

avoid the destruction of slander we must be “up front” with one another, earnestly seeking to resolve our differences.

What if our pastor sins against us? A leader’s angry words can cause a hurt which burrows deeply. We are to treat a pastor just as we would another brother or sister: privately seek to restore the relationship with gentleness (Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15). Spreading a story without confronting the pastor involves us in sin and threatens the health of the whole church. Only if the shepherd refuses to acknowledge the sin and repent, should the problem be brought before others. The church should be informed in an orderly way (Matthew 18:16-17) and the leader publicly rebuked (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

Since anger is the root of slander, we must guard against our own anger, lest it “give the devil (literally, ‘the slanderer’) a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27). When angry we must seal our lips. Giving anger time to cool permits us the perspective either to overlook a hurt or to seek reconciliation. Slander is forbidden to us (1 Peter 2:1; Titus 3:2). We dare not breathe its “scorching fire” (Proverbs 16:27-28).

Even though we bear no grudge, we must be on the lookout lest we be sucked in to passing slander along. Instant recognition of degrading gossip is vital. We should stop the tale-bearer in mid-sentence, if necessary. We ought to challenge our Christian brothers, “Have you confronted the person with this?” To give ear to a nasty tale will not only injure our spirit but encourage gossipers to continue their destruction. We will either be part of the problem or part of the solution.

We sift our words through God’s grid:

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:29, 31- 32)

Nimble tongues itch to tell a tale. Inquiring minds want to know. But the Church’s health hinges on our willingness to submit our stories to His standard – peace in place of strife, upbuilding exchanged for a wrecking ball. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Jesus taught, “for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).



## Coming To Grips With Gossip

Jennifer Churchmember wouldn’t be caught dead with the *National Enquirer* on her coffee table. She doesn’t need it. She has her own sources for the “inside scoop” about more local celebrities – the choir director’s obnoxious wife, the six foot wavy-haired newcomer whom Ernestine brought to church last week, and the latest failing of the pastor she doesn’t like.



What’s wrong with that? We all talk about what’s going on. After all, it’s only harmless gossip.

### Gossip, Harmless Gossip

Grapevines entwine every organization. We humans crave news, yet neither city papers nor parish newsletters really cover this fascinating beat of human conflicts, joys, sorrows, and flaws. While an ethical reporter checks facts and verifies wording, gossip has no commitment either to accuracy or good taste. It thrives on the juicy tidbits of gossip, what the dictionary defines as, “rumor, report, tattle, or behind-the-scenes information, especially of an intimate or personal nature.”

Gossip tantalizes. We listen.

“The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body” (Proverbs 18:8, NASB)

Whether true or false, gossip affects us.

Can gossip be avoided? Hardly. It is inevitable. The informal network often provides the only way to understand what is happening around us. We discuss with one another the latest scuttlebutt, trying to piece together some semblance of the truth from the rumors and events of the day.

Yet the network is dangerously flawed. Because gossip seldom slows down to document its quotes, it suffers progressive distortion as it passes from mouth to ear. We’ve all played the party game where the message whispered at the front of the line bears scant similarity to its end product. Further, gossip is nearly always one-sided. It tries a case on the basis of the prosecution’s evidence alone.

And then, rumors get out of control. Like a feather pillow burst in a slumber-party battle, there is no way to put back all the feathers so mom won't find out. They lurk under couches and between cushions, and turn up for months in the strangest places. The damage cannot be undone.

There are actually three strains of gossip – as hard to separate as scrambled eggs. First is the innocuous chitchat about weather, the gas station being bulldozed at the corner, the new Lexus Bob's neighbor bought last week, using his tax return as a down payment. This is the stuff of so much casual conversation.

It is an easy descent, however, to a second, more personal level. "Did you hear the Morgans are having problems again? Mark says he heard Jim's car squeal out of their driveway at 3 in the morning." "Hank sure is in a bad mood this morning. I hear the boss is really sitting on him since he slipped up last week."

This kind of rumor, though not vindictive, becomes the basis for judgments of character, and so often grows with re-telling. To examine with our tongues the private and intimate problems of others is fraught with danger, and leads all too easily to the third and worst form of gossip – slander. No wonder Paul censured those who

"... get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to." (1 Timothy 5:13)

This is the sort of gossip which tarnishes reputations, divulges secrets (Proverbs 20:19), reignites quarrels (26:20-26), and leaves friendships in ruins (16:27-28). Moreover, it brings terrible pain to its victims, who are angry, shut out, and isolated from the very community they need so desperately to sustain them.

Gossip, harmless gossip.

## Deadly Slander

Because the grapevine relays whatever stories happen by, it exposes the church to an ominous threat. Like tinder-dry grass at the peak of fire season, it is extremely vulnerable to the arsonist's angry match. That match is slander.

Slander is gossip turned ugly, what the dictionary defines as "the utterance of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and damage reputation." Though slander may look like ordinary gossip, it differs in intent – slander actively seeks to tear down. Slander begins with anger, perhaps the reaction to a stalled promotion, a betrayal, a slight, a wound. Slander fights back, determined to brand the offender publicly.

Most often, slander does not originate with a lie but a distortion. While statements and actions can usually be confirmed, it is hard to prove intentions. Yet motives are vital to evaluating character; a jury's verdict may hinge entirely on interpretation of motive. Everyday slander, however, faces no scrutinizing jury. This ugly form of gossip twists motive, discredits character, undermines public confidence. Impugning motives is the slanderer's most sinister weapon. Although snide interpretations of motives are mere opinions, doubt, once planted, is difficult to erase. A slur conceived in anger becomes deadly innuendo. Subtly slipped into the flow of conversation, it is picked up by the grapevine and spread to a dozen ears, ruining a reputation.



Churches are not immune to slander. Regular members wonder if the rumors might be true. Hidden factions form. New people somehow sense the undercurrent of dissension. Disunity begets spiritual malaise, and the church suffers from a persistent low-grade infection. Slander despoils the body of Christ.

Malicious talk can damage anyone in the church, but the church leader is slander's most devastating target. Moses' enemies murmured behind his back. No longer could the Apostle Paul's converts hear him speak or read his letters without wondering if his detractors might be right after all. Sadly, some of the sheep never find their way back to a fold after the ugliness of slander. Instead they wander without food eventually to weaken and die or be eaten by the wolves.

## Stopping Slander

How can slander be stopped so the body is not utterly destroyed? The cure begins with understanding the disease. Slander is a "cop-out," an excuse to air grievances without accepting the responsibility to work through a problem. Those who relay slander become party to the sin and compound it still further. Only if the slanderer is confronted – hard as that may be – can the wasting disease be isolated and prevented from tearing down the entire body. Confrontation is just what Doctor Jesus ordered.

Jesus commanded: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (Matthew 18:15). If he does not listen, we are to approach him again with one or two others, hoping to find reconciliation (vs. 16). If he will not listen to them we are to bring it to the church (vs. 17). By the same token Jesus tells us to confront the brother who bears some grudge against us (Matthew 5:24). If we are to