

Should or Ought to or Let Us?

By David P. Kuske

In the exhortations which we use in our preaching or teaching, we are often prone to use such expressions as “we should...” or “we must...” or “we ought to...” Take out an old sermon and look for these words. Listen to a fellow pastor or a teacher as he addresses his congregation or class. Look at the papers which your confirmation class or high school religion class has turned in to you as an assignment or a test. Listen to the people in your Bible class as they discuss a point. *Should's* and *must's* and *ought to's* usually abound.

Is it wrong to use these expressions? No, not if they are understood correctly. But there's the rub! Are they understood correctly by our people and our children when we use them?

We all would agree that communication is not what one person *intends* to say to another, but rather what the second person *actually* hears and understands when spoken to. We could cite many examples of humorous or tragic situations in which what one person intended to say was not what the other person actually understood. For example, if a child doesn't understand a word or concept which we use, the child may not ask us what we meant. Instead the child might just substitute a word or concept which he or she knows, but which may give a sense totally foreign to what we intended to convey.

What do we intend to say when we use *should* or *must* or *ought to*? Usually we use these terms in a sermon or a confirmation class in exhorting people to an action which is Gospel motivated. When we are making an application to the lives of our people or children, we say, “Since it is God's will that we live a holy life, we *should* want to do only what pleases him.” Or, “Since Jesus died to save us, we *ought to* be ready to serve him with our whole life.” Or, “Since God commands us to share the gospel with all people, we *must* be ready to sacrifice our time and treasure to carry out this task.” What we intend to say is that our love and thanks to God for his grace and mercy compel us to a life of service.

But is this what our people or children understand? Not always. Not even usually. Usually by *should* they understand either “We should be doing this, but because we are sinners we don't do it,” or “God is demanding that we do something, and we'd better do it or we are going to be in trouble.” With *must* they usually understand the latter (i.e. God's demanding and we'd better do it or else). With *ought to* they understand the former (i.e. We ought to do it, but we usually don't). If you don't believe that this is what our people or children usually understand by these words, just ask them on occasion in confirmation or Bible class. The papers of Seminary students also abound with these expressions, and spot checks have shown a very obvious confusion in understanding.

Sometimes when we use these terms in our preaching or teaching we might really intend to emphasize the failure to do what we should do or ought to do, or that we must do this or that or we can expect God's judgment. However, if we intend to use them as an expression of gospel motivation, and they are understood in this totally foreign sense, only confusion can be the result.

What expressions can we use that will avoid confusion and also communicate clearly what we intend to say? The New Testament writers give us the answer. *Should's* and *must's* and *ought to's* are scarce. Where the NIV or KJV translate with these expressions, often the Greek word is either δεῖ or ὀφείλω. The first really means “it is necessary.” In the pagan mouth this was the equivalent of “the fates have decreed”; in the mouth of the inspired writers of the New Testament it is the equivalent of “it is God's will” or “God wants.” The word ὀφείλω stresses the idea that there is an obligation which is owed. Both say more than the simple English should, ought or must.

Most often the writers such as Paul, Peter, James and John use either the imperative, the hortatory subjunctive, or verbs such as ἐρωτοῦμεν (“we ask”) or παρακαλοῦμεν (“we urge”). Look at I Thessalonians 5:12–27 which is a rapid series of exhortations which Paul directs to the Thessalonians and all Christians. Twenty times Paul urges the different aspects of a sanctified life. But there are no *should's*, or *must's*, or *ought to's*. In verse 15 when the NIV translates “try to be kind,” this is a questionable translation of what more accurately says, “keep on pursuing what is helpful (useful).” In verse 16 Paul does not say “We *ought to* be

joyful always,” but simply, “Be joyful always!” In verse 17 he does not say, “we *should* pray continually,” but more directly, “Pray continually.” In verse 18 he does not say, “We *must* give thanks in all circumstances,” but he exhorts, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” In regard to all these he then adds, “For this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Or look at Hebrews 10:19–25. After summarizing the results of Christ’s redeeming work the writer urges, “*Let us* draw near (hortatory subjunctive, v22), not “we *should* draw near.” “Let us hold unswervingly,” he says in verse 23, not “we *ought to* hold unswervingly.” “Let us consider,” he adds in verse 24, not “we *must* consider.” The NIV takes the two participles in verse 25 and also makes them hortatory subjunctives. This paraphrases the thought well if one makes a separate sentence of this verse.

If a person scans the epistles in only a very cursory way, this pattern of using either the imperative or the hortatory subjunctive quickly impresses itself on the reader. And this impression readily suggests to us that there is a better way to speak than with *should’s*, *must’s* and *ought to’s*. While the latter do not usually convey what we intend to say, the imperative and the hortatory subjunctive speak directly and clearly to the heart of the Christian.

Sometimes the suggestion is made that we might use the expression, “A Christian *will* do this or that.” But this way of speaking also has a serious flaw. It implies that if one is a Christian, he *will* live in a certain way. The obvious conclusion which some might draw is that since they have not lived this way, therefore they are not Christians. Again, that hopefully is not what the speaker intended to say, but it is what some can easily understand. Because of the confusion it can cause, the expression “a Christian will,” like *should*, *must*, or *ought to*, is best avoided unless carefully circumscribed.

The expression *try to* is often tacked on to *should* or *ought to*. One hears or reads, that *we should try to* or *we ought to try to*. These expressions confuse at best and may even completely mislead a person who takes them literally. If one is told that he or she should *try to* keep God’s will, he or she might very well be led to self-righteousness. If all that the person hears is that he or she is *to try to keep* God’s law, that person might think, “Well, I tried, so God will be happy with the best that I can do.” Or, if we tell a congregation of believers that they ought to try to preach the gospel to every creature, let’s not be surprised if what they hear is that a good try is all that God wants.

Sometimes the objection is raised that Luther used *should* in his explanations of the Ten Commandments. But the German *sollen* has a fuller idea of obligation than the English *should* and none of the implication that *we should have* even though we didn’t. Even more telling is the point that Luther combined the word *should* with *fear and love*. “We should fear and love God,” he wrote, not just, “We should.”

The point is that we would do well to step back on occasion and take a good hard look at the expressions we are using to exhort the people committed to our care. It is so easy to slip into *should’s* and *must’s* and *ought to’s* which do not convey what we intended to convey. This writer confesses to this fault very often also. Students in his class are conditioned by the red underlining of their *should’s*, *must’s*, and *ought to’s* to be on the watch for a better and clearer way to say what is really intended. Their smile at times in class reminds the red underliner that he too does not always avoid what he counsels them to avoid.

If we want to stress something as God’s will, let’s just say that. “It is God’s will that we ...” or “God wants us to ...” says clearly what “we should ...” or “we must” or “we ought to ...” may or may not convey clearly. The imperative is a direct and clear call to the Christian to drown his Old Adam and to let his New Man come forth and arise. On the other hand, “we should” or “we ought to” may well convey the negative idea that what is being urged is well nigh impossible instead of being a stirring call to action. The hortatory “let us ...” or “may we ...” is an urgent exhortation which the gospel motivated Christian surely understands without the confusion which *must* or *ought to* might well convey.

Let the final words of this article demonstrate the point by way of an exhortation to you. Which of the following speaks more clearly and encouragingly to you, A or B?

- A) We *should* remember that in communication it is not what we intend to say but what people actually understand us to say that counts. We *ought to* learn from the writers of the New

Testament epistles how to exhort Christians directly and clearly. We *must* follow their example and use the imperative and the hortatory subjunctive rather than *should*, *must*, and *ought to*.

- B) Remember that in communication it is not what we intend to say but what people actually understand us to say that counts! Learn from the writers of the New Testament epistles how to exhort Christians directly and clearly! Let us follow their example and use the imperative and the hortatory subjunctive rather than *should*, *must* and *ought to*.