



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

November 15, 2020

# **An Accent? Who, Me?**

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

# **An Accent? Who, Me?**

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

© 2020 by Dr. Bruce Lancaster and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 16, 2020

*I Corinthians 13:1-7*

*Matthew 26:69-75*

I remember soon after I moved here, I was checking out at CVS and talking with the clerk. As I finished the transaction, she looked at me, “You’re not from around here, are you?”

My accent is rather hard to disguise, and some of you may also have noticed that I’m not from around here; but from my point of hearing, I’m looking forward to moving back to where people don’t have an accent!

Our scripture lesson tells the story of how Peter’s Galilean accent caught the attention of a young woman across a warming fire on a cool evening in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the high priest.

All the other disciples had fled after Jesus’ arrest. Peter stayed, even though it was in the shadows. There was danger in every step he took.

The flames of the fire suddenly shot up, casting a wider circle of light. Peter instinctively moves a step back, but not before the young girl notices him.

She comes over and says, “You were with Jesus; you are both from Galilee.”

Peter denies it, and when another young lady notices him, again he denies any involvement with or knowledge of Jesus, that man on trial behind those walls of Caiaphas’ house.

But these confrontations catch the attention of others, and they gather round, and the voices rise like the flames of the fire burning in Peter's heart, "We know you are one of his disciples, for we can tell by your Galilean accent."

Again, Peter denies it. Then he hears the crowing of a rooster, and he remembers Jesus prediction of Peter's denial.

The curtain closes on this scene, but before it falls, the Bible says Peter left the campfire and went into the night and cried bitterly.

Scholars tell us that the Galilean accent was unmistakable. It was rustic and rough. You could take the man out of Galilee, but you couldn't take Galilee out of the man.

It was Peter's accent that gave him away. It was part and parcel of who he was, a Galilean by birth; but it was also part and parcel of what he was, a friend of Jesus by new birth.

Peter's Galilean accent was not just a matter of how he talked. It was also very much a way to describe who he was.

Accents have as much to do with our character as with our speech.

What this story tells us is that we cannot rid ourselves at a moment's notice of the patterns of speech, the values of our character that have been formed over a lifetime.

The great musical of Rodgers and Hammerstein, "South Pacific," was at its heart a story about our hard-to-change accents of race and religion.

One of the plot lines follows the character of Lieutenant Joe Cable, played by John Kerr. Joe Cable is a Philadelphia blueblood who is falling in love with a dark-skinned island girl.

He struggles with his love for her as opposed to the way of life he's been raised to follow. He sings a wonderful song, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," that describes the accent of where he's from:

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear,  
You've got to be taught from year to year.  
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear.  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid  
Of people whose eyes are oddly made  
And people whose skin is a different shade.  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
Before you are six or seven or eight,  
To hate all the people your relatives hate.  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

We develop our accent at an early age as to who we are, how we live, how we speak life: hatred, fear, pride, prejudice, or love, respect, justice, kindness, humility.

And that accent is developed, strengthened over the years. It's happening at soccer fields, dance lessons, classrooms, in our offices, on the golf course, around the bridge table, movies we watch, video games we play, in carpools, around the kitchen table....

I have to ask, “What accent for life are we hearing, speaking? Are we surrounding ourselves with people who speak the language of Christian living, not only in the sanctuary but outside these doors?”

In his book, *Keeping Your Teen in Touch with God*, Dr. Robert Laurent shared a study conducted by the National Sunday School Association.

They administered a poll in which they talked to two thousand students who had belonged to a conservative protestant church but who were no longer participating; and they were asked why they were no longer active in a church.

Number one was ‘too judgmental’. Number two on the list was ‘adult hypocrisy’, people who said one thing and did another. As one person said, “People who were Sunday-only Christians.”

I don’t believe they were looking for perfect Christians. What they were looking for were people whose lives were real, people who were honest about their faith in the good times and the bad.

They were looking for people whose lives were worth listening to, whose accent of love spoke from the heart and lets you know where they’re coming from.

Isn’t that what an accent does? You can tell by my accent that I come from the South, a matter of geography

But the accent of the Christian life is a matter of geography of the soul. People should be able to tell that you come from fellowship with the Galilean, Jesus of Nazareth.

I've told you part of my faith story, growing up in the '60s in Louisiana, my father was Superintendent of Education as the schools were being integrated. We would get threatening phone calls, cursing tirades against my father and my family.

I knew some of the voices; it was a small town, and many were 'good church-going Christians' but I was confused by their accent of hatred and violence, anger and fear.

Now let me be clear, I am no better than them, for if I have learned anything since those days, it is that if we humans are united in anything, it is our sin and our words betray our accent of sinfulness.

I remember, though, something Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people."

Words are powerful. Words can damage: from teachers, parents, friends, from the not-so-friendly; words that hurt, knock you down, kick you while you're down.

But words can be powerful miracles: words that help, words that heal, words that come at unexpected times and carry unexpected blessings; lift you up, put a smile on your face, the right word at the right time that makes life good!

So if you hear anything today through this slow southern accent of mine, it is my conviction that we must speak, as Paul describes it, with an accent so clear, so strong, the world will know where we are coming from, will know who we are coming from.



There's nothing much else to distinguish us Christians from the rest of the world, except, like Peter, that our accent for life reveals us for who we are: Disciples of Jesus Christ who speak with love that endures.

So, let us go, not crying into the night, but speaking, singing, living with an accent converted by love.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)