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THE WITNESS OF CHRISTIAN HONESTY

by Jan Wood

Whatever is true

. . . honorable

. . . just

. . . pure

. . . lovely

. . . gracious

. . . . think on these things.

Philippians 4:8

I have been puzzled by the paradox of Christians being concerned with each nuance of Truth and amazingly careless and dismissive of ordinary truth telling. It seems foundational that you should be able to trust a fellow follower of Christ to tell the truth in all matters. My guess is that every Christian thinks of themselves as a person of integrity. We believe we are honest. We don't believe we are truth benders. Yet . . .

Our political discourse—in which evangelical Christians are a powerful component—is filled with deliberative non-truth and distortions. We are continuously bombarded by marketing ploys based on manipulation rather than truth telling. We pass on the most outrageous emails to one another with a click of the mouse. We find ourselves violating the truthfulness of Christ's Body by de-Christianizing those who disagree with us.

One of my favorite quotations is from William Penn who said that "Love is the hardest lesson in Christianity; but, for that reason, it should be most our care to learn it." In a world of polarization, spin, marketing manipulation and increasingly boundary-less expression I think we followers of Jesus need to attend to truth telling with the same sense of intentionality and faithfulness that Penn encourages us to give to loving as Christ loved.

Honesty is a commitment to factualness. Spin is a way to dodge honesty. Half truths are ways to mislead. An honest person may make a factual mistake; but an honest person is quick to retract the non-truth. An honest person changes her/his mind when facts differ from cherished opinions. A truth teller is faithful to the simplicity of the facts. The recent story about the arrest of Louis Gates, Jr. illustrates this so well. The 911 caller, Lucia Whalen, is quoted as saying, "I don't know if they live there and they just had a hard time with their key."

But I did notice they used their shoulder to try to barge in and they got in. I don't know if they had a key or not, 'cause I couldn't see from my angle. . ." ¹ But others in the incident elaborated on the straightforward observation and an honest call of concern became an explosive incident.

Honesty is humble. We all see life through our own lens of experience. No two witnesses observe exactly the same thing at a crime scene. Distortion is a facet of all of our perceptions. Being honest means that we are clear about our own biases and projections. Finding the truth of a situation, of a moment, is a collaborative journey in which we give our gift. Violences—small or large—do not serve truth telling.

Honesty is a commitment to holding facts in a grace-filled spirit. In Jesus' teaching, spirit counts. It matters if you hold ideas and people in generosity of spirit or in judgment and condemnation. Wrestling words out of their context and intent is dishonest. The Christian commitment to truth is holistic: it tells the truth of the facts *and* it is faithful to the intent and spirit of those facts. Any dialogue that rises must be fully consonant to the truth of all facets of the issue. Mean spirited news, entertainment or conversation—however factual or exciting it may be—displaces the Holy Spirit that calls us to be centered in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. ²

Honesty is disciplined. I am struck how, in our many contentious dialogues, the arguments and emotions are not about the facts or even the spirit undergirding those facts. The dishonesty comes from our fears, projections and speculations about possible future trajectory—*as if* they were facts or truth of intent/spirit. More often than not, these dishonesties rise from our fears. This is so evident in our present health care “debate.” Many folks can't have an honest dialogue about what is proposed because they are leap-frogging to what they assume are the future intentions of someone, some idea. This ceases to be an honest conversation, because one it is based in speculation and it often impugns the motives and intents of the other. It is another form of dishonesty that is neither consistent with Christ's Lordship nor lives immersed in Love that casts out fear. ³

Honesty in all things—in all situations—is one of the powerful witnesses of God's redeeming work in our lives. It is part of what sets us apart from the discourse of a broken world. It is a conduit through which God's amazing transformative work in the world flows.

It doesn't always fall from our heart and lips easily. A witness of honesty in our lives does require attentiveness and intentionality. But without adherence to honesty, who would believe we are really followers of Christ?

1. <http://news.aol.com/article/gates-911-call/589068>
2. Galatians 5:22
3. I John 4:18

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