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Praising and Criticising

By Peter Barnes

One of the surest indications of our own corruption is the universal experience that if someone ventures to praise us, we tend to heartily agree, but if someone criticises us, we tend to be deeply offended. Another obvious truth today is that the world, especially the world of social media, has become, at the same time, more addicted to flattery and to harsh and foul-mouthed criticisms. Celebrities are treated like gods on the one hand, and on the other, people consider that they have answered an issue when all they have done is cursed and sworn at those who differ from them. All of these responses are wrong, in different ways. Yet surely it is human pride that unites them all. That is why we are prone to flattery, and resentful of criticism, and in our modern technical age this is simply put under the magnifying glass. Social media does not make us worse, but we allow it to reveal our worst aspects more vividly.

The first two casualties are truth and civility. Truth – even scientific truth – does not rule the roost these days. What matters is feelings, whether my feelings have been hurt, and I am offended. This does not augur well when the standard of debate is reduced to who can hurl the most abuse in the loudest tones. So often we try to solve by law what cannot be solved by legal means. In fact, the appeal to law has a way of making matters worse.

Most remarkably, Christianity both softens and hardens us in an enhancing way, whereas unbelief softens and hardens us in a destructive way. We live in a world of criticism. As Blaise Pascal observed: 'I state it as a fact that if all men knew what others say of them behind their backs, there would not be four friends left in the world.' I have always wondered why he thought there could be as many as four. The words of Charles Spurgeon are reassuring: 'if any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him. For you are worse than he thinks you to be.' The unbeliever finds that notion humiliating; the believer finds it humbling.

The Bible is full of rebukes. In fact, open rebuke is better than hidden love (Prov.27:5). When the pagan sailors on Jonah's ship

learned that he was fleeing from his God, they were shocked: 'What is this that you have done!' (Jonah 1:10) This was not the sort of rebuke that a fellow believer might have given, but it was nevertheless effective in leading Jonah to see his sins. John the Baptist was not more civil in our sense, but more virulent, perhaps because the times demanded it. To the crowds who came to him, he was blunt in the extreme: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' (Luke 3:7) It was probably not something he picked up at college.

Our speech is meant to be seasoned with salt (Col.4:6), which certainly means that it is not to consist of bland platitudes. The best preachers always aimed to preach plainly. After a bit of practice, any clown can sound learned. William Perkins, who was genuinely learned, used to say of sermons 'the plainer, the better'. We are not meant to charm people so much as convince them. To repent, I will need to know that I am a sinner. That will necessarily hurt and offend me, but it must not stop there. To insist that we are not allowed to offend anybody is to sink the Christian faith.

Naturally, there is a need for an appropriate form of praise and encouragement. We can praise others, so a husband and children should praise a godly wife and mother (e.g. Prov.31:28-31). The world seems to think that we do better when we wallow in praise, but the Bible is generally wary about overdoing it. If it comes, let it come from another, not your own lips (Prov.27:2). None of us will thrive in an atmosphere of continuous criticism – nor, for that matter, in an atmosphere of artificial encouragement.

Christianity supplies all that we need to deal both with praise and criticism. We are realistic, since we realise that all are sinners in a sinful world; we seek to be gracious because we recognise that it is only through God's free grace that we can be right with God; we seek the truth, even if it hurts, because God is the God of truth; and we are to walk humbly before God in the knowledge that the eternal Son of God emptied Himself to walk humbly here on earth. In the end, we recognise, with the apostle

Paul, 'But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court' (1 Cor.4:3). Often we might be inclined to appeal to this when we are criticised – but it is as just as true when we are praised. It was the unjust judge who neither feared God nor respected man (Luke 18:2). In contrast, and softened by grace, humility and truth, the Christian is also

thereby strengthened.

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