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## GOSSIP: STOKING THE COALS OF CONFLICT

*“Without wood a fire goes out; without  
gossip a quarrel dies down.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Board of Elders of Third Presbyterian Church<sup>2</sup> had made the difficult decision not to renew the youth pastor’s contract. Ben just didn’t seem to have the gifting and energy needed for that ministry. He and the elders met to discuss his contract, and one elder spoke strongly about Ben’s poor supervision of a particular event in which two young lovers were discovered kissing in a dark classroom. Ben expressed regret about the incident but blamed it on the parent chaperones. After the heated discussion cooled down, everyone agreed that Ben would leave his position at the end of the year with an excellent character reference and three month’s salary. The conflict appeared to be amicably settled—until the annual congregational meeting. When the subject came up, wild and angry charges started to fly: that Ben had tried to corner unsuspecting girls in dark classrooms, and (on the other side) that the elders had been abusive and manipulative in order to dump Ben. Ben’s parents, members of a sister church, were threatening a libel suit. Why did this disaster happen, even after an agreement had been reached for the original conflict? In one word—gossip!

Many people dismiss gossip as a trivial sin compared to the Technicolor varieties such as drunkenness and drug addiction, explosive anger and murder and, of course, the full range of sexual immorality. In our age of flagrant wickedness, we find it difficult to take gossip seriously or even to identify it accurately. We might even excuse gossip, contending that everything we are saying is true and factual. Clearly, a biblical understanding of gossip is crucial.

<sup>1</sup> Pro 26:20. Unless otherwise noted Bible quotations in this paper are from *The New International Version*, © 1971, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society.

<sup>2</sup> This story is fictitious, but compiles elements from many different conflicts and illustrates experiences far too common in our churches.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Gossip is best understood by placing it in the larger context. It is a violation of the Ninth Commandment. *“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”*<sup>3</sup> The Westminster Larger Catechism<sup>4</sup> got it right by including among these “false witness” sins “all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors,” and “speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, talebearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions....” Who would attempt to defend such blatant sins? *“The works of the sinful nature are obvious...”* (Gal 5:19). However, it is not so obvious that every sin must be understood in the light of its positive counterpart—the righteous “duties” required by God’s Law.

The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocence; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

“Promoting of truth...and the good name of our neighbor,” is the core positive principle that gossip undermines. Here’s a brief working definition of gossip: **confessing others’ sins behind their backs, in a manner and timing that fails to edify the church in Christ-likeness.** When saying or listening to anything negative about another (their sins, failures, character flaws, etc.) we must ask ourselves, “What is this communication<sup>5</sup> achieving?”

<sup>3</sup> Exo 20:16 KJV; cf. Pro 21:28, Matt 19:18, and many other texts.

<sup>4</sup> Questions 142-145. Many of this catechism’s incisive descriptions are still unsurpassed after 500 years.

<sup>5</sup> “Communication” is used here rather than “speech” because the proliferation of information technology has opened up so many new

“What is the likely effect of this communication on the speaker and recipients?” “What is the motive behind it?” “Will it stand up when judged by the standards of Scripture?” And above all, “Does it honor Christ?”

Using that basic framework of sin contrasted with its alternative, we will focus on some key features of gossip.

## WALK IN THE LIGHT—NOT GOSSIP

We begin by looking at the NT word for gossip that means, literally, “whispering.”<sup>6</sup> Gossip is confessing others’ sins behind their backs. It is speaking negative words about a person that we do not want that person to hear. It is communication that remains intentionally secret from the one who is the subject of the communication. The sinner hates the light and walks in darkness “for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:20).<sup>7</sup> Yet walking in the clear light of open truth-speaking is the only place where “fellowship with one another” can thrive (1 John 1:7).

At this point it is important to note carefully that the accuracy of the content in the gossip is not its defining issue; a statement may be factual yet still considered gossip. Spreading lies makes everything worse, of course. “A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbors deceit” (26:24). “Slander” adds the additional offense of falsehood to the deviousness of gossip. “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people” (Lev 19:16).<sup>8</sup> “I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander<sup>9</sup>, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2 Cor 12:20). Slanderers are gossips who tell lies, and all lies have

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opportunities for both good and evil. Some of the worst gossip happens in cyberspace because it travels at a speed and to an extent the biblical authors could never dream of.

<sup>6</sup> *Psithurismos*. Note the onomatopoeia in the Greek as well as in the English word “whisper”—the word imitates the sound it describes.

<sup>7</sup> The matter of heart-level motives behind gossip goes beyond the scope of this paper. But it can be said that gossip’s deceit has a root in fear, often fear of the open conflict that might happen if honest communication took place.

<sup>8</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version © 2001 by Crossway Bibles. Hebrew for “slanderer” is *rakyl*. “The translation ‘talebearer’ found in some cases in the KJV and ‘gossip’ in some versions is too light as the contexts show” (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol II, 1980, Moody Press, p. 848). There is no need to split hairs on precise definitions of the vocabulary—a precision greater than the scriptural usage affords.

<sup>9</sup> Greek *katalalia* (“speaking against”). Another NT word used for slander is *blasphemia*, e.g., “...to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men” (Titus 3:2).

their origin with the prince of darkness who is “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). The Word shocks us into repentance by showing such evil speech as traitorous disloyalty to a Holy God. “*Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it*” (Jas 4:11).

## TRANSFORMED TOGETHER—NOT GOSSIP

Why is such speech evil? It is because gossip undermines the divine purpose of communication: “*speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ*” (4:15)<sup>10</sup>. The Holy Spirit begins with sinners alienated from God and from one another and transforms them together into a people united in the love of Christ. The image-of-God shattered at the Fall is restored—heralding the day when we will all see our Lord and “*be like Him, for we will see Him just as He is*.”<sup>11</sup> God’s design for communication has in view the New Creation itself when all those saved out of the nations will gather in united worship around “*the throne of God and of the Lamb*” (Rev 22:1ff.).

That spectacular vision of the future shapes the battle lines in the present. The devil hates Christ’s saving work, and our flesh resists it; Christ has overcome the devil, and the Holy Spirit will conquer our hearts and our tongues. The stakes are high with souls in the balance. In fact, we stand on the front lines of cosmic warfare whenever we open our mouths. “*Do not let any rotten word come out of your mouths but only that which is good for building others up according to the need, that it may give grace to those who listen*” (Eph 4:29).<sup>12</sup> Every word proceeding from our mouths must be a channel of the demerited<sup>13</sup> favor of God, and any communication that falls short of this bar is sin. Such is the towering demand of God’s holy Law—which is also his template for our transformation in holiness.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul’s words are, of course, directed to the church, the covenant people of God. But since God’s Law is the correct standard for all humankind, not just believers, we can appropriately apply the same principles in non-church contexts. It is wrong to gossip about co-workers, for instance, even if they are not believers.

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 1:3 New American Standard Bible © 1971, 1995, The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>12</sup> Author’s translation

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes called “unmerited favor”; “demerited” is preferred because it makes clear that in Christ, God gives us the *opposite* of that which we deserve.

## UNITY—NOT GOSSIP

Because “*the wages of sin is death*,” it always brings deathly things into human relationships—and the communication that takes place within them. The book of Proverbs remains unsurpassed in showing the varieties and consequences of sinful communication. Gossip is high on that list. “*A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip<sup>14</sup> separates close friends*” (Pro 16:28). Gossip bears the rotten fruit of discord.

Often the best way to judge speech is by its fruit. Gossip violates the Law because it is a species of “rotten” words, communication that divides the church rather than edifying and unifying it. Gossip communicates negative content—something bad, probably sinful, about another person—said in a manner and context that harms God’s people rather than encouraging Christ-likeness in them. Gossip is the opposite of words that “*give grace to those who listen*” and is therefore a serious sin.

The implications of Ephesians 4:29 for our communication takes our breath away: every word must “*give grace*.” When I talk about the weather, it must give grace to those who hear or I am sinning. And it tells me that even if my words are not in themselves sinful, if their effect is unedifying in a particular context my communication has become sinful because it brings “rotteness” into relationships. The principle of judging speech by its effect is easily observed. How many close friends have been needlessly and tragically separated by gossip and other careless speech? Such separation prevents growth in unity into the likeness of our Lord. No wonder Solomon condemns such speech as “perverse.”<sup>15</sup> It tears down rather than building up. It undermines that unity which is meant to display the glory of Christ (Eph 2:14-16; 4:3-5) and the love of the Father for his own Son and for those who trust in him (John 17:23).

## LET IT DIE – NOT GOSSIP

James, the NT writer of wisdom, knew the destructive power of sinful speech. “*Consider what a*

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<sup>14</sup> As with *rakyl*, this Hebrew word (*nirgan*) may imply something closer to slander, suggesting falsehood communicated with secrecy, cf. 6:14 & 19 where the one who separates close friends is a deceitful “false witness.”

<sup>15</sup> In this comparative proverb (16:28), the “perverse man” is parallel with “gossiper,” again indicating the seriousness of this sin in contrast with the triviality of the common understanding today. Gossipers do not think of themselves as perverse and evil people.

*great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body* (3:5-6). Open and angry battles in the church produce words that can burn a forest down to ashes. But the secret sin of gossip keeps the smoldering coals stoked and ready to erupt into a conflagration at a moment’s notice. No doubt James recalled Proverbs 26:20, “*Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down*.” In fact, the undercover gossip and the quarrelling brawler work hand in hand—and may even be the same person. “*As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife*” (26:21).<sup>16</sup> Wise people know that often the best strategy for handling information critical of others is to drop the matter entirely. “*A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense*” (19:11). Wise people pray for discernment and a sense of proportion before they speak—and they choose their battles carefully. Some things are worth fighting over. Most things are not. So drop the matter and let the conflict die.<sup>17</sup>

## KEEPING TRUST – NOT GOSSIP

Keeping sensitive information confidential is usually the right and wise course in healthy relationships. “*A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret*” (11:13). The higher the level of intimacy (with marriage at the pinnacle), the greater the necessity for trust—and the greater the offense when that trust is broken. For that reason those who talk a lot especially need to be aware of communication pitfalls. “*A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much*” (20:19). “*The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly*” (15:2).

As with virtually all the aphorisms in the book of Proverbs, the ones about confidentiality speak in black-and-white terms about matters that are typically true.<sup>18</sup> They do not attempt to address every situation, such as those times when a loving friend

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<sup>16</sup> This entire section, Proverbs 26:17-28, describes careless and evil speech.

<sup>17</sup> When is a matter of sin too serious to overlook? Ken Sande (*The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Third Ed., Baker Books, p.150-151) suggests these diagnostic questions: Is it dishonoring to God? Is it damaging your relationship? Is it hurting others? Is it hurting the offender?

<sup>18</sup> A single proverb cannot give all the nuances and fine print that 21st century western culture demands. Solomon and the other biblical authors were wise men and prophets, not attorneys or German theologians.

must seek the involvement of others—sometimes even ecclesiastical or government authorities—for the sake of conscience, for the other person’s good, or for the honor of Christ in the church (Matt 18:1-20; Rom 13:1-5). Moreover, frequent talkers are not always to be avoided, because the heart of the gossip problem is not frequency of speech but its content and effects. When they betray confidences, gossips are “fools” who undermine trust, leading to a further degeneration of communication and increasing harm to relationships. Truly, gossip creates a vicious cycle that only the Gospel can reverse.

## **A GOSPEL THAT COVERS SIN – NOT GOSSIP**

We conclude by considering an obvious and important component to gossip: it requires at least two people. Someone must listen in order for gossip to take place. *“The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s inmost parts”* (18:8; 26:22).<sup>19</sup> Gossip continues because sinners want to hear it—a fact not lost upon tabloids, talk-show hosts, and political commentators who mine gossip at a nice profit. Why does our flesh gravitate toward hearing about the sins and failures of others? Why do we listen to gossip? Why do we speak it? Could it be that gossip is just one more form of self-righteousness—the heart’s vain attempt to build its own record by diminishing the records of others? At this point the darkened heart of gossip is clearly revealed: it is anti-Gospel and anti-Christ at its core. It has no grace, and in fact it hates grace. Gossip is a drowning man struggling to get his head above water by standing on the weaker drowning men underneath him. It works for a time, but soon they all go down to depths together.

The Gospel takes us in a radically and gloriously different direction. *“He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends”* (Pro 17:9; cf. 10:12). *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins”* (1 Pet 4:8, cf. Pro 10:12). *“Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins”* (Jas 5:20; cf. Gal 6:1-2). Putting these texts together we can understand that the opposite of “repeating a matter” is “covering” it—either by silently overlooking it or proactively restoring the sinner caught up in it. With King David

and the apostle Paul, we proclaim, *“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered!”* (Psa 32:1; Rom 4:7). As a redeemed sinner, I view other sinners in a new light. They are just like I am, a broken and guilty creature in constant and desperate need of God’s mercy. Now I see others as God does, as precious ones whose sins are washed clean—or as lost sinners to whom the Lord extends his grand offer of free grace. The tasty poison of gossip loses its appeal as I drink deeply of the *“free gift of the water of life”* (Rev 22:17). Now the Holy Spirit will use my speech—and my silence—in ways that minister spiritual life to those around me.

*“...If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7).

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## THE WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

Q. 76. Which is the ninth commandment?

A. The ninth commandment is, Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Q. 77. What is required in the ninth commandment?

A. The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbor’s good name, especially in witness-bearing.

Q. 78. What is forbidden in the ninth commandment?

A. The ninth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own or our neighbor’s good name.

## THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Question 112. What is required in the ninth commandment?

Answer: That I bear false witness against no man, (a) nor falsify any man’s words; (b) that I be no backbiter, nor slanderer; (c) that I do not judge, nor join in condemning any man rashly, or unheard; (d) but that I avoid all sorts of lies and deceit, as the proper works of the devil, (e) unless I would bring down upon me the heavy wrath of God; (f) likewise, that in judgment and all other dealings I love the truth, speak it uprightly and confess it; (g) also that I defend and promote, as much as I am able, the honor and good character of my neighbour.

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<sup>19</sup> Repeated twice in the book, highlighting its importance.