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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Style or substance: does the reputation of the church matter?

by David McIlroy

*Reputation: What People Say About You Matters*¹

Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7

We strive continually to adorn and preserve our imaginary self, neglecting the true one.

Blaise Pascal

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Summary

The church and its members are not to be concerned about their reputation for their own sake or as an end in itself. But, they should seek to protect their reputation where the honour of God is at stake, provided doing so is consistent with the countercultural values of the gospel.

Introduction

Reputation is what others know (or think they know) about us. Should Christians and the church be concerned about their reputation in wider society? Does it matter or is it a distraction from the central task of preaching the gospel?

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the reputation of the church in the West is most acutely at stake over allegations of sexual abuse against clergymen and over the question of whether it is appropriate for practising homosexuals to hold office in the church. To what extent should the church be concerned about the way in which these issues are reported and commented upon? Does it matter if evangelicals are denounced in the press as 'bigots' and as the 'Taliban'?²

The nature of reputation

Reputation is a social construct. It is a necessary invention of human society. Our reputation is our public image, and as such it is constructed by a combination of what we project out into the community and what the community projects onto us. Reputation acts as a shorthand character sketch, reducing transaction costs and the necessity for extensive information exchanges before social and economic interaction can take place. It enables us, for example, to be suitably trusting of those with a reputation for honesty, and wary of those with a reputation for dishonesty. The problem is that the character sketch can be a caricature, or worse still, a character assassination.

Although reputation is not the full reality, it creates in our minds a mental picture of the person with whom we are dealing, and 'the point is that it is that mental picture which counts, which speaks to our hearts, which acts effectively on us, arousing in us real feelings of admiration or reprobation.'³ Until we get to know them, we react to people according to their reputation. God alone relates to us as we really are. He is not blinded by reputation, either good or bad. He is never disillusioned, because he harbours no illusions to begin with.

Not only individuals but communities and institutions have reputations too. These reputations are inevitably constructed on the basis of generalisations, expressed most vividly in the national stereotypes such as the German reputation for efficiency or the English for pragmatism. In Revelation 3, John told the church at Sardis: '...you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'⁴

1 www.repdirect.co.uk

2 *Guardian* leader article, 7 July 2003, 'The bigots win', and article by Stephen Bates, 'No room in the church', 20 September 2003.

3 Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons: Reflections on a Psychiatrist's Casebook*, (English tr.), London: SCM, 1957, pp.11-12.

4 Rev. 3:1. Contrast Rom. 1:8.

Recent research has revealed that, as an institution, the church's reputation in UK society is largely a negative one, creating a real barrier to the effective proclamation of the gospel.⁵ Does that mean that the church should now make a public relations campaign a primary focus for the next few years?

The pursuit of reputation

A concern for honour and reputation has been characteristic of humankind since at least the time of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:4). Its builders were not only constructing a tower, they were constructing a name, a reputation for themselves. In contrast to this self-promotion and reputational self-seeking, God told Abraham: 'I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.' (Genesis 12:2). The contrast is deliberately drawn.

The pursuit of reputation is an attempt at self-construction, at self-determination; ultimately, at self-creation. The Psalmist's plea is instead, 'May my vindication come from you.'⁶ Despite the value of reputation, Christians are not to seek a good reputation *for its own sake*. Such an ambition can lead one into extremely hot water indeed. Paul Whitman argues that a distinctive feature of Nazism's appeal to the German working classes was that it offered to them not primarily increased wealth, but instead increased honour, a status as Aryans which made them part of the people who were 'worth something'.⁷

The perils of seeking to gain or maintain a reputation *for its own sake* are illustrated in our own times by the disgrace of Jonathan Aitken and Jeffrey Archer. Both Archer and Aitken brought libel actions to 'clear their names' and protect their reputations. Both lied on oath. Both were sent to prison for their crime. Both ended up ruined, although Archer's comeuppance was slower in arriving. Aitken was repentant; he pleaded guilty. Archer remained defiant to the end.

At best, Archer and Aitken were guilty of believing their own publicity.⁸ At worst, they were calculating liars and cunning manipulators. Why did it matter to them so much to vindicate their public reputation? In part, at least, because they had invested so much of themselves and their time and effort in manufacturing their reputation. Their sense of self-worth, their sense of dignity, had become intertwined with the reputation they believed they had created for themselves. Looking back on his experience, Jonathan Aitken reflects: 'It didn't take me long to work out what had gone wrong. I could sum it up in one word – *pride*.'⁹

This attitude stands in contrast to the attitude the Bible promotes with regard to questions of reputation. As Aitken now acknowledges, 'the Christian journey...is a journey from self-centredness to God-centredness.'¹⁰ Christians are urged to entrust the vindication of their reputation to God in heaven,¹¹ rather than being anxious to seek affirmation, praise and positive feedback from mere human beings.¹²

Paul in Galatians 1:10, writes: 'Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? ...If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.'¹³ Christians are to expect to be poorly regarded by the world, and even to experience poor and unjust treatment from the world.¹⁴ Such is the price

of commitment to the one true God and to his Christ.

The idealisation, indeed the idolisation, of reputation is exchanging the pursuit of the superficial for the substantial. Living lives like Christ is primarily about character rather than reputation. If the church is seeking a good reputation from other human beings then reputation becomes a trap (Proverbs 29:25). A church which places a premium on its reputation would be incapable of standing counterculturally. You cannot be a prophet if you want a good reputation.¹⁵ Chasing godliness *may* lead to the acquisition of a good reputation,¹⁶ or it may lead to persecution.¹⁷

In our times it is a prophetic action for the church to stand on the truth of biblical sexual morality, and though the issue may have negative consequences for the church's reputation, especially with liberal newspaper columnists, questions of human sexuality are so closely bound up with our identity as beings created in the image of God, that the adverse publicity, the persecution, is the price of being true to the gospel.

Therefore, Christians and the church are not to join the general pursuit after reputation. 'It is not good to eat too much honey, nor is it honourable to seek one's own honour.' (Proverbs 25:27).¹⁸ However, in the New Testament, we find Paul, on more than one occasion, going to considerable lengths to establish his reputation as an apostle, for the sake of the gospel.¹⁹ How do we explain this?

The importance of reputation

Paul's first letter to Timothy contains a significant amount of material on reputation in relation to its size. Amongst the qualifications for being an elder, set out in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, reputation is mentioned both explicitly and implicitly: '...the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ...He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.'

The Greek word *anepileptos* translated as 'above reproach' means not merely of good report but deservedly so. The good reputation which is a requisite of eldership is one which ought to have been proven through experience, as is evident from Paul's advice with regard to deacons: 'They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve...'. (1 Timothy 3:10). The public facade must concord with the interior reality.

What grates with us is when there is a discord between the *persona* which a person projects and the inward reality of their lives. 'It is not the mask, the personage in itself, but its artificial and deceptive character, which gives us the uneasy feeling...It happens as soon as we perceive a discord between the person and the personage. It is not, then, a case of casting off the personage, but of bringing it into harmony with the person. It is a case of being in accord with oneself.'²⁰

This places significant constraints on how Christians seek to construct their reputations. It is not a question of attempting to present whatever reputation can be sold to the unsuspecting public. The reputation of Christians and the church ought to correlate with their inner reality. The church's leaders ought to have integrity, because their public face and their private lives are not disconnected.²¹

5 Nick Spencer, *Beyond Belief? Barriers and Bridges to Faith Today*, London: LICC, 2003.

6 Ps. 17:2.

7 Whitman, 'Nazi "Honour" and the New European "Dignity"', in Joerges and Ghaleigh (eds.), *Darker Legacies of Law in Europe: The Shadow of National Socialism and Fascism over Europe and its Legal Traditions*, Oxford: Hart, 2003, p.265.

8 See Peter Preston, 'Masters of Unreality', *The Observer*, Sunday 26 December 1999.

9 Alpha supper talk at Bradford Cathedral, reproduced in *Alpha News*, Nov. 2003–Feb. 2004, p.5.

10 *ibid.*

11 1 Sam. 2:30; John 12:26. See also 1 Chr. 29:12; Ps. 62:7; 84:11; Zeph. 3:19–20; 1 Pet. 1:7.

12 John 5:41; 12:41; 1 Thess. 2:6.

13 See also John 5:44.

14 Matt. 5:11–12.

15 Jer. 37:13–15, and Elijah – who Ahab described as 'the troubler of Israel' in 1 Kings 18:17.

16 Prov. 21:23; 22:4.

17 2 Tim. 3:12.

18 See also Prov. 25:6–7.

19 Gal. 1:11–2:13; 2 Cor. 10:1–12:10.

20 Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*, p.81.

21 See 1 Cor. 4:17; Francis Schaeffer, *Trilogy: He is there and He is not silent*, Leicester: IVP, 1990, pp.338–9.

The reputation of the church, of its leaders and members, ought to be built on truth, and this applies also to the reputations we are involved in creating for others. This is why there is such strong biblical condemnation of gossip and slander.²²

The reputation of the church, its members and its officials matters, because the church is the church of the living God (1 Timothy 3:15). God's reputation is associated with that of his people. Therefore, the church should be careful not to appoint leaders with a bad reputation nor should its members conduct themselves in such a way as gives 'the enemy' any opportunity for slander (1 Timothy 5:14; 6:1).

These issues of reputation are not just about the behaviour of church leaders as individuals, they go to the reputation of the church as a whole. One of Paul's motivating reasons for writing to the Corinthian church was that their lax approach to questions of sexual conduct had become notorious (1 Corinthians 5). In the New Testament, holiness was not just a personal matter, it was a vital issue for the church as a community. The church is called to be holy. Sexual immorality in the Corinthian church was understood to be a communal problem because it brought dishonour to God.

Oliver O'Donovan has perceived once again that it is a concern for its reputation as a community which justifies church discipline. He writes: '...the point of church discipline...is to defend the public integrity of the church. Inevitably it belongs to the realm of appearances, and provides a sign rather than the substance of divine judgement. ...But that does not mean that the realm of appearances is a realm of absolute illusion. ...[The church] can define the shape of its public life by excluding from it scandalous, that is, known and unrepented, sin.'²³ The challenge for the church today is to be faithful to revealed morality, even when it has to do so at a cost to its reputation in some quarters.

The issue is the credibility of the gospel. It is the church as community – the city on the hill which is meant to be seen (Matthew 5:14–16). The church as a body of God's people ought to have a reputation for goodness, saltiness and light.

The reputation of God

Therefore, although Christians are not to pursue reputation and status for their own sakes, neither are they to neglect questions of reputation entirely, because the reputation of God is bound up with the reputation of his people.

The reputation of God and the Old Testament

The reputation of God is established by his creation,²⁴ and vindicated by his redemptive actions. God told Moses: 'I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'²⁵ In the New Testament, the second phrase in the Lord's Prayer is that God's name would be hallowed; that God's name would be honoured.²⁶ In biblical terms God's name refers to his true identity, his revelation of who he really is – his character. The question is: will people accurately understand who God really is or will he be dishonoured by the way in which his character is presented? God is concerned about his reputation, and his people should be too.

But God's attitude to his own reputation is surprisingly complex. God is playing the long game. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.²⁷ But until then, and throughout history, God

has allowed his reputation to be closely tied to the fortunes of his people here on earth.²⁸ Israel is the bearer of God's name.²⁹

God's people have proved to be inconsistent witnesses to the character of their God, at times displaying little of the holiness, love and grace which he exemplifies. After God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they quickly fell into idolatry, quarrelling and sexual immorality in the desert. When God was on the verge of destroying them, Moses interceded successfully on the grounds that to do so would be ruinous for God's reputation.³⁰

Yet after the Israelites had conquered the Promised Land, God allowed them to be overrun by their enemies, when to do so was necessary to demonstrate to them that their sins were serious in his sight. The overall impact of such actions on God's reputation is difficult to quantify. It would have damaged it with those whose idea of godship was tied to territorial concepts or who thought that God had irrevocably committed himself to protecting certain sacred places.³¹ But for those with a concern for justice and holiness, God's actions were a vindication of his character, and therefore were, however painful, an enhancement of his reputation.³²

The reputation of God and the Incarnation

The Incarnation can be seen in terms of the loss of, and the recovery of, reputation. Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, 'made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself...'. (Philippians 2:7–8). From the glory of heaven, the Son of God became a man, known as a carpenter in his home town (Mark 6:3), enduring ultimately the humiliation of a show trial, the degradation of a public flogging, and the ignominy of a naked death as a criminal, blasphemer and revolutionary (Hebrews 13:12–14). While God is ultimately concerned to magnify his glory, his love drove him to become shame for the good of others. The biblical message is that the road to honour is to be found by walking the paths of humility.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus endeavoured to manage his reputation. He was very much concerned about his public image. Having rejected the devil's temptations to become a miracle-worker or a political ruler, he constantly sought to prevent people from forming such opinions of him or from forcing him into those roles. He refused to perform for the Pharisees or the crowds when they demanded a miracle (Mark 8:11–12), and he walked away from the mob when they sought to proclaim him king.

Jesus demonstrated a proper concern for his reputation. There were times when he was acutely aware of it. He was interested in who people thought he was (Mark 8:27–30), but above all he was concerned that his followers should be aware of his true identity. When Lazarus died, he told his disciples: 'This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' (John 11:4). There were times when Jesus took positive steps to protect his reputation. When the Pharisees accused him of being possessed by Beelzebub, he refuted the charge, because it went to the heart of his mission (Mark 3:22–30).

But Jesus was not a slave to his reputation. He provoked, even cultivated, the reputation that he was a friend of sinners and prostitutes, which no doubt undermined his standing in the eyes of 'right-minded' people. Jesus was prepared to endure a bad reputation when, by revealing what was true about himself, he made himself look less praiseworthy in the eyes of some. That was the price to be paid for acting counterculturally.

And yet, despite the steps that Jesus took, his enemies

22 Lev. 19:16; Ps. 15:3; Matt. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:20; Col. 3:8; Titus 3:2; James 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:1.
23 Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd edn.; Leicester: Apollos, 1994, pp.175–6.

24 Ps. 8; 19:1–4; 97:6.

25 Ex. 9:16; see also 1 Chr. 16:24, 28; Jer. 33:20.

26 See also Num. 25:11–13; Ps. 22:23; 50:15; Jer. 3:17; Mal. 1:6; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 4:9–11; 5:12–13; 7:12.

27 Phil. 2:10–11; see also Is. 40:5.

28 Jer. 13:11.

29 Num. 6:27; Deut. 28:10.

30 Deut. 9:7–29; see also Josh. 7:9; Ps. 79:9; Jer. 14:21.

31 See 1 Sam. 4:21; Jer. 7:12–15.

32 See Ezek. 39:21–24.

branded him as a blasphemer and liar (Mark 14:60–64). The desperate trawl for evidence at the trial of Jesus before the high priest bears the hallmarks of a search for proof to support a conclusion already reached on the basis of rumour and *reputation*.

As well as modelling an approach to questions of reputation, Jesus also taught about it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: ‘Be careful not to do your “acts of righteousness” before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets...to be honoured by men.’ (Matthew 6:1–4). This would appear to call Christians actively to eschew reputation-building.

However, earlier in Matthew 5:14–16, Jesus said: ‘You are the light of the world. ...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds...’. The resolution of the apparent contradiction is to be found in the last phrase in Matthew 5:16; when Jesus’ followers act openly they are to do so not in order to attract praise to themselves, but rather that the watching world would ‘praise your Father in heaven’. It is God’s reputation, not our own, about which we should be concerned; as the first verse of the first Passover Psalm expresses it: ‘Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.’ (Psalm 115:1).

The Christian is justified in seeking to protect his or her reputation, when the honour of the gospel is at stake. In an age of child abuse scandals within institutions, ‘giving the enemy no opportunity for slander’ (1 Timothy 5:14) must include making sure that churches have child protection policies and procedures in place which do not leave their children’s workers vulnerable to unfounded allegations. In an age of marital breakdown and infidelity, being ‘above reproach’ may require church leaders to go to the lengths Billy Graham did to avoid any possible accusations that he might be having an affair.³³ Perhaps more than ever, it is now imperative that church leaders have taken wise precautions to protect themselves from challenges to their reputations. Reputation management is an inevitable part of leadership, and an important one if our actions are to be credible.

Reputation and counterculture

1 Peter 2:12 places on Christians an obligation to ‘Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God...’. Although Christians are not to be obsessed by reputation, they ought to do what they can to deserve a good one, for the sake of the gospel. Jesus commands his followers to seek to have a good reputation for functional reasons, rather than as an end in itself. At times, the desire for ‘good PR’ will conflict with other obligations weighing on the Christian, such as the obligation to take a stand for God’s holiness (cf. John 12:42–43) or the obligation to reach out to the untouchables in our society. It is at this point that the injunction to seek the praise of God not of man is applicable. When the claims of reputation collide with the substantive work of God, the desire for a good reputation must give way.

Such an approach to questions of reputation is evident in the

33 Billy Graham would not even travel alone in a car with a woman other than his wife.

lives of Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist. The two men went about their God-given ministries in very different ways. John was an ascetic who withdrew into the desert, subjecting himself to a rigorous diet. Jesus chose to eat and drink with the outcasts of his society, tax collectors and ‘sinners’. Their opponents accused John of being possessed by a demon and Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard.³⁴ It was their enemies, however, who were deluded. Jesus and John the Baptist acted as they did in order to bring others in touch with fundamental realities, about God’s offer of forgiveness and love for human beings, and about the need for repentance and faith. But what they did was open to misinterpretation and to negative consequences for their reputation as public figures. This was a price they paid for doing God’s work, God’s way.

Nonetheless, the church must pay *some* attention to its reputation, where failing to correct a negative impression would be harmful to the success of its message. The reputation of the church does matter because it impacts on the way people listen to and receive Christian truth. However, the church’s concern for its reputation must never be at the cost of betraying the commitment to truth for which it stands.

Reputation and the Day of Judgement

The outcome of Jesus’ life was that ‘God exalted him to the highest place’.³⁵ The lifting up of Jesus on the cross, intended by the Romans and Jews to expose him to public ridicule, became in the divine plan the apogee of Jesus’ mission. As Jesus had predicted: ‘the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.’³⁶

The Day of Judgement will be a day of truth for God’s reputation and also for others’. On that day there will be concord between reputation and inner reality, both for us and for God. Therefore, Christians must not forget that reputation is only a temporary facade, useful only as long as the present age continues. At the Last Judgement, God will deal with us not merely on the basis of our reputation, not even just on the basis of our external deeds, but rather on the basis of our lives as a whole, of who we are in thought, word and action.³⁷ This means that on that last day, we can expect to see reversals of reputation. As Jesus prophesied: ‘Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’³⁸

34 Matt. 11:18–19

35 Phil. 2:9; Heb. 2:7–9.

36 John 3:14–15.

37 See Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime and Punishment*, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001, p.128; O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, p.205.

38 Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30.

Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version.

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