

Transparency at Work

From the Theology of Work Project

As Paul moves into the body of his second letter to the Corinthians, he addresses the complaint that he had not been open and honest with them. Although he promised to visit Corinth again, Paul had backed out twice. Was Paul being insincere or speaking out of both sides of his mouth? Was he maneuvering behind the scenes to get his way behind others' backs? Paul addresses these questions in 2 Corinthians 1:12–14. He is proud that his behavior among the Corinthians has been transparent at all times. He cancelled his visits, not to gain an advantage for himself or save face, but because he did not want to shame or rebuke the Corinthians again. Therefore, he delayed coming back to Corinth in the hope that, when he did come, he could bring joy rather than recrimination and reproof.

Though Paul's integrity had been questioned, he knew that because of his history of transparency with them, they would continue to trust him. He reminds them, "We have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity," (2 Corinthians 1:12). Because they had seen him in action, they know he says what he means without vacillating. This makes him sure they will understand once they know all the factors he has had to consider. His proof of their trust is that even without knowing everything, Paul tells them, "You have already understood us in part" (2 Corinthians 1:13).

In our work today, are we transparent enough so that people have a reason to trust us? On a daily basis, every person, company, and organization faces temptations to hide the truth. Are we obscuring our motivations in order to falsely gain trust from a customer or a rival? Are we making decisions in secret as a way of avoiding accountability or hiding factors others would object to? Are we pretending to support coworkers in their presence, but speaking derisively behind their backs? Paul's example shows us that these actions are wrong. Moreover, whatever brief advantage we might gain from them is more than lost in the long term because our coworkers learn not to trust us. And if our coworkers cannot trust us, can God?

This doesn't mean, of course, that we always reveal all the information we have. There are confidences, personal and organizational, that cannot be broken. Not everyone needs to be privy to all information. At times the honest answer may be, "I can't answer that question because I have a duty of privacy to someone else." But we shouldn't use confidentiality as an excuse to prevaricate, to gain an edge on others, or to portray ourselves in a falsely positive light. If and when questions surface about our motives, a solid track record of openness and reliability will be the best antidote for misplaced doubts.

Transparency is so important to Paul's work with the Corinthians that he returns to the theme throughout the letter. "We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you" (2 Corinthians 6:11). We might say that Paul's life was an open book before them. When questions arise about his ministry, he can appeal to his earlier dealings with the Corinthians with absolute certainty that he has always been honest with them about himself. Can we say the same of ourselves?