was not a young toddler. Let us, as parents, avoid ridiculous threats, and always follow through. If we say “if you bump that porcelain vase again, I will spank you,” then that’s exactly what should happen. And let not the child get away with, “Well, I didn’t bump it, I only touched it!” If parents don’t gain a reputation for clarity and credibility when their children are younger, they will not be taken seriously when their children are older.

Preachers and teachers should avoid equivocating. I heard tell of a preacher who was very concerned about what the eldership would think about his stance on divorce and remarriage. He stated, “I believe exactly what the Bible teaches about that!” Surprisingly, the elders accepted this meaningless assertion and left him alone about it. He had merely tricked them into thinking they were in agreement on the subject, when actually they were at odds. He was equivocal: he used ambiguous language to mislead. And it only caused trouble down the road. Equivocating can be a form of deception.

Spouses should avoid equivocating. The wife asks, “where are you going this weekend, darling?” The husband answers, “I have to go on a business trip.” This is true, but his business meeting is scheduled to end at 10:00am Saturday, and he plans to spend the rest of the day fishing and golfing. Nothing wrong with this plan—if he’ll come right out and say it. Why hide behind evasive language? Why be shady? A marriage is based on trust—full and complete transparency and trust. Half-truths are not much better than lies. We don’t want to cause our spouses, after the real truth comes out, to feel like they have to start parsing our words, combing through our statements looking for signs of deception.

“Guile” (1 Pet. 2:1), being “double-tongued” (1 Tim. 3:8), and using “flattery” (Prov. 26:28, 29:5) are among the not-quite-lies that are condemned by God. Let us avoid them. —*John Guzzetta*

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### **Quote of the Week:**

“You can’t build a reputation on what you plan to do.” —*Henry Ford*