

Purging The Rumor Bug From The Body Of Christ

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In the booklet *The Seven Laws of Radiant Health*, in the discussion of fasting, we learn that "as food intake is retarded, elimination proceeds rapidly, and the body is truly 'house cleaning' itself." A similar process seems to occur in the human mind. When it is idle, the mind purges a great deal of poisons on its own through the deadly little instrument—the tongue. If the human thought processes are deprived for a time of stimulating intellectual nourishment (creative instruction, ideas, literature, art, etc.) the toxins of misconceptions, little white lies, half-truths, fabrications, outright lies and character assassinations (slander and libel) clamor to be expurgated.

An old acquaintance of mine, a Russian professor at Gustavus Adolphus College, enlarged on this metaphor. In describing a speech of one of Minnesota's well-known, long-winded politicians, he said, "Zehr arr two kinds of diarreeah. Vahn iz za rezult of poisons clogging za intestines, and za ahzehr iz za rezult of a muddled-up mind."

The unengaged mind automatically engages or dabbles in rumor-mongering. The apostle Paul makes this connection between idleness and gossip in I Timothy 5:13 in advising Timothy to drop younger widows from the relief list. Paul explains, "And besides they learn to beidle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not."

Gossip and rumor were diseases in the first-century body of Christ. With telephones, email and quick and easy transportation, how much more is it a problem in today's church?

Crushed in the Rumor Mill

How many of us have either started or have been the victim of rumors? Some rumors prove humorous and innocuous. Sometimes they are unwittingly started by well-intentioned people. At other times, however, they can cause a great deal of damage.

Before the Feast in 1969, I was run over by a drunken driver, sustaining a massive fracture of the right tibia. My family attended the Feast in the Lake of the Ozarks that year without me. They became amazed at the stories that circulated about my mishap:

- » One member expressed concern about the massive asphalt burns I had received being dragged down the pavement.
- » Another asked whether police had caught the truck driver who had beaten me up.
- » Several members sympathized that I had to have my two legs and an arm amputated.
- » The last straw was the condolences about my death. As Mark Twain would say, "This story seems to have been slightly exaggerated."

The rumor mill did another number on me in the winter of 1973, when I visited the Minneapolis congregation after having moved to Rapid City, South Dakota, seven months earlier. One man

looked startled and astonished when I walked into the restroom, exclaiming, "We heard you became bitter and left the church." Actually, the only thing that I became bitter about were the bitter-cold Minnesota winters.

Five years later, the rumor bug struck again. I returned to Pasadena from Chicago, after having attended a convention in the Windy City, learning from three separate people that I had been fired from my job. I stormed into the Dean's office and asked why he had blue-lined me. He appeared startled and said that he had not terminated me, and, matter of fact, had been very pleased with my work. A dissatisfied student had evidently been engaged in some wishful thinking.

Probably many of us have suffered similar fates in the grapevine jungle. To my shame and regret, I have done my share of passing rumors along—some having humorous consequences and some having hurtful consequences. Most discussions of rumor or gossip focus upon the destructive consequences to the victim: the destruction of his reputation and the assassination of his character. This article will focus on the destructive consequences that befall the propagator of rumors (a category that fits all of us from time to time).

Spread Rumors—and Suffer

The talebearer receives a sense of perverse pleasure from the rumor. Proverbs 26:22 suggests that, "The words of a talebearer [*gossip, slanderer*, margin] are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body." A juicy tale seems so sweet on the tongue, yet as it works its way deeper, it becomes bitter and harmful.

We often have the mistaken notion that if we emphasize something bad about another, it will make us look better. Scripturally, the opposite is true. I Corinthians 12:26 teaches us that if one member suffers, all the parts share the suffering. Like a boomerang, our weapon against our brother will eventually return to smack us.

The trader in gossip suffers as much as the victim. Trading in gossip appears analogous to contracting a severe communicable disease, like pulmonary tuberculosis, which, if not arrested, could cost us our eternal life. The effects upon the gossip's character are initially unnoticeable, but the symptoms gradually worsen until the talebearer becomes engulfed in the paroxysms of bitterness and hatred.

Why hatred waxes increasingly bitter can be partially explained by Proverbs 26:28, "A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin." One could assume that the intent of this verse could be paraphrased, "Only a person who hates another would deliberately wound or hurt someone by lies." However, this verse really suggests, upon closer reading, that the very act of saying something negative about another will *automatically reinforce* this belief.

In explaining this principle of reinforcement, psychologist George Weinberg states, "Every time you act, you *add strength* to the motivating idea behind what you've done." Weinberg describes graphically how hatred and resentment can be built from scratch:

At a party Ralph makes an offhand remark critical of a certain movie. When he first makes his remark, his attitude toward the movie is actually mild. He may even have liked it on the whole, and his remarks merely to display his cleverness. But he gets a surprise. Instead of just smiling at the gibe, someone at the party contradicts it. Ralph

answers back. The other man rebuts again. Ralph attacks another aspect of the movie. The man is unmoved. Ralph tears into the other man's notorious bad taste. Ralph's basic attitude toward the movie has changed. *Now he really hates it.* At the next party he goes to, almost the first subject he brings up will be the movie, to attack it thoroughly.

As the hatred grows, Ralph's personality and character become sullen and ugly. His own tongue contaminates his very being. James 3:6 reveals, "[The tongue is a] world of wickedness set among our members, contaminating and depraving the whole body" (*The Amplified Bible*). Verse 8 continues, "It is a restless (undisciplined, irreconcilable) evil, full of deadly poison."

Fighting the Disease

Returning to the communicable disease analogy, we can learn valuable lessons about fighting rumors by comparing how the body fights bacteria. In *The Modern Medical Encyclopedia*, the following description illustrates how the immune system fights the onslaught of pathogenic bacteria:

When the tuberculosis germs reach the lungs and begin to multiply there, the body rushes its defenses to the infected area. The body is almost always victorious in this first skirmish. It kills some of the germs and covers the remainder with tough scar tissue. The walls of this scar tissue are constructed out of rock-hard calcium. Although the germs stay alive, they are powerless. It is important to take precautions to keep the germs from escaping.

These germs will not escape if the body is healthy, maintained by proper nutrition. Poor nutrition, stress, late hours, burning the candle at both ends—all could weaken the body, allowing the pathogens to escape into the body.

Scripture provides several natural sources for spiritual calcium needed for confining these deadly bacteria:

- » Proverbs 10:12: Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins.
- » Proverbs 11:13: A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.

Using a spiritual/physical analogy, hatred resembles pathogenic bacteria like the tubercle bacillus. The circulatory system manufactures antibodies in the blood stream to ward off the effects of massive germ and virus attacks. Jesus Christ's sacrifice, His shed blood, would correspond to spiritual antibodies. Love, then, is spiritual calcium, whose function is to smother and strangulate virulent bacteria.

To aid the antibodies, the body needs a massive dose of spiritual vitamins to enable the sick patient to recover. Philippians 4:8 describes positive wholesome thoughts (spiritual vitamins) prompted by God's Holy Spirit:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

A highly important tip is to avoid eating from other people's plates. We should make it a cardinal practice not to accept second- or third-hand information. A close friend, the late Bob Bricker, took this admonition seriously. On several past occasions, when Bob and I would have some rather intense conversations up in the Verdugo Mountains, Bob would point-blank ask me, "Dave, do you know this first hand?" Often, after searching my recollections, I had to admit sheepishly that I was merely repeating hand-me-down information. I never recall Bob ever repeating a piece of information unless he had personally investigated the origin. Repeating gossip is equally as unsanitary as eating off the plate of a sick person.

The greater church of God, as a metaphorical body, does not have to fear rumors, gossip and negative information—if it is healthy and getting the proper nutrition. Jesus tells us what the proper source of nutrition should consist of in John 4:34: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work." Such a daily diet forces each member to replenish his spiritual deficit through prayer, study and meditation. If he is fed only on the Sabbath with a concentrated intravenous solution, he will not become a strong and vital organ in the body.

If the organ is weak, it will succumb to pathogenic virus and bacteria. As a biology instructor once said, "The purpose or ecological niche of a pathogenic bacteria or virus is to bring down and destroy a sickly organism." Such is its task, and so it will do if we give it the opportunity.

We need to ask ourselves: Are we spiritually healthy enough to risk foraging for hours on the garbage in the tabloids or the idle chat rooms of the Internet? Do we believe that we will not be infected? Do we think we can restrain a latent "pathogen" from causing us to spread rumor or gossip, commencing its destructive course in us?

Pruning the Grapevine

Knowing how active the church "grapevine" is, we have a great deal of work to do. It is probably long past the time for a thorough cleansing fast followed by a reorientation to spiritual milk in this area of God's way (Hebrews 5:12). We must go back to the basics, remembering that our Savior warns us, "But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37).

His brother James advises, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19). Solomon echoes this in two of his proverbs: "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Proverbs 10:19), and "He who has knowledge spares his words. . . . Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive" (Proverbs 17:27-28).

Finally, we must remember how much influence the tongue wields. James writes:

For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how

great a forest a little fire kindles! . . . But no man can tame the tongue. . . . Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. (James 3:2-5, 8, 10)

Solomon again has something to add on this point: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and they who indulge in it shall eat the fruit of it [for death or life]" (Proverbs 18:21, *The Amplified Bible*). The tongue, which we often use so indiscriminately, has power to affect lives far beyond what most give it credit. The more we control it, the more beneficial its influence will be.

Only after we have mastered these simple rules may we, as a healthy organism, digest pure, solid, spiritual food, which is given to "those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14). Only then will we have rid Christ's body of the germ of rumor.