

## The Truth “in Love”

I make a deliberate effort not to cite Bible verses *at* people’s life situations, good or bad, unless I have a reasonably good sense of what the texts that immediately precede and follow such verses say as well. I have a higher respect for the Scripture than that, but I only wish I could claim that was all there was to it. Like everyone else, I am a product of my own experiences. On a less noble level, I have been annoyed beyond description by people who have tried to have their own ways or push their own agendas by ripping verses from their contexts. Whether they do so knowingly or ignorantly makes little difference. Whoever would authoritatively wield the sword of the Spirit has a responsibility to know what it really says (James 3:1).

One of the most abused verses in this regard is not even a verse, but only a phrase. “Speaking the truth in love” appears in Ephesians 4:15, but in common usage, it rarely has much to do with anything else in Ephesians 4. Most of the time, when someone announces he or she has something that must be said to another person “in love,” that second person is wise to brace himself or herself to absorb the coming critique. The emphasis seems to be on saying some hard thing in a nice way, but too often, less concern is given to the truthfulness of the hard thing being said.

Under the guise of “speaking the truth in love” I have seen petty criticism offered as counsel, ignorance masqueraded as wisdom, legalism cloaked in false humility, personal preference advanced as sound doctrine and inappropriate judgment passed off as discernment. I suspect the friends of Job who pontificated their speculations as to the causes behind that righteous man’s sufferings were convinced that they were speaking “in love.” Unfortunately, they were not quite so careful when it came to mastering the “truth” half of this “speaking the truth in love” concept.

Obviously, tone is important. The Proverbs counsel us often in the way of “gentle” speech and answers. Paul urges us to season our conversation with the salt of grace (Colossians 4:6). And, when working to restore a brother caught in sin, Paul insists that it be done “... gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

However, in the Ephesian passage, love describes *NOT* a demeanor or a tone of voice, but the realm in which true truth is spoken.

<sup>14</sup>Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>Instead, **speaking the truth in love**, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup>From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. – Ephesians 4:14-16

The context of these words tells us that God gave an equipping ministry (of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) to equip the Body of Christ for service by imparting truth to them and leading them into a knowledge of Christ. Here, the enemy is not a severe tone of voice, a forceful sense of urgency, verbal clumsiness or unambiguous clarity. "Speaking the truth in love" is the church's holy response to spurious winds of teaching, cunning, craftiness, deceitful scheming and everything else that exists to detract believers from a pursuit of Christ-likeness and unity with one another.

It seems to me that this age's preoccupation with niceness, gentleness, non-judgmentalism, tolerance, inclusiveness and not making anyone feel bad has actually undermined our allegiance to speak the truth in love – inside or outside of the church. Even believers begin to chaff at listening to sound doctrine and turn instead to things they prefer to hear, just as Paul warned that they would (2 Timothy 4:3).

If we cannot speak God's truth, we cannot speak in His love. We will have nothing to say at all. In fact, there is much nothing-at-all being proclaimed in many churches today. But, at least all this nothing-at-all is being said nicely.

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