

Christian Community is Marked by Speaking the Truth in Love

A Sermon on Ephesians 4:11-16

Pastor Knox at Faith PCA, Tacoma

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This will be the second sermon in a four part mini-series which I've entitled "Four Marks of Christian Community." By preaching on these 4 marks, my goal is not to give a comprehensive or exhaustive description of Christian community. If that was my goal, we would need far more than four weeks and four marks. Instead, the goal of this mini-series is to highlight the four essential ingredients of the small group ministry which our church is officially launching in September.

In last week's sermon I gave a theological rationale for why we have organized the small groups around eating in each other's homes by considering the theme of Biblical hospitality. This week my goal is to give a theological rationale for why the bulk of small group meetings will consist of discussing sermons by considering the theme of speaking the truth in love.

Although there are many Biblical passages that command, illustrate, or imply the need for discussion of God's word and sermons, few are as clear, broad or foundational as Ephesians 4:11-16. As we read it together, notice that speaking the truth in love is central to Paul's vision of the church.

...

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles open and may the Lord help us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Christian community is marked by speaking the truth in love.

What is speaking the truth in love? In Christian circles this phrase is so common that you could make a case that it has reached the unenviable status of being cliché. But, despite its popularity and familiarity, it seems to me the phrase is rarely used in the same sense that Paul uses it here in Ephesians 4. Most often, in the colloquial usage of contemporary Christians, the phrase "speaking the truth in love," means saying something hard, but necessary, in a gentle way. Often this phrase comes up in the context of interpersonal conflict and peacemaking, and the essential meaning there is usually something like, "Be gently honest about what is bothering you" or "get that frustration and hurt off your chest by talking to the person who offended you." In other words, in the most common usage, this phrase usually refers to confronting or correcting others.

But when Paul exhorts us to “speak the truth in love” here in the context of Ephesians 4, he is not encouraging us to be transparent about how others have hurt us, nor is he primarily talking about confronting others on their sins. Those, of course, are Biblical ideas, but you’d have to go to other passages to see them addressed directly and spelled out clearly. Instead, in these verses Paul is primarily exhorting us to talk to each other about Christian doctrine.

In a sermon on this passage, John Piper points out three main evidences of this meaning of speaking the truth in love here in this text. (*I’m actually going to suggest four, but we’ll start out with the three he helped me see.*) First, look again at verses 11-12 and notice how this passage begins with a description of four church offices which are all centered around the truths of the gospel. While it’s certainly true that Apostles and Prophets knew how to confront wayward individuals (*think of Nathan confronting David or Peter confronting Ananias and Saphira*), their calling was much broader than that; it was to proclaim the foundational truths of our faith to the entirety of God’s people. That proclamation is still with us today in the form of Scripture. In a similar way, evangelists proclaim all of the foundational truths of the gospel, not just the hard words of personal admonishment. Likewise, as verse 12 spells out, the calling of pastor-teachers is not only to confront personal sins, but also to equip the saints generally, to minister to the whole man, and build up the body in every area. This means applying all the truths of God’s word to the many situations of life.

Although these offices have different emphases, they all work by the same basic means: the truths of the gospel. As John Piper put it, each office is a “truth agent.”

Secondly, this understanding of “speaking the truth in love” (*as being about the whole of Christian doctrine and not just about a gentle rebuke*) is reinforced by Paul’s vision of unity in verse 13. Look again at that verse with me and notice that Paul’s vision is built on the same body of truth to which Paul refers in verse 15. Here in verse 13 “the faith,” primarily refers to the objective content of what we believe as Christians (*think, for example of the Nicene Creed*), while “knowledge of the Son of God,” probably refers more to the subjective experience of walking with the Lord Jesus (*think, for example, of Paul’s description of “knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” in Philippians 3:8*). In both cases, our unity as Christians is in the truth. We are united both by our profession of faith in the truth, and by the lifestyle of pursuing Christ which arises from that profession.

Thirdly, this understanding of “speaking the truth in love” (*as being about the entirety of Christian doctrine*) is reinforced by Paul’s description of maturity in verses 13-14. Look again at those verses with me and notice that a significant aspect of maturity is a deep grasp of Biblical truth. Paul illustrates immaturity as being like a storm-tossed ship, where the waves and winds

are various errors and false teachings. In these verses Paul suggests that a deep grasp of Biblical truth brings insight, protection, stability, rootedness, strength, and health not only to the individual Christian, but to the church. While these verses obviously have some relevance for the occasional need to individually confront someone with gentleness, it's clear that the "truth" which Paul is talking about here is much broader. It's the entirety of Christian doctrine, the foundation of our faith, the road to maturity, the armor of God, the building blocks of a Christian worldview, the spectacles of Scripture through which we interpret all of life.

Fourthly, this understanding of speaking the truth in love is reinforced by Paul's description of comprehensive spiritual growth. Look again at verse 15 with me and notice that the scope of truth here is as wide as the horizon, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." The Greek translated here as "in every way" literally reads "the all," which is why the KJV translates it "in all things." In other words, the call to speak the truth in love is a all-encompassing call to grow in Christ by applying the word of God to every area of life.

So, let's distill these four textual observations down into a concise definition: speaking the truth in love is a life-long conversation that we, who are the body of Christ, have with one another about the truths of God's word and how they apply to every area of life, with the ultimate goal of continual growth in Christian unity and maturity.

This leads us to our second question: Why is speaking the truth in love important? Our passage suggests three main reasons. The first is implied in our definition, but would be helpful to unpack, namely, that speaking the truth in love is the process by which we grow in unity. Look again at verses 12 and 13 and notice that this great conversation about truth begins with the four offices I mentioned earlier. That is because these four offices each speak for God in some sense: Apostles and Prophets speaking for God in a primary sense by giving us the inspired and inerrant word of God, now recorded in Scripture; evangelists and pastor/teachers speaking for God in a secondary sense by proclaiming, explaining, proving, and applying the Scriptures to us.

But the great conversation does not end here. If you read the rest of this passage, and for that matter, the rest of the Bible, carefully, you'll see that the word of God is meant to be explained, proved, applied, savored, and generally discussed in every way by all of God's people, not just apostles, evangelists, and pastors. On that point, notice that the subject of verse 15 is an all-inclusive "we." And notice Paul's emphasis in verse 16 on the proper functioning of every part of the body of Christ.

In other words, there is a dialogical pattern here: first the Lord speaks to us through His word, and then we respond by speaking to one another about what we have heard.

In one sense this pattern is reflected in the liturgy of our worship services. The Lord calls us to worship, and we respond with singing and prayers, which are not only ways of addressing the Lord, but of addressing one another. The Lord assures us of pardon, and we respond with singing and offertories. The Lord speaks to us through His word, and we respond with singing and by professing the faith together in creeds and confessions. The Lord feeds and communes with us and we respond with songs of praise. Corporate worship is one of the ways that we fulfill Paul's command in Ephesians 5:19, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart." Notice here that Paul does not draw a sharp distinction between singing praises to the Lord and singing to one another about the Lord. Neither should we.

This dialogical pattern is also an important part of the design behind our small group ministry. The Lord first speaks to us through the preaching of His word, and then we speak the truth to one another as we discuss sermons and bible passages in small group times.

Now, if you are thinking that discussion of sermons sounds boring or redundant, let me assure you that discussion times are NOT simply a regurgitation of what the pastor said on Sunday morning. As I hope you've already begun to see from the Questions for Reflection and Discussion that I provide each week, discussions are not like the fill-in-the-blank quizzes that so many of us grew up on in school as kids. That, I agree, would be boring and redundant. Instead, small group discussions are meant to take us both deeper into the ideas of the sermon and Biblical text, and beyond it. My goal each week is to provide at least three types of questions: ones which help us to know each other better, especially as we consider how the Biblical text touches situations in our lives; ones which help us to dig deeper into closely related concepts and other Biblical passages that naturally flow out of the sermon; and ones aimed at helping us walk out the truths we've discussed and pray for each other.¹

As I think most preachers probably feel when preparing for most sermons (*I certainly do!*), there is almost always so much more that *could* be said, especially when you consider the varied, individual circumstances and personalities of any given audience. Not only do I often find myself having to cut out many interesting and edifying rabbit-trails or parallel passages, but I also am often reminded that the same Biblical text might a strong rebuke to one person, while simultaneously being a warm comfort to another. What might be a paradigm-shifting insight for one hearer might simply be a good reminder for someone else, or maybe something he or she completely disagrees with.

¹ Inspiration for these categories comes largely from Larry Osborne in his book, *Sticky Church*.

Discussing sermons with one another not only allows the members of a small group to consider more fully how a text should be applied to individual lives, but it also promotes the kind of unity that Paul envisions here in verse 13. Think about it. Not only does discussion have the potential to increase unity by increasing our shared understanding of the truths we have heard, but it also is an opportunity to love each other by fulfilling many of Paul's one another commands at the same time. Think, for example, of Paul's exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 to "encourage one another with these words" (*about the resurrection and the second coming*). Or consider Hebrews 3:13, "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Or think of Hebrews 10:24-25 "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Of course it's true that you can fulfill these commands without being a part of sermon discussion small group. And I know that many of you already have the kind of deep Christian friendships with each other where you can speak freely and openly about your struggles, failures, and temptations. If that's you, praise the Lord! Keep up the good work.

But, having personally spoken with many of you over the course of this past year, I also know that many of you do not have those deep Christian friendships, or at least not enough of them. And, as most of us have learned from experience, establishing those is usually not as easy or straightforward as it sounds on paper. Despite the fact that we share so much in common in the Lord, most of us find that it takes time and intentionality to develop these kinds of relationships. Unless we have already developed this kind of a bond, most of us, most of the time, don't just walk up to each other at the coffee table after the service and launch into the blood and guts of last week's failures and sins, our sense of spiritual weariness, lethargy, and discouragement, or our need for a loving kick in the pants.

Our hope is that small groups provide a natural starting point for these kinds of conversations and relationships. As Pastor Steven pointed out in a sermon a couple of years ago, while church leadership cannot manufacture or force deep Christian friendships, it can provide a structure which gives them the potential to develop, just as farmer encourages a tomato plant to grow by providing it with a trellis or cage. Our goal in the small group ministry is to provide an environment conducive to deep, uplifting, edifying conversations which lead to deep Christian friendships.

This, by the way, is one reason why we have decided not to assign people to small groups or to rigidly impose a demographic or geographical organizational schema. We genuinely want for small groups to be place where people can find close Christian friendships. Ideally, you might say

that any two Christians ought to be able to develop such a deep spiritual connection, given how much common ground we share in the Lord. However, as practical experience often demonstrates, most of us find that we can more easily cultivate this kind of closeness with some more than others. After all, even Jesus had an inner ring of 12 disciples, and even within that inner ring, three disciples who were especially close to him.

Our hope is that by giving you a variety of groups to choose from, you will find the one that most easily allows you to form those kinds of deep Christian friendships.

Speaking the truth in love is important because it helps us to grow in unity.

But, speaking the truth in love is also important because it helps us to grow in maturity. We've already touched on Paul's portrait of maturity in verses 13-14, so at this point I simply want you to think with me about how the process of speaking the truth in love leads to maturity.

Although there are many helpful ways to explore and apply this idea, I want to approach it by suggesting to you five benefits of discussing sermons. First, discussing sermons helps you understand what you hear. While explaining the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:19, Jesus warns us about the danger of hearing the preached word without understanding it, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path." It stands to reason that before the truth can transform us, it must first be understood.

Discussing sermons is one way to strive for greater understanding of what we hear. Of course, ultimately, we know that understanding comes from God's sovereign grace and Spirit (1 Cor 2:14-16). But, at the same time, the Lord has provided us with means of grace. After all, even Jesus, in this very same passage which emphasizes the need for sovereign grace to give us understanding, took the time to discuss and explain His mysterious parables to his disciples when it was clear that they weren't picking up what he was laying down. In a similar way, Jesus patiently explained to the two befuddled disciples on the Emmaus road how all of Scripture pointed to his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, despite telling them that they should have already understood this from the prophets.² Likewise, Prisca and Aquilla took Apollos aside to "explain to him the way of God more accurately." (Acts 18:26).

Discussing the preached word with our brothers and sisters gives us the opportunity to learn from each other. Of course it should be obvious how those who are younger and less experienced in the faith can learn from listening to more mature saints reflect on what we have

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heard in the preached word.³ If you are one of those seasoned saints, I would encourage you to consider whether participating in a small group might be a meaningful way to pass along some of the wisdom which the Lord has imparted to you over the years. But I also want to remind you that even the wisest, oldest, and most experienced among us have a limited perspective, and can be edified by hearing younger brothers and sisters reflect on the preached word.

I also want to remind you that our congregation not only consists of seasoned saints, but of children, new believers, those who are new to Reformed theology, and those who speak English as a second language. If you find the idea of discussing sermons boring because you already know most or all of what you hear on an average Sunday, then maybe that means is that you and I should talk about you leading a discussion group for those who don't already know what's being taught.

Secondly, discussing sermons can help us to believe what we hear in the preached word. Again, it's of course true that faith is ultimately the gift of sovereign grace, but, as Hebrews 3:12-13 reminds us, the Lord uses means, and one of those means is the exhortation of fellow believers.

Discussing sermons has the potential to deepen and sustain your faith as you listen to your brothers and sisters testify to the truthfulness of God's word. That may come in the form of sharing a dramatic story of God's faithfulness, sharing how the Lord has answered prayer, or simply in sharing how the Lord has blessed simple, faithful obedience. The Psalms are full of examples and exhortations to praise the Lord and testify of His faithfulness to God's people; our hope is that small groups provide an avenue for this.

Thirdly, discussing sermons can help us remember what we have heard. As most of you adults probably discovered in your school years, if you don't interact with what you hear in some way (*for example by taking notes or discussing it*), you are very likely to quickly forget it. If I was to ask you, for example, what you learned from last week's sermon, I wonder how many of you would be able to say more than a few words. Of course that's not to say that the goal of listening is to remember every point, every argument, and every illustration from every sermon of your life. But it is to say that if you can't remember hardly anything within a few days or weeks, it's hard to see how those same truths will have any meaningful impact on your life.

The Bible frequently exhorts us to remember, store up, treasure, and meditate on God's word. Listen to just one example, Psalm 119:10-16, "With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin

³ Cf Proverbs 1:5 Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.

against you. Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.”

Discussing sermons is a way of doing all of these things at once.

Fourthly, discussing sermons can help us to apply the word. I’ve already touched on how discussing sermons with Christian friends can help us apply the word to our individual circumstances and personalities. But most of us, most of the time, need more than just insights and additional perspective to apply the word. We also need encouragement and prayer. Think, for example, of Paul’s exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5:11, “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” Again, our design and our hope is that small groups would meet these needs for many of you.

Fifthly, discussing sermons can help us to articulate the word to others. Even if you are already a great listener, you may still need to grow in your ability to communicate what you know to others. Discussing sermons is one way to practice that skill.

Several years ago I came across an article from Christianity Today entitled, “The Biggest Hindrance to Your Kids’ Faith Isn’t Doubt. It’s Silence.” The subtitle of the article summed it up, “According to two researchers, the key to “sticky faith” is conversation.” This article points to research which indicates that Christian teenagers who discuss doubts and hard questions about the faith with a mature, Christian adult (*especially parents*) have higher rates of remaining in the faith and greater signs of spiritual maturity. Many of these same sources of research also, sadly, describe how many Christian teens have few, or even no, Christian adult with whom they regularly discuss the Bible or their faith.

This kind of research shouldn’t come as a surprise to us, since the Bible’s primary model for parenting is constant conversation about God’s word. Listen to Deuteronomy 6:6-7 and think about how similar it is to Paul’s command here in Ephesians 4 to speak the truth in love, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

Again, I want to remind you that each week I’ll not only be providing sermon discussion questions for adults, but also simplified questions for parents to use with their kids. Moreover, I also want to remind all of us (parents or not) that the children of this church are listening to us,

even when we think they aren't. It's my hope that at least some of our small groups will be open to allowing children to listen in to what's being said.

Finally, speaking the truth in love is important because it is a measure of the overall health of the church body. Look again at verse 16 and consider Paul's emphasis on the need for every part of the church to contribute to growth and building up, not just pastors and officers. Just as one sign of a healthy human body is that every limb and organ is working properly and contributing to the well being and function of the whole, so a healthy church is one where every member turns God's word into encouragement, praise, thanksgiving, warning, and insight for the benefit of one another. This is what Paul is getting at in Colossians 3:16, when he says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom."

May we always be such a church!

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