

By Jamie Buckingham

Truth and Consequence

■ The staff members of a church I know have vowed among themselves never to listen to charges against any other person on the staff. If there are accusations, they insist that the accusing person talk directly to the person accused.

It sounds like a great policy for all of us, doesn't it—never to speak a bad word about someone else, especially behind his back? The problem with that particular creed, however, is that it is more Rotarian than biblical. Like it or not, we still need a "watchman on the wall."

Several years ago (when I was still doing collaborative writing), a man with a ministry behind the Iron Curtain asked me to write a book about his co-worker who had supposedly escaped from Eastern Europe. But as we talked, some things did not ring true. I sent a cable to a trusted friend in Holland. Could he shed any light on the situation? He responded with a one-sentence telegram: "I don't like to say bad things about a brother in the Lord."

It was enough.

My Dutch friend could have gone into detail—dirty details. But rather than defame a man's character he simply warned me to stay away. I dropped the entire matter. Recent newspaper disclosures about this same man indicate I made a wise decision.

The issue remains, however. Whenever one writes (or speaks) about real people involved in real events, how far does one go? How much does one reveal?

I'm having to face this question in writing my newsletter, the *Buckingham Report*. It's an "insider's" report to Christian leaders. How much do you tell, even to those who have a need to know? Where does truth become gossip?

Shortly before Kathryn Kuhlman died she asked me to write her autobiography. "Wait until after I'm gone," she said, "then tell it all for the glory of God."

Kathryn knew I was not a muckraker or a sensationalist. At the same time she had a high regard for truth and realized that lasting good comes only when all facts are revealed. She also knew that when I sat down to write *Daughter of Destiny* I would realize it is the truth which makes us free, not just the facts.

The Kathryn Kuhlman Foundation, which carried on after her death, hired an attorney to try to stop publication of the book. They contended the public did not have the right to know many of the things I included.

Legally I was OK. The courts have ruled that eminent people—"public figures" such as Miss Kuhlman—are more or less fair game as long as the writer does not display "actual malice." That means the writer must not show a "reckless disregard for the truth?" The foundation argued that some things should never be revealed. I took a position that if God chose to reveal King David's sordid sexual life and the apostle Paul's hot temper, why should today's servants



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of God enjoy higher privilege?

There is a thin line between muckraking and solid analysis. It is called *love*. It is love that enables a communicator to draw the line between the sordid expose and truth revealed without malice.

Here's my dilemma: I believe Christians should know what's going on. They have a right to know—indeed a responsibility to know—and this responsibility often transcends the right to privacy. I believe that anything built on less than truth will ultimately fail.

I am one of those who believes that the framers of the Bill of Rights heard God when they insisted on "freedom of the press." I have been in too many nations where the newspapers

and magazines reported only what the government wanted. I believe the *Washington Post* did us all a great service by revealing the rottenness of the Nixon administration. A people kept in ignorance are a people who walk in darkness.

But we must remember: it is not facts which make us free, but truth. Nowhere is that more important than in the kingdom of God. Yet in this dimension we operate on different principles from those of the worldly press. Here even truth must be tempered by love. For instance, I am not telling you the name of the Iron Curtain minister. It would be of no benefit to you to know his name. Besides, I would be planting a seed of distrust in your mind, making it difficult for you to accept him if he does repent and change.

In other words, knowing facts, especially negative facts, about someone is an awesome responsibility. The *fact* is: the fellow is a scoundrel. The *truth* is: God can change him. Facts, like a loaded gun, must be handled with great caution for they can maim the innocent as well as the evildoer.

Facts are hard, objective. Truth is subjective. It involves facts but goes far beyond to reasons—and results. Newspapers operate without feelings. If it's fact, they print it. But truth involves feelings and morality. Its purpose is more than revelation—it is redemption.

The Christian communicator—journalist or preacher—knows there are times when publishing a story can harm or ruin someone's life. On the other hand, to refrain from revealing falsehood can be even more damaging. The secret is doing it without rancor, without exhibiting the "gotcha" spirit which is so evident in little people who think the fastest way to the top is to pull down the big guys.

Someone asked, "Well, how would you feel if someone talked about your dark side and revealed all the scandal in your life?" That's not a problem for me. I determined sometime ago to beat everyone else to the punch through self-revelation. And to be repentant if caught in some ungodly act. Confession—along with a teachable spirit—remains the best policy.

But until we reach that point, God will no doubt continue to commission others to pull down our icons, prick our balloons and (with love, I hope) call us to honesty. ■