

PERMISSION TO SPEAK FREELY

ESSAYS AND ART ON FEAR, CONFESSION AND GRACE

by Annie Downs & Anne Jackson

STUDENTS/YOUNG ADULTS

“The purpose of this book is simple: To share those confessions and show you that you’re not alone. To have thousands of other peoples’ words and art and blood and guts and hope and love and courage prove it to you. And that in their confession, you’ll find you have the permission – and the responsibility – to speak freely. “

INTRO: THEY SPEAK FREELY.

Our minds are infiltrated with the things that other people say. Whether it’s blogs or editorial pieces in newspapers or television shows like Dr. Phil. It seems that people all over the world are desperate, practically burning, to say what they are feeling, to share the problems in their lives, or to merely express themselves.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Where are some places throughout your week that you see or experience the world speaking their thoughts and opinions loudly?*

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Why do you think people are willing to type things on facebook that they won’t say in person?*

Yet, in what is supposed to be a center for healing, the church, it seems that so many of us aren’t willing to say. To speak about the things that hurt us, bother us, excite us, devastate us. We are quiet. The world is loud. And yet everyone is still hurting.

It’s time for a change. It’s time that the church got the chance to speak freely. And it can start with one voice.

Are you confused about some portion of scripture?
Did something go wrong?
Did something go right?
Are you struggling with sickness, sin, or hurts in silence?
Are you at your breaking point?
Are you ready to celebrate a victory and no one knows?
Are you wondering about God? About Jesus? About your past or your future?
Are you afraid to say?

Using the story of Ezra’s confession before God, we are going to study the effect that it has on other people when just one person is willing to be honest and speak.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *What is the opposite of “speak freely?”*

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Why do you think the world is more comfortable sharing their stories than people in the church?*

HISTORY: WHO IS EZRA?

Though you’ve probably read some part of Ezra’s story before, here’s the simple answer: Ezra was a humble, low profile leader of the Jewish community. He’s not a big deal, he’s just a God-fearing man who was placed in a leadership position.

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An interesting fact that deserves to be highlighted is that “Ezra” in Hebrew means “God helps”. And we will see in this scripture that God helps many people through Ezra.

SCRIPTURE: Ezra 9- Ezra 10

Read this scripture with your group, focusing specifically on Ezra 9:1-5 and Ezra 10:1-4.

In 9:3, Ezra responds physically to the fact that the Israelites are sinning before God (pulled out his beard, hair, tore his cloak, and sat down appalled).

discussion question -- Can you think of any modern day comparison to these acts? (We obviously don't tear our clothes when we are convicted of sin, etc.) If you can't think of one, why is our culture so different?

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Why did Ezra weep and mourn over a sin he did not commit?*

The Quest Study Bible says this in regards to Ezra 9:6--

“He did not personally commit the sins mentioned... Ezra saw himself vitally linked to the community—even in its sin. Ezra showed care and responsibility for his people rather than setting himself above them.”

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Why does humility bring people together?*

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *What do you think it felt like to be a spectator in this moment? To watch Ezra?*

In 10:1, a large crowd of Israelites began to gather around Ezra as he wept and mourned and prayed.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *What drew the people to Ezra in that moment?*

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Why is honesty attractive?*

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *How did Ezra's courage affect his friends?*

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Is that kind of response possible with your friends? Why or why not?*

ACTIVITY: YOU CAN SPEAK FREELY

Ezra did something no one else was brave enough to do. Speak up, pray and confess, in front of a crowd. Even though the sin wasn't his alone, he took the opportunity to speak. And the people responded. And all were changed. For the better.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Why are we afraid to speak freely?*

Ezra probably dealt with some fear. But, in the end, the strongest thing Ezra felt was the desire to please God and honor Him. To be open about his brokenness so that God would be glorified.

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Now it is your turn.

Each person in your small group should have a notecard and a pen. On that notecard, answer this question:

What is one thing you feel you can't say in church?

Feel free to just write it or draw or illustrate it in some way. Be creative if you'd like!

CLOSING: YOU'VE SPOKEN.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: *Why does it feel good to do this activity? After all the fear and nervousness and tension, why such a deep relief?*

You have not entered a utopian society now that words have been spoken aloud. People are still hurting and broken and need Jesus. Speaking freely doesn't erase problems and erase world poverty.

To speak freely is not to reach the finish line.

It is the gunshot that begins the race. You are at the starting line.

James 5:16

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." (NIV)

Pray for each other, that as God continues to bring questions to the surface of your hearts, you would continue to speak freely to each other and just like Ezra, see the others around you begin to speak freely as well.

Things are going to change now for your group. Ask God for wisdom to lead these who now see the value in open communication and honest confession.