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OUR WORDS

Pledge

As members of this church, we pledge:

To ^a speak the truth in love by ^b comforting, ^c encouraging, and, when necessary, ^d rebuking; to ^e reconcile conflicts, ^f putting away bitterness and anger, being kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave us;

^a Eph. 4:15; 1 Peter 4:8 ^b 2 Cor. 1:3-7; ^c 2 Cor. 13:11; ^d Luke 17:3; Gal. 2:11; 6:1; Titus 1:13; 1 Tim. 5:20;

^e Heb. 12:14; ^f Eph. 4:32-32

Scripture

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Ephesians 4:14-16

Lesson

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

Those words, spoken by Winston Churchill before the British House of Commons on June 4, 1940, were just a few of many stirring addresses he delivered to galvanize a beleaguered nation under the glowering threat of Nazi Germany.

Someone famously said that Churchill “mobilized the English language and sent it into battle.” Indeed, it can be argued that the outcome of World War II depended as much on words as on bullets—perhaps even more so.

The power of words, unfortunately, was wielded by Churchill’s archfoe as well. With a weirdly enchanting power, Adolf Hitler radicalized Germany with his speeches of hatred, racial superiority, and extreme nationalism. The result? A Europe ravaged by war and the loss of millions of lives.

*Sticks and stones may break my bones,
—But words can never hurt me?*

Not a chance.

It’s no wonder that the Bible teaches that *the right kind of words* are the bloodstream, so to speak, of a healthy church. As believers and fellow members, we cannot afford to be inattentive to the kinds of words we exchange with one another.

In Ephesians 4:15-16, Paul tells us what kind of communication must take place among believers. We may analyze this passage as teaching us three things about our words: (1) What we must speak, (2) How we must speak it, (3) What happens when we do.

What We Speak: The Truth

“Two plus two equals four.”

“You missed a belt loop.”

“I’m feeling depressed today.”

“Last Sunday’s offering was lower than average.”

“Once again, you were late for the service.”

Suppose all the above statements are factual. So, we might reason, if we report these truths in a *loving* manner, then we will be doing what God wants us to do: *speaking the truth in love*.

But we must take a closer look at what Paul means by “the truth.” He does not mean just any statement that happens to be factual. Instead, he means the truth *about something in particular*.

So what are we to speak the truth *about*? We don’t need to guess, since Paul has already referred to the truth earlier in this letter: “You heard,” he reminds the Ephesians, “the word of *truth, the gospel of your salvation*” (Ephesians 1:13). He makes this clear later on as well: “Assuming that you have heard about him,” he writes, “and were taught in him, as *the truth is in Jesus*.”

There it is: the content of the “truth” we are to speak is the good news about Jesus, that is, the gospel.

But does this mean we approach each other, repeating various parts of the gospel story?

“Jesus died on the cross for your sins.”

“Jesus rose from the dead.”

“Jesus is ascended to the right hand of God.”

Actually—yes. But to understand how this works, we must look at the “in love” part of this verse.

How We Speak It

“In love” defines not only the *attitude* with which speak these gospel truths; it informs the *purpose*. We do not mindlessly repeat the gospel truths into an empty vacuum, but into the real struggles of our fellow believers.

Perhaps the best way to explain this is to show you how Paul himself did this throughout his letter.

- “Christ loved us and gave himself for us” (5:1). That is clearly a truth of the gospel. But note how Paul uses it for a loving purpose. “And walk in love.” A certain love-logic is at work here: “Since Christ loves you so much he gave himself for you, you must walk in love toward each other.”

- Here’s another example: “God in Christ forgave you” (4:32). That is clearly a truth of the gospel, and Paul mobilizes it for *love*. So, he urges, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.”
- Do you see the logic? Let’s look at one more example: “The Holy Spirit sealed you until the day of redemption” (4:30). That is a truth of the gospel—the work of God’s Spirit to guarantee our final salvation. But what does it mean to speak this truth *in love*? Here, Paul uses it to warn his readers: So, “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.”

Simply stated, *speaking the truth in love means to bring the person and work of Jesus to bear on someone’s life.*

To do this, we must be . . .

- 1) *person-oriented*: Be attentive to the person’s need.
- 2) *gospel-oriented*: Understand how a gospel truth intersects with that need.
- 3) *wisdom-oriented*: Tactfully and courageously urge the person to believe that truth in view of that need.

This is why “speaking the truth in love,” can encompass both positive encouragement and negative rebuke. Both are directed toward the good of the hearer (*love*) and based on the message that Jesus saves (*truth*).

What Happens When We Speak It

What happens when we speak the truth in love to each other? Paul describes it this way: “We . . . grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly; makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Two things are going on here—individual Christian maturity and corporate Christian unity—and they work in tandem. As Christians become more like Jesus *individually*, they also become more like Jesus *corporately*. In fact, this is God’s purpose for the church, that his glorious wisdom might be displayed through a redeemed humanity—once utterly broken by sin, but now healed and restored (Ephesians 3:7-13).

Mobilizing Gospel Language

World War II was an outcropping of a deeper, more dangerous war we continue to face today: *spiritual* warfare, the forces of evil arrayed against God. These spirit beings (Paul calls them “the cosmic powers over this

present darkness,” Ephesians 6:12) bind humans to sin and lusts (Ephesians 2:3). Jesus, the King has conquered these powers for all who trust him, but we still have a role to play in the battle. By speaking the truth about Jesus’ saving power to and among ourselves, we can stand firm.

As Winston Churchill “mobilized the English language and sent it into battle,” so may we mobilize gospel language and send it into battle.

Putting the Pledge to Work

1. What is meant by “speaking the truth in love”?
2. The lesson says that to do this, we must be (1) person-oriented, (2) gospel-oriented, and (3) wisdom-oriented. Which of these do you find easiest? Which do you find hardest?
3. What risks do we take when we “speak the truth in love” to others?
4. Suggest more examples in which a truth about Jesus and his work to save may be applied to a specific situation (others may be found throughout Ephesians).