Confidentiality and its limits: some contributions from Christianity

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The issue is whether Christianity, of its nature, would seek to prevent a justifiable breach of confidentiality or could endorse it, under certain circumstances, as the act which is fundamentally more loving or more truthful. The individualistic nature of Western Christianity is noted. The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is used to show Christian support for dynamic rather than literal truth telling, and for awareness of the contexts and power relations within which persons stand.

In what follows, a distinctively Christian perspective is sketched. Breach of trust, in the specific case of breach of promise, is used to illustrate how Christianity might address breaches or apparent breaches of confidentiality. Behind this, there is a series of couplets which reach to the heart of Christianity's self understanding. Is it, at the most fundamental level, a religion of generosity or of obedience? Is it obliged to read its sacred texts literally or figuratively? Is it true to the religious tradition of the ascetic monk, or more truthful. The individualistic nature of Western Christianity is noted. The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is used to show Christian support for dynamic rather than literal truth telling, and for awareness of the contexts and power relations within which persons stand.

Historically, rigorism did not triumph, because it could not cope with the complication of everyday living. Yet, much later, Protestants tended to distrust subsequent Jesuitical casuistry, seeing it as eroding moral certainties. It is more likely, however, that casuistry, with its preference for permissives over against absolutes, was attempting to shift an historical mindset of Christianity away from an expression of its moral values only in abstract terms.

If, therefore, one is trying to think seriously about the limits of confidentiality, and whether Christianity helps one to negotiate that terrain or actually befores it, one has to ask whether,
for Christians, their distinctive perception of divine power is better symbolised by laws engraved in stone, or in the vulnerability of Jesus, naked, pinned to the cross, hiding nothing and with nowhere to go. Breaching a rule on behalf of others (generosity is freely giving more than is required) always struggles with the accusation that it is patronising or a concealed way of creating debts. But generosity is, or should be, at the heart of Christianity, and defensive individualism ought not to invalidate such a passionate vision for wholeness.

A common way forward has been to redescribe a dilemma as a conflict of claims, and then attempt to find a way forward either on the basis of utilitarianism or by maintaining that those afflicted by uncertainty do not properly understand the meaning of vows. Headway may be made by either route, but this note is to suggest that neither can claim to be ‘distinctively Christian’. So, finally, let us take account of the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran academic who was hanged by the Gestapo at Flossenburg on the 9th of April 1945.

At the end of his Ethics (incomplete at the time of his death), there is a chapter on ‘What is meant by ‘telling the truth’’. Bonhoeffer tended to take the bull by the horns. He considered the relationship of trust and truth telling between a small child and its parents. He observed that the relations between them are different and cannot be reversed. He considered the case of a child asked by a schoolteacher in front of the class whether it is true that his father often came home drunk. Bonhoeffer observed that we live in the midst of a series of complexifying circles. He suggested that the more complex the actual situations of life, the more responsible and more difficult will be the task of ‘telling the truth’. He argued that truth telling must be ‘learned’. To the objection that we owe truth not to this or that individual, but only to God, he agreed, but then insisted that we do not forget that “God is not a general principle, but the living God who has set me in a living life”. To disregard this would be not to speak of “the God who entered into the world in Jesus Christ, but rather of some metaphysical idol”. Thus, he suggested, the truthfulness we owe God must assume a practical form in the world: our speech must be truthful not in principle but concretely.

Bonhoeffer then pointed to the superficiality of restricting the matter of truthful relations only to speech. We can engage in profoundly untruthful relations to others without saying a word. He developed the notion of “living truth” to refer to the dynamic of such relations, and denigrated “the cynic” or “fanatical devotee of truth” who would claim to “speak the truth at all times and in all places to all men in the same way”. Such an individual, he suggested, “wounds shame, desecrates mystery, breaks confidence, betrays the community”. He acknowledged the danger of his concept of living truth, and its risk of patronising, of “calculating . . . what proportion of the truth I am prepared to tell”. He suggested we can only respond by “attentive discernment of the particular contents and limits which the real itself imposes . . .”. Finally, he reminded his readers that in our attempts to express the real, we do not encounter it as a consistent whole, “but in a condition of disruption and inner contradiction which has need of reconciliation and healing . . . our words . . . can . . . fulfill their assigned purpose of expressing the real, as it is in God, only by taking up into themselves both the inner contradiction and the inner consistency of the real. . . . They must neither deny the Fall nor God’s word of creation and reconciliation.”

The brief notes above hardly at all address the issue of confidentiality and its limits directly. Their purpose is to attempt to show that at a profounder level, as a faith inspired by the love of Jesus, Christianity is concerned with more than the literal.

REFERENCES


