

Chapter 5

Living the Truth—The Freedom of Integrity

Part of My Own Story

Walking in the light and abiding in the truth is indeed liberating personally, as we need not fear exposure or false accusations about our behaviors and lives. Of course, we make mistakes and at times fall short of our goals and aspirations, but living truthfully allows us to confess our shortcomings and to embrace the grace and empowerment to do better. As the word “integer” means “one,” depicting inward and outward unity, the great freedom of living in the truth means that we have nothing to hide. Our outward lives cohere with our inward commitments, and that is life-producing in itself. Along these lines, here’s a part of my story.

Have you ever been tempted to tell people what they want to hear instead of what really is true? That can be a real challenge if we grow up wanting to please others, especially those that are important to us. I saw the difficulty of this inclination when I was eleven, traveling with my family in the high mountains of Ecuador. Our family had traveled to Cuenca from Guayaquil for the celebration of the New Year. Cuenca has a lovely tradition of “burning the old man” on New Year’s Eve—a means of releasing the past and welcoming the new. Part of the celebration involves making dummies out of burlap, stuffed with straw and firecrackers. The dummies are adorned with masks, hats, and clothing that could be removed at the last moment, at least if the clothes had some further wear left in them. At midnight, *El Hombre Viejo* (The Old Man) is stripped and set afire, with burlap blazing and fireworks crackling. People then celebrate with their own fireworks and noise makers, welcoming in the New Year. It is a joyous celebration, year after year!

This was a fun time for our family, and as we returned to Guayaquil, we stopped at El Tambo to get a huge stock of about fifty bananas, just freshly cut. The elevation was over 10,000 feet, according to the altimeter that Dad had installed in our brand new 1966 Ford Custom 500. Dad also mentioned that there was an ancient Inca ruins not far from there, and he asked a passerby if he knew how to get to Ingapirca. The man said that he would be happy to ride with us and guide us to the site. We agreed, and soon we were winding up and down a llama trail, which might have passed for a road, if one had a four-wheel drive. On the

right was a thousand-foot drop off, and the road was single-lane at most. I had to get out twice to move rocks out of the way, sharp rocks that might have put a hole in our muffler or crankcase. After two or three miles, which took us at least twenty minutes, we asked him how much further it was. He kept saying “Un poquito mas; un poquito mas” (just a bit more; just a bit more). We kept going, but when we met a man walking with his donkey, Dad rolled down his window and asked how far the ruins were. A bit intoxicated, he said that it was about twenty more kilometers, and that if we kept going, we could probably be there by dark.

At that point, Dad turned to our guide, sitting next to me in the back seat, and asked him why he kept saying it was close, when it was actually a long ways away. The man responded that he knew we wanted it to be closer, and he didn't want to disappoint us. Well, we turned the car around at that point, and headed back to the Pan American Highway. We thanked our tour guide, and Dad gave him some money. The point struck home with me, though. It's better to tell people the truth, even if it's not what they want to hear. They'll be better off in the long run, and we'll have served them better with plain speech rather than false hopes, in so doing. That was an important lesson, growing up in an “aim-to-please” family.

Another lesson about the importance of abiding in the truth came from a project in high school, where several of us in our youth group felt it would be important to create some positive peer support among Christians in our secular high school. It wasn't enough to just stay clear of parties and other activities that might compromise one's values; we wanted to create a fellowship of believers that could encourage one another during the day and throughout the week. So, my sister and her friend, Karen asked for permission to meet fifteen minutes before the homeroom bell rang, Tuesdays and Thursdays, in a self-managed Bible-and-prayer meeting. We called the gathering “Challengers,” as we hoped to challenge secular culture with Christ-like values, as much as we knew them.

The gathering actually came off really well, and from year to year, we invited a faculty member to serve as an advisor. Basically, we simply passed around a sign-up sheet, and people took turns leading the sessions. Among the twenty or so students that participated, the day began with a voluntary gathering for hearing a Bible text and a brief time of sharing and prayer. It also was a great opportunity for inviting others to join the gathering, finding ways to support one another personally and spiritually during the week. In addition to youth group at Canton First Friends Church, these types of gatherings allowed believers to create positive

peer groups, allowing us to encourage each other and to abide in the truth, as we understood it. There I saw that peer pressure can actually be a good and supportive thing, especially if it helps people embody with integrity the values they embraced.

A third learning about the freedom of integrity came with the commitment to do as agreed and to live into one's personal and institutional commitments. This had to do with a rather complex set of issues around alcohol and its potentially damaging effects. My family, of course, had grown up with an overall commitment against drinking alcohol, out of concern for those who might suffer from its effects. I learned of this conviction rather early. When I was five, I saw a beautiful picture of a golden glass with ice, against a black backdrop, on the back of a *Time* magazine. We were soon headed 450 miles to Greenleaf, Idaho for my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary, and I asked my mother if I could cut out that lovely picture and give it to my grandparents. She allowed me to do so, and when I gave it to Grandpa, sitting on his lap, he said, "Thank you, Paul, but we do not eat meat offered to idols."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but later I realized that the beautiful picture was of a Black Label or Jim Beam glass of whiskey on the rocks. Nor did I understand that Grandpa was upholding a temperance testimony, out of concern for the vulnerable. My mother's parents, Scott and Grace Clark, were recorded (ordained) Friends ministers within the revivalist Quaker tradition. Grandpa was the founding president of Friends Bible College (now Barclay College) in Haviland, Kansas. Every time he and Grandma went to pastor a new church or to serve in a new context, in addition to Grandpa's preaching and pastoral ministries, Grandma started a youth group, began a jail ministry, and established a Women's Christian Temperance Union. Especially when men's abuse of alcohol tended to involve drinking up the paycheck, diminishing dependability, and causing wives and children to suffer, the WCTU addressed many of the social concerns that my feminist friends have been addressing in recent decades. Haviland was midpoint between Wichita and Dodge; go figure.

While biblical teaching follows along the lines of temperance, Christian groups with social concerns saw abstinence as the best way to further temperance. And, out of concern for the vulnerable, one never knows who might have alcoholic tendencies, so personal liberties were forfeited out of loving concern for the vulnerable. That's where Paul's counsel in 1

Corinthians 8-10 comes into play. If the “weaker brethren” in the Corinthian situation might have associated idolatrous and licentious activities with meat offered to idols, Jewish Christians needed to check their liberties. He also says that there is nothing wrong with eating meat, oneself, if one does not associate it with idol worship or related practices (sometimes involving cultic prostitution). Nor did he want believers to claim superior knowledge if they disparaged myths and felt themselves above local superstitions. Rather, the key issue was loving concern for the vulnerable, and that was the basis for my grandparents’ teachings on alcohol over the years. If the liberty of some might cause others to stumble, the loving way forward was to abstain in the furthering of healthy temperance.

Eventually, however, Christians and others began to distinguish between the moderate use of alcohol and its intemperate abuse. Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, as a movement, raised particular concerns, passing laws that penalized drunk driving; insurance companies and medical reports privileged non-smoking and alcohol temperance; spouse abuse and domestic violence were addressed head on, whether alcohol was directly involved, or not. These pointed measures and medical reports on salutary effects of some moderate uses of alcohol began to change the social concerns of society over the last few decades. Due to clear medical research, tobacco has not fared as well. As a result, many evangelical churches also changed their alcohol stances from abstinence to temperance.

Our own Yearly Meeting went through a change in its *Faith and Practice* several years ago, harmonizing the query calling for abstinence with more open church teaching along the lines of temperance. At George Fox University, it became more and more difficult to maintain the stance against drinking for the graduate and doctoral programs, so a change was made over a decade ago, maintaining the prohibition against drinking for undergraduate students, while allowing temperance liberty for graduate programs. Faculty and staff, of course, were to model abstinence before students, while granted liberty of conscience in their personal lives. That has worked pretty well, in keeping alcohol use and abuse from being a problem within the college student population, especially as drinking under the age of 21 is forbidden by law in Oregon. And, employees and graduate students are called to exercise discernment and to embody responsible living as a healthful Christian witness, which has worked out fairly well.

Before George Fox University modified its policy, however, I was invited to serve at Yale Divinity School as a visiting associate professor in New Testament. So, Carla and I moved

our family across the country to Hamden, CT during the 1998-1999 year. It was a wonderful time, living in a new setting and getting to know some really fine people. At Yale, though, wine-and-cheese afternoon receptions were abundant, and I was faced with a decision. Even though partaking of a glass of wine at a social gathering or meal would neither have had an unhealthy effect on me or others, I wondered if I should maintain the stance of George Fox University, even while on leave. In fact, choosing an alternative to wine actually felt like an embarrassment in some settings, as I didn't want others to feel uneasy about my choices.

Nonetheless, it seemed to me to be a matter of integrity in terms of the lifestyle expectations at my home institution. I imagine I could have exercised liberty of conscience if I'd wanted to, but my thinking went along these lines. If we expected abstinence of our college students back in Oregon, even on their international study trips, then I as a faculty member ought also to commit to the same standard, even when on a year's leave of absence at an Ivy League institution. I also wanted to model integrity before my children, explaining that the commitment I'd made on the West Coast was also binding while living on the East Coast. While it would have been entirely fitting to enjoy the standard and fare of the YDS community and its fellowship settings, for me it was a matter of integrity—abiding by the standards to which I had committed myself. Even though greater liberty at my home institution emerged later, my word being good was for me a matter of conscience.

While none of these experiences with integrity are exceptional, or perhaps even intriguing, they reflect parts of my own experience as to how abiding in the truth can be truly liberating. When we tell people the hard truth, even if they'd rather not hear it, they are served well by plain speech rather than embellished oratory. In providing support for groups seeking to live by owned standards, whatever they may be, we create loving networks of integrity, furthering the transformation of culture by our example and witness. And, in holding to our commitments, our word is good, and that creates trust and confidence along other lines, as well. In these and other ways, abiding in the truth is liberating, both individually and corporately. As reminded by John 11:9 and 1 John 1:7, walking in the light not only keeps us from stumbling, but it also creates a fellowship of loving support and purpose.