

'Sharing' and 'Frankness'

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Faithful Well, then, said Faithful, what is that one thing that we shall at this time found our discourse upon?

Talkative What you will. I will talk of things heavenly, or things earthly; things moral, or things evangelical; things sacred, or things profane; things past, or things to come; things foreign, or things at home; things more essential, or things circumstantial; provided that all be done to our profit.

Faithful Now did Faithful begin to wonder; and stepping to Christian (for he walked all this while by himself) he said to him (but softly), What a brave companion have we got! Surely this man will make a very excellent pilgrim.

Christian At this Christian modestly smiled, and said, This man, with whom you are so taken, will beguile, with that tongue of his, twenty of them that know him not.

Faithful Do you know him, then?

Christian Know him! Yes, better than he knows himself.

Faithful Pray, what is he?

Christian His name is Talkative.

Christians are currently being urged to become more talkative. Two of the words at present in vogue are "frankness" and "sharing". Such openness is held out as a Christian *duty* as well as being a source of mutual enrichment among Christians.

It stands to reason that Christians ought to value opportunities of friendship and fellowship with each other and that on such occasions, as on all other occasions, they should do their best to be free from hypocrisy, cant and humbug. In their talk with each other they should avoid needless misunderstanding and make every effort to minimise personal animosity, and to remedy its effects where it occurs. But there is a world of difference between telling the truth and telling the whole truth, between speaking honestly when one does speak, and telling all.

Those who appeal for frankness do not seem to appreciate this distinction. For they seem to be calling for a situation in which personal thoughts and feelings about oneself and others are expressed without reserve in public. Though even the advocates of such "sharing" recognise that there must be limits to such frankness, nevertheless what they are aiming at is clear. Christians ought to tell others much more about themselves than it is conventional to do at present. And, since sharing requires sharers, Christians must be prepared to listen to more about others than they are prepared to do at present.

I shall try briefly to argue that such an emphasis is both unbiblical and unwise. It is based upon at least two questionable principles about the human mind, and a misunderstanding in Christian ethics. First, the principles.

Principle One: Christians know their real selves (but are generally unwilling to reveal them). An unspoken and perhaps an unrecognised assumption in the advocacy of frankness is the idea that each of us knows ourselves but is inhibited by present conventions from publicising what he knows. Remove the inhibitions, and the enrichment will follow. But is it true that each of us knows himself in this transparent sense? Certain eminent thinkers appear

to have taken this view. For example Descartes said that there is nothing more easy for him to know than his own mind, and by this he seems to have meant not only that it was *easier* to know his own mind than to know anything else but also that it was *easy* to know his own mind. For Descartes, consciousness is an infallible sign of mind, indeed consciousness is mind, and such consciousness is self-intimating or transparent.

According to Descartes if a person wants to tell someone else his mental state then he can do so — he simply reads it off from his consciousness. Many commentators on Descartes point out that such a view is pre-Freudian, but it is not necessary to have been convinced by what Freud said about the unconscious to recognise its importance. Nor are modern novelists revealing much that is new when they attempt to limn such subcutaneous meanderings. Long before the rise of the novel, Puritan ministers had wrestled hard and long with the pastoral problems of inauthentic religion, "bad faith" and the dangers of self-deception.

And this is surely a biblical emphasis. At this point at least Scripture is clearly anti-Cartesian in its insistence that self-knowledge — a person's knowledge of his own inner motives and desires — is an extremely difficult attainment only made possible by the gift of wisdom. Left to himself a person is inclined to censor and suppress the truth about themselves. The New Testament repeatedly cautions against the possibility of self-deceit (1 John 1.8, 2 Cor. 3.18). The believer is advised to examine himself (1 Cor. 11.28, 2 Cor. 13.5). Most important of all, in Scripture God alone is said to be the one who knows the hearts of men (1 Kings 8.39, Prov. 21.2, Acts 1.24).

But there is a world of difference between telling the whole truth, between speaking honestly when one does speak, and telling all.

It may be said that frank talk is a way of getting to know oneself better. Perhaps it is. But it is more likely that a person's preparedness to reveal in public some deeply personal matter will heighten the prospects of distortion and self-deceit. Well-intentioned witnesses who have sworn to tell the whole truth have been known to be carried away by the occasion into error.

If we are defective in our knowledge of ourselves, of facts about ourselves and of the significance of those facts, this should induce in us an appropriate reticence in publicising our state of mind. For we may not have got the facts right. Talkativeness is not necessarily a sign of self-knowledge. It may be a sign of the very opposite, as Bunyan acutely suggests.

But even if we suppose that we do have accurate knowledge of ourselves, there is a further reason to be reticent.

Principle Two: Thoughts and feelings should generally be made transparent in public behaviour. It is easy to fall into the following line of thought. What is private is dark; what is dark is bad and evil; what is bad and evil ought to be confessed; what ought to be confessed ought to be publicly confessed, confessed in the light of day.

But when we think about this more carefully such a line of thought does not have very much to commend it. It certainly does not amount to a convincing *argument* for frankness. "What is private is dark". Yes, we often talk about keeping secrets, hiding them in the recesses of our minds, keeping things dark. But the fact that what is private may be appropriately described as "dark" does not mean that this darkness is the darkness of sin or moral evil. Much that is secret is sinful. Scripture compares sin to darkness (John 3.19-21) and to night, and holiness to light and day (1 Thess. 5.5). But it does not follow that because what is immoral is often kept secret that whatever is kept secret is immoral. Nor does it further follow that what it is right to confess it is right to confess publicly.

The present-day emphasis on frankness among Christians seems to have more to do with the modern cultivation of explicitness and "authenticity" than it does with Christian principle. How often — in certain types of journalism or television reporting, for example — is the suggestion made that what a person is not prepared to reveal to a reporter must for that very reason be shameful? What has the person to hide? Why does he not tell us? Such innuendoes ought to be resisted. A person's refusal to tell a reporter what he is thinking, or planning, or has done, need not be because such thoughts are immoral or shameful but because they are — quite simply — none of the reporter's business.

Yet the thrust of the New Testament teaching is that the tongue needs careful watching (James 3) and that the Christian ought to be slow to speak (James 1. 19).

A person's feelings towards his wife, his hopes for his children, his plans for his career, his state before God — these matters and much else are his own affair, part of his own and his family's private "space" which goes to make up a person's or a family's identity and individuality. A person may, under special circumstances, reveal such details to relatives or friends whose judgement he values. The disclosure of a person's most deeply-felt and private states can only properly take place in relations of trust and mutual respect and dependence of which a happy marriage and a deep friendship are the paradigms. To press for such disclosures in public in the interests of the enrichment of Christian fellowship is to run the risk of impoverishment of spirit.

Of course a person may, if he is sufficiently notorious or celebrated, write and publish his autobiography. But the point is that he has no obligation to do such a thing, and it may be prudent not to. Neither Christian morality nor Christian spirituality require a person to broadcast the details of his life widely or indiscriminately.

Our discussion is now beginning to touch upon ethical questions and so it is to the ethics of frankness that we must now turn. The suggestion that I wish to make here is that the basic thrust of such frankness is that it is *uncivilised*. Civilised relations between people depend upon self-restraint both in advancing one's own point of view and in putting the best possible construction on the expressed attitudes of others. Such mutual self-restraint occupies an exposed, easily trampled-on middle-ground between a situation in which every public action has to have a legal warrant in order to be permissible, and a state of total unrestraint, pure anarchy. Freedom of speech is not the duty of always speaking one's mind, but the privilege of being able to speak one's mind.

The maintenance of such civilised relations clearly depends upon each of us not broadcasting everything that we believe about everything and everyone, ourselves included. For it is only restraint in publicising one's views which permits a person's views to be sufficiently opaque and ambiguous for another person honestly to put a favourable construction (favourable to him, that is) upon them. Such restraint is seriously threatened by the cult of frankness, and civilisation is threatened with it, whether this is civilised relations within a church or within the wider community.

While they are distinct, the public and the private are not totally disconnected. What is private affects what is public and *vice versa*. Perhaps, as certain modern philosophers have argued, the existence of a public realm, a community of individuals, is a necessary condition of individuals identifying and describing their private states. But if people had to publicise whatever they thought this would at once impoverish the inner self. The requirement of decency and civility — that we do not say all that we think — safeguards such freedom of thought.

Lest anyone is tempted to condemn this point of view as "complacent", "bourgeois" or "middle-class" (and this is a predictable reaction) I shall now try briefly to show that such a view is fully in accord with the ethical outlook of Scripture.

To begin with, there is Christ's explicit teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ taught that Christians should keep quiet about when they pray, or fast or give (Matt. 6.1-18). These are essentially private activities because the danger of formalism and of self-advertisement is otherwise so great. The principle behind Christ's teaching is clear: a Christian ought to do what he can to prevent the moral perversion of his activities, and this frequently requires him to keep quiet about them.

From time to time during his ministry Christ refrained from telling his disciples about matters which they could not "bear" (e.g. John 16.12). No doubt a case could be made out for the view that such a practice was unique, occurring as it did at a special time in redemptive history. Yet Christ's practice surely embodies a more generally applicable principle about Christian talk and Christian teaching, namely that such talk should be governed by the overriding question, Does it edify? What is on the tip of my tongue may be true, and I may very much want to say it, but if it will cause confusion or despair or ridicule then I ought not to say it.

Then there is the whole character of the gospels as documents. The claims of liberation theologians and other radicals to the contrary, the four gospels are positively bourgeois in their restraint. There is much that the reader is not told about Christ that was there to be told. What did Christ look like? What were his mannerisms, his likes and dislikes, his small talk? What were his views, in detail, on the Roman occupation and the social problems of his day? Would it not be fascinating to have answers to these questions? Why the restraint? Why are the gospels so brief and scanty a record? The reason is obvious: because they are given to us not as a modern, critical biography, but to highlight one thing — the redemptive work of the Messiah, the work which the Father had given him to do (Jn. 4.34, 17.4).

Reticence is imposed about many things in order to highlight one thing. And if such reticence is built into the very fabric of the gospel narratives then surely it ought to

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