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Putting Rumours to Rest



Ethics

Ergänzungen zur Ethik

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Putting Rumours to Rest

Thomas Schirrmacher

“Whoever has gossiped knows (and we all have done it, because nothing interests us more than the human element), that the appeal of rumours about the private lives of our neighbours, friends and colleagues lies in speculation. Speculation can be correct, but it can also be wrong. And speculation appears to grow with a dynamic that does not seem to centre on truth content but rather on the rate of dissemination. Gossip exercises its greatest power when it begins to move along on its own. This is due to the fact that, in the case of gossip, the decisive proof is: If everyone is saying it, there must be something to it”

Everyone knows that malignant gossip at the expense of others is incongruous with love, and it is for this reason the New Testament, in an old Luther translation, warns about someone who “secretly maligns” and spreads “malicious gossip.” Slander is not reconcilable with the character of the church of Christ, and it truly destroys all sense of community in the family, at work, and in society. Who is allowed to live in the sanctuary of the Lord? It is whoever “... has no slander on his tongue ... does his neighbour no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman ...”(Psalm 15:3).

Malicious rumours and slander belong in a list of those attitudes and actions that are directed at our neighbours and that we normally immediately and clearly denounce: “... envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers ... (Romans 1:29b-30a); “... quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2 Corinthians 12:20b); “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind (1 Peter 2:1; comp. 2 Corinthians 12:20; 2 Timothy 3:3).²

The Command against Slander (Examples)

James 4:11-12: “Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.”

1 Peter 2:1: “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.”

Exodus 20:16: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.”

Deuteronomy 5:20: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.”

Exodus 23:1: “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.”

Leviticus 19:16: “Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour’s life. I am the LORD.”

Proverbs 30:10: “Do not slander a servant to his master, or he will curse you, and you will pay for it.”

Proverbs 11:13: “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.”

Proverbs 20:19: “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.”

Psalms 101:5: “Whoever slanders his neighbour in secret, him will I put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure.”

The biblical legal process stands or falls with the Ninth Commandment. People are allowed to act as witnesses against other people. In order to guarantee impartiality, they have to bear witness before people who are under oath before God’s law (elders, judges), and there have to be multiple witnesses who speak.

It is not forbidden to testify as a witness against another. What is forbidden is to give false witness or perjury. It is indeed legitimate to extend this prohibition to all sorts of malicious defamation, in the same way that the prohibition against murder encompasses murder with words.

The Two Most Important Texts in the Old and New Testaments against “Unwholesome Talk”

Eph 4,29-32: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³²Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (NIV).

Deuteronomy 19: 15-20: One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offence he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you.

Do We Need a ‘Rumour Commissioner?’

Where can a person go in our church communities to air grievances about false rumours? What can our churches do in order to stop the rumour mill? As a rule, nothing. The victim has to pay the other back in kind, taking care of it himself while at the same time not being too hard on the party involved, lest he be seen as unspiritual.

It would be correct to identify those who initiate rumours, ask for evidence and, if necessary, make it publicly known that an investigation of the rumours has led to determining their falsity.

The value of trusted third parties and trusted panels stands the test of time. Studies conducted at Swedish schools by Dan Olweus have demonstrated that violence in schools drops drastically if there is an official trusted third party and a personal and anonymous contact telephone number to which a victim can turn.³ If an institution has a women’s representative, harassment of women is reduced simply by the existence of such a position. It does not take someone continually denigrating others but rather the simple knowledge that a victim can turn to someone and that the issue will be handled responsibly. That is often enough to deter the offender.

The same applies to a church community. If the members of the church know that rumours will not be taken lightly and that members will be held responsible for them, the number of rumours will automatically decrease. In

addition, a perpetrator becomes a reluctant perpetrator when there is the danger of his becoming the ‘victim’ instead. Such would be the case if it is found out that his rumours came out of thin air or that in bad faith he made confidential information public.

Paul also wanted wise men from the church to mediate conflicts arising in the congregation (1 Corinthians 6:1-11). When, in a letter to a church, Paul publicly admonishes Euodia and Syntyche to end their quarrel at last and to “agree with each other in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2b), he expressly asks Syzygus to act as a mediator (Philippians 4:3). Paul is well aware that a quarrel can be so bitter that without public admonishment and without a trusted third party acting in an intermediary fashion, a settlement is not possible.

Paul knew all too well the everyday dealings with good and bad reputations: “... through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown” (2 Corinthians 6:8-9a) and could sometimes let bad rumours about himself rest: “But what does it matter? The important thing is that ... Christ is preached” (Philippians 1:18a). Having said that, justification against slander and against the allegation of false motives takes up astonishingly much space in Paul’s letters (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:3-27; 2 Corinthians 1:12-24; 2:17; 3:1-3; 4:1-6; 2 Corinthians 10-12; Galatians 1:10-24; Galatians 2; comp. also Romans 1:9-17; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). He wrote the following to

the Corinthians: “This is my defence to those who sit in judgment on me “ (1 Corinthians 9:3; comp. 2 Corinthians 12:19). Yes, Paul swears before the church in the face of reproaches and rumours that he is not guilty, and he calls again and again upon God as his witness (2 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:5; 2:10; Romans 1:9; Philip-
pians 1:8).

The point is not to put the spotlight on himself and commend himself, “For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends” (2 Corinthians 10:18). It has to do with good arguments and the clear language to rebut false allegations and malicious gossip.

Paul swears before the church that the rumours and slander are not true.

2 Corinthians 1:23: “I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.” (comp. the context in 1:22 and 23b-24).

Romans 1:9 = Philippians 1:8: “God ... is my witness ...”

1Thessalonians 2:5: “... nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness.”

1Thessalonians 2:10: “You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.”

The thought that a person is not allowed to vindicate himself when incorrect facts or thoughts are insinuated is completely foreign to the Bible. Whoever teaches that a Christian has to silently bear all rumours about himself or herself has the burden of proof to demonstrate where in the Bible this silence is demanded. A Christian can and will often find it wise to abstain from vindicating himself or herself, for instance in order to prevent further escalation. However, to say that abstinence is the only option and that in all cases silence has to be maintained is neither biblically justified nor is it liveable in the real world.

What can an individual do against rumours?

- Inquire more often and scrutinize the source of certain information. Negative information about others, which provenance is unclear and hurts others, is not to be further propagated. This breaks the rumour chain.
- When questionable sources are involved, let the partner with whom one is speaking know about one’s own disapproval of rumours. Investigate the truth of a rumour by asking the source and, where necessary, the person affected by the rumour.
- Listen to all involved parties (or witnesses) before making a judgment. Have serious conversations with people identified as sources or as those who spread rumours.

Speak as often as possible with people known to spread rumours, and let them know where you stand on rumours.

Which preventative measures can the church take against rumours?

- Preach and teach on the topic of rumours, and call for repentance and reconciliation.

Repeatedly convey that it is a matter of one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20).

- Preach and teach that in the Bible an accused person always has the right to present his view of things and to have the case checked by honest, uninvolved individuals (Deuteronomy 19:18). A person does not have to, but may, defend himself (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9:3).
- Upon the occasion of communion, point to the fact that people should reconcile with each other and excuse themselves for spreading rumours prior to taking communion (Matthew 5:23-25).
- Make public whom one can address if a person in the church who is the subject of rumours is suffering and wishes to have a discussion, or have the rumours stemmed, investigated or set right. Repeatedly offer that the church make an intermediary available. (See Philipians 4:2-3.)
- Set out a comprehensible way of showing how and by whom rumours can

and may be investigated. This begins with the question of whom a person can and should initially address (e.g., house group leader), includes the question of who is allowed to conduct an impartial investigation, and ends with the possibility of setting things right in the context of a small or larger group, according to how broadly spread the rumour is.

What can the church do against rumours in a concrete case?

- Go through the just-mentioned steps in the following order: intervention, investigation, involvement of a trusted third party, confidential committee, etc.
- See to it that in the end, the buck is passed to the person who is the source of the malicious gossip, not to the victim.
- Give victims of rumours the opportunity to inform the same framework or audience to set things right, that the rumour covered.

Talking about Others?

A misunderstanding is to be resisted at this point. Many people think that rumours are best fought by no longer speaking about others when they are not present. In this, a rumour is wrongly seen as the equivalent of speaking about someone. This is an illusory stipulation.

First of all, the Bible nowhere forbids talking about others. Rather, it forcefully presupposes conversations about others. Parents can only fulfill their parental responsibilities of bringing up their children if they talk about their children. Elders have to corporately consult about church members. Good advisors not only give other people advice; they also look for good advice relating to themselves. The question: “What would you advise Mrs Meier to do?” would be forbidden otherwise.

Also, the stipulation to no longer speak about others is completely illusory. One would want to say as Paul does: “In that case you would have to leave this world” (1 Corinthians 5:10b). Business people have to speak about their clients, teachers about their students, doctors about their patients, and the police have to look for witnesses. Each time I recommend a doctor, a store, a restaurant, or a musician to a friend, I speak about other people, and in some sense I make a judgment about them. We would not be able to speak about whether the violin virtuoso played well, whether the meat from the butcher is fresh, whom we want to vote for as Chancellor, and what we thought of the last sermon. Absurd!

On the other hand, slander does not mean speaking wisely about others. Rather, it means that a person either

1. disseminates things that are not true;
2. disseminates things that cannot be documented;
3. makes things public that could only be privately and confidentially known (e.g., from a friendship or on the basis of its being an official secret or a secret conveyed in confession); or
4. specifically disseminates things in order to hurt others and not for the benefit of the relevant party.

Justice and Peace

In the Bible, justice and honesty are conducive to peace. True ‘shalom’ is not achieved by ignoring problems but rather by seeking advice, entering into intensive conversation, engaging outsiders, and seeking justice.

Many Christians think that seeking justice and engaging a neutral intermediary or responsible leader would cause tension and conflict and make federal cases out of small problems. The Bible sees just the opposite. Seeking justice produces peace, and where justice is neglected, even the tongue “... corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6; comp. vv. 5-8).

For example, the fact that marriage is a covenant and has an external legal structure is not at the expense of the internal, invisible relationship. Rather, the external structure protects and fosters the internal reality.

Justice and peace in the Old and New Testaments are often encountered together as conceptual pairs (e.g., Psalm 72:3,7; 85:11; Isaiah 32:17; 48:18; 60:17; Romans 14:17; James 3:18; Hebrews

12:11). Justice brings about peace, and injustice brings about strife. “The fruit of righteousness will be peace” (Isaiah 32:17a), writes the prophet. The psalmist rejoices: “... righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Psalm 85:10a). And James writes: “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). God has a vintage manner of interacting with us. According to Hebrews 12:11, “discipline” by God is not comfortable at the time. Rather, it is “painful.” But to those who are trained in it, discipline “produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.”

First Expose and Admit; Then Forgive

In the Bible, reconciliation and forgiveness are not achieved when problems are ignored but rather by laying open the facts. God forgives us if we acknowledge the facts, albeit not blindly. This means that open dialogue is required and only then can a new start ensue.

As Christians, our problems are not solved by suppressing, ignoring, glossing over, or justifying guilt, mistakes, shortcomings, and misunderstandings but rather by uncovering what wants to remain in the darkness: “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (Ephesians 5:11).

Clarity will only be achieved, and a new start enabled, by forgiveness and reconciliation, where, as with Zaccha-

us, a serious reversal includes amends and setting things right.

Grace in the Bible does not mean to act as if nothing ever happened but rather to receive just deserts after investigation, disclosure, and determination of guilt. Where allegedly nothing has happened, no grace is required.

I find it splendid to not have to continually prove that I am faultless. Such an affected life tears us apart mentally. Permanently working on masks and cover-up maneuvers costs time and strains our nerves. In most cases, it does not work in the end. Jesus died substitutionally on the cross for my sins and failings, and for that reason, I can admit them to him as much as to the world around me. If my faults have already been admitted, then it has to be easier for me than for people without Jesus to admit who I really am.

However, what is decisive for my relationship with Jesus is that my faith begins with self-criticism. In this respect, my faith fundamentally differs from Islam, which does not really have true self-criticism. It does not have a self-criticism that is understood as recognizing defeat. In contrast, in the Bible faith begins with recognizing one’s own insufficiency. It is also not accidental that the Bible does not primarily criticize unbelievers and the evil world but rather believers. Complete books of the New Testament disclose the bad situation in Christian churches.

The Christian Faith: A Religion of Self-Criticism

In contrast to other world religions, an unsparing self-criticism is inherent to Judaism and Christianity. No religion has a self-criticism such as that found in Old Testament Judaism and New Testament Christianity. The failings of the most significant leaders are disclosed, and all too often God has to call upon outsiders in order to bring his people to reason. The Jewish author Hannes Stein writes in this connection:

“In contrast to the holy scriptures of Mohammed, the Hebrew Bible is not a book but a library. It is a colourful tapestry of narratives woven by a people over the course of millennia. No misdeed by the children of Israel is excluded from this incomparable convolution, no crime by their greatest kings concealed. Paul Badde holds: ‘Including the New Testament, almost every book of the Bible can be understood as a plea, an objection or a critical commentary of earlier history and history current at

that time. The result of this historical frankness is that self-criticism in the Jewish-Christian world has been seen as a virtue, as a sign of strength and not as an admission of weakness. In Islam it is different: Criticism of one’s own history? Unthinkable, a blasphemy! It would pull the foundation out from under revelation. It would be an insult to the prophet. And thus it is in countries shaped by Islam, there is neither freedom of speech nor debates in freely elected parliaments up until today.”⁴

In no religion do the followers of their own religion lose out as much as in the Old and New Testaments. The teaching that Jews and Christen are sinners and are capable of the worst deeds is shown quite plainly in the Bible. In the Old Testament, it is not the heathen peoples, nor is it the Romans and Greeks in the New Testament, whose atrocities and fallacious outlooks stand in the centre of things. Rather, it is the alleged or actual people of God.

Annotations

Anmerkungen

¹Tissy Bruns. „Das Gerücht“. *Die Welt*, January 22, 2003. p. 8 (lead article).

²Comp. the meaning in the political public eye: Lars-Broder Keil, Sven Felix Kellerhoff. *Gerüchte machen Geschichte: Folgenreiche Falschmeldungen im 20. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Ch. Links, 2006 and Christian Schertz, Thomas Schuler (Ed.). *Rufmord und Medienopfer: Die Verletzung der persönlichen Ehre*. Berlin: Ch. Links, 2007 (awakens, however, the impression that only the politically conservative camp works with rumour cam-

paigns). Regarding the legal side of protection of honor from a Christian perspective, see Thomas Zimmermanns. *Meinungs- und Pressefreiheit*. Holzgerlingen: Hänssler, 2006. p. 34-43.

³Dan Olweus. *Gewalt in der Schule: Was Lehrer und Eltern wissen sollten – und tun können*. Bern: Verlag Hans Huber, 2002³. p. 77.

⁴Hannes Stein. *Moses und die Offenbarung der Demokratie*. Rowohlt Berlin Verlag: Berlin, 1998. p. 47.

The Author

Über den Autor



Thomas Schirmacher (*1960) earned four doctorates in Theology (Dr. theol., 1985, Netherlands), in Cultural Anthropology (PhD, 1989, USA), in Ethics (ThD, 1996, USA), and in Sociology of Religions (Dr. phil., 2007, Germany) and received two honorary doctorates in Theology (DD, 1997, USA) and International Development (DD, 2006, India). He is professor of ethics and world missions, as well as professor of the sociology of religion and of international development in Germany, Romania, USA and India, and is president of Martin Bucer Theological Seminary with 11 small campuses in Europe (including Turkey). As an international human rights expert he is board member of the International Society for Human Rights, spokesman for human rights of the World Evangelical Association and director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. He is also president of Gebende Hände gGmbH (Giving Hands), an internationally active relief organisation. He has authored and edited 74 books, which have been translated into 14 languages.

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