

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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The “Push Back” of Truth-Telling

by Dan Trygg

“And when the Sabbath had come, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, ‘Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, and Joses, and Judas, and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at Him. ⁴ And Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his home town and among his own relatives and in his own household.’”

Mark 6:2-4

“The Jews were astonished, saying, ‘How has this man become learned, having never been educated?’”

John 7:15

“For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.”

Acts 24:5

“And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good enough.’”

Luke 5:39

People don’t like change. They can especially become resistant and defensive if you bring a message, or are choosing to live in a way, that *they think* challenges *their* thoughts or practices. You may not *intend* to attack *them* at all, but *they perceive* any questioning of their beliefs or practices as nearly a direct assault to *their* personhood. Suddenly, there is no room for discussion, or airing of ideas. **You have become the enemy.**

In 1989, I went to a week-long seminar on the dynamics of dysfunctional relationship systems. **Families, work environments, or any other system of human interaction (including churches) can be either healthy, equitable and well-functioning, ...or they can become unhealthy, abusive, function poorly.**

In healthy organizations, when a problem becomes evident, *anyone* can point it out, and people will *gratefully acknowledge* the issue in question, and will *set about to correct* or *address* the matter. **Healthy people, and healthy organizations, are open to constructive criticism.** They are *willing to examine* new ideas, and weigh them out on their own merit. They are *grateful* for whistle-blowers, and those who seek to improve quality or point out areas that need to change. They often will *reward* those who point out where change is needed, or where practices have become outmoded. **A truth-teller in such a system is a hero.**

Not so in unhealthy, dysfunctional relationship systems, however. **In dysfunctional systems, there is always some inequity being covered up.** People are covering for other people’s irresponsibility or inappropriate immaturity, ...or some people are taking advantage of other people, and they want that to remain in the dark. **There is something “rotten” going on. People can “smell it”, but no one talks about it.** It is the proverbial “elephant in the room” that no one will address. Outsiders can often quickly *feel* the unhealthy dynamics, and soon can *see* the problem. If they try and talk about it, however, or ask too many questions, they are immediately shut down and attacked. **A truth-teller in a dysfunctional system is a threat, and becomes “the enemy”.** The instructor of the seminar reinforced this point, over and over, that if you point out an issue that seems unhealthy, or needs to be addressed, **the attention immediately moves from the problem to the “prophet”.** **“You become the problem for bringing up the problem”.** Prophets were generally people who spoke the truth to those who had wandered into error, injustice and sin. **Most prophets were met with scorn, rejection, punishment and persecution. We should not be surprised if we experience similar treatment.**

I purposely made the connection to the Biblical prophets, because it is helpful to see that **they experienced rejection and persecution, even when they were sent with a message from God Himself.** In fact, **even God Himself, in the person of Jesus, was discredited, criticized, scorned, calumniated and crucified.** We shouldn’t be shocked at such treatment, even though it may be wholly undeserved, on our part. Jesus warned us that it *would* happen to those who would stand up and live for Him. **They say that “to be forewarned is to be forearmed”, but knowing this could happen to us, if we speak the truth, does not necessarily take the sting out of these attacks, when they come.** We can be more *mentally and emotionally prepared* to “steel ourselves” against such harassment, but a metaphorical “slap across the face” still *smarts*, even if we know it is coming, and even if we voluntarily choose to turn the other cheek. Furthermore, the “burning feeling” and “red mark” may continue to be with us for a time afterwards, as we have to work through this unfair treatment from others, ...some of whom may be from among our own family, friends, or those for whom we have had respect!

We can learn from the experiences of Jesus, and Biblical “truth-tellers”, what the more common points of attack may be, from those who are resistant to the message we bring or the lifestyle we exemplify. As

we observe from Mark 6, **the first question asked was “Where did this man get these things?”** Note that there is already a subtle shift away from *the message itself, to the person bringing the message*. Instead of *examining the truths* being proclaimed, on their own merit, ...to look into *them*, or examine *them* carefully, or even to see if *they* accurately represent reality..., the point of focus is directed to the *messenger*, and the *source* of the message. Instead of the *open mindedness* exemplified by some of the listeners of Paul at Athens (Acts 17:32), “We shall listen to you again concerning this” (“We are interested. Tell us more.”), or the *eager receptiveness* of the Berean Jews, who then “were examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11), the Jews of Nazareth diverted their attention away from *what* was being said to *who* was saying it. But, see, ***the truth is the truth, no matter who says it!***

“Is not this the carpenter?” The attack against Jesus’ credibility continues. He is the *carpenter*, not a *rabbi*. They all know His family. **The implication is that *He is nobody special*. Where does *He* come off as being able to teach *them*?** He is not any smarter than they are. He’s never been trained as a rabbi. He has no special credentials. He is one of their own townspeople. They remember Him as a snot-nosed kid. **Who does He think He is? “And they took offense at Him.”** This is a very common accusation that the enemy uses to discredit someone attempting to speak for Christ. He will suggest to the minds of the listeners that the person thinks that he or she is *better*, or *holier*, than they are. **Yet, this attitude of superiority or arrogance may not be in that person, at all. It is just a slanderous lie, used by the enemy to discredit the speaker.** (On the practical side, we need to be aware of this, and watch *how we interact* with others. Be respectful, and be a good listener. Make sure you do not cut people off, or talk over them.)

When attempts to minimize or discredit are not working, people will resort to wild, general accusations and name-calling. Calling Paul a “plague” and “one who incites sedition among all the Jews around the world” is so general and vague as to be laughable. This charge is presented in a court of law, without any evidence of any kind! It is nothing but an out-and-out smear against Paul’s reputation. **Jesus had warned of false reports and insults**, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11,12). We should not be surprised to find ourselves to be the target of unjustified rumors.

If character assassination, name calling and false rumors do not drive the truth-tellers away, their opponents may actually use threats, shunning, legal injunctions, or violence to get them to leave or to be silenced. In the NT, people were hired to cause riots (Acts 17:5), truth-tellers were arrested, beaten, stoned and even put to death, because they were preaching the good news of God’s love through Jesus Christ. Their preaching was upsetting the religious power structure that was already in place. Those in charge would not tolerate this. It was more about protecting inequitable, dysfunctional power structures, than it was about an honest examination of the truth. The new life of the Spirit cannot be contained in such inflexible wineskins.

The Bible says, “Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. Instruct a wise man, and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will increase his learning” (Prov. 9:8,9), and, “*Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me. It is oil upon the head; do not let my head refuse it*” (Psa. 140:5). **If our heart is pure, and we genuinely want to know the truth, then we will listen to correction and rebuke with an open mind.** We will want to carefully *examine the facts*, not just try to keep them at arm’s length by *discrediting the messenger*. **The issue in question is the real problem, not the messenger who points it out to us.**

What is to be done? How do you respond to those who move from discussion to quarreling and personal attacks? The Bible is very clear (Prov. 23:9; 26:4; 29:9). Jesus is very clear (Matt. 7:6; 10:23-26). The apostle Paul is very clear (I Tim. 6:3-5; II Tim 2:14; Tit. 3:9). **Do not engage in such quarrels. They will only escalate or become more abusive.** They generate more “heat” than “light”. **Let the truth be its own witness.** Excuse yourself from the conversation. Don’t argue with a fool, or one who does not have an open mind. **If they do not receive you, go elsewhere.** Jesus says to “shake the dust off your feet, as a testimony against them”, so that they know they are responsible for what they heard, and that you are clearly breaking off the discussion (Matt. 10:14,15). **Jesus repeatedly walked away from conflict** (Lk. 4:30; Jn. 4:1; 7:1; 8:59; 10:39,40; 11:53,54). **Paul took those who responded to his message and went elsewhere** (Acts 13:44-52; 17:32-34; 18:6-8). In II Timothy 2:24-26, Paul says that **it is not necessary to quarrel**. Be *kind, patient* when wronged. **With gentleness and humility correct those in opposition**, if they will give you the chance. **Then, leave it to God.** He can lead them to a change of mind that leads to a recognition of the truth, and a freedom from the mental bondage they are in.