



Don't Gossip

Words can hurt. Rachel was a 13-year-old 7th grader in a Minnesota middle school. She was a typical teenager with typical teenage angst. What was not typical, however, was how a group of kids in the school targeted her. The group spread rumors that she was sexually active. Rachel received notes, texts, and emails calling her names, like "slut," "prostitute," and "whore." One group member sent out a text message to the entire school body so that "she would finally quit school." She did. She committed suicide on April 29, 2012. Is this an extreme example?

Unfortunately, the number one cause of teen suicide is related to gossip and bullying at school. Workplace gossip is such a significant problem that many employers prohibit gossip in the workplace and consider it grounds for termination. The Catholic Church considers gossip a sin.

Gossip is defined as "conversation about the personal details of other people's lives, whether rumor or fact, especially when malicious." Clearly, given this definition and Rachel's tragic example, gossip has no place in a discussion about civility. Gossip interferes with a civil discussion by placing personalities and lifestyles above the substance of the discourse. At times, gossip can lead to hurt feelings, anger, and sometimes violence, all examples of incivility.

As the above story illustrates, gossip is a sin with very extreme consequences, not only for our own souls but also for those who are the subjects of gossip. When we avoid conversations based primarily on gossip, we are engaging in civility and acting as a good Christian.

Civility, as well as Christianity, recognizes that words can hurt. Be a good Christian; do not hurt others.

Credit: Oshkosh Civility Project

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How to shut down gossip and its nasty kin

"For lack of wood, the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases. As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body. Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart." - Proverbs 26:20-23

Gossip kills churches. Don't want your church in this predicament? Here's what you do:

First, understand what gossip is: the spreading of harmful information in an ungodly manner — without love and thus to no positive end. Its bastard stepchildren are the triplets: Strife, Dissension, and Division.

Second, do any or all of the following steps, as needed. Some of them help identify whether you're actually hearing gossip or not. All of them will stop it dead. But none will work...unless it is used.

- Ask, "Why are you telling me this?" Focusing on this question can bring an end to the whole unpleasant chapter. It has the added benefit that it can help a person whose intentions are as good as his/her judgment is bad.
- Ask, "What's the difference between what you're telling me and gossip?" As said above, it will get the same effect and same potential benefits.
- Ask, "How is sharing this thought, complaint, or information going to help you and me love God and our brothers better and knit us closer together as a church?" Isn't that the goal we should share, every one of us?
- Ask, "Now that you've told me, what are you going to do about it?" While the previous questions are subjective, this is not. If the previous questions did not help you identify gossip, whispering, or sowing of dissension, the answer to this question will likely do so. *Tip: If the answer is "Pray," a good response might be, "Then why didn't you do that and leave it there in the first place?"*
- Say, "Now that you've told me, you've morally obligated me to make sure you talk to _____ about it." You might fall off the list of the gossips' favorite venting spots, but you may head off a church split, division and/or harmed souls. Isn't that worth it?

Shared with the Door County Civility Project by Pastor Cory Dahl from a blog "*Between Two Worlds*" posted by Justin Taylor on February 12, 2013, and written by a man named Dan Phillips for the "*Pyromaniacs*" blog.

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