

Grow Together: Unity Tells the Truth in Love

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Ephesians 4:15-16

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Key Focus: *Mature disciples tell the truth in love.*

Dick assisting; John online; promoting nametags during welcome; PM = Truth About Sex class
Our five-part series on unity re-emphasizes Jesus is “the head” of “His body,” the church. Jesus is in charge, but the church has a huge role. Paul emphasizes three basic needs for the church:

- 1.) Strong and gifted leaders who teach the faith (Grow UP)
- 2.) Mature disciples who tell the truth in love (Grow TOGETHER)
- 3.) The practice of ministry and mission (Grow OUT)

We focus on #2 this week. Paul Coughlin writes in his book, “No More Christian Nice Guy” (subtitled: “When Being Nice—Instead of Good—Hurts Men, Women, and Children”), that too often Christians are nice, but not kind. We often do not tell the truth in love. The church is full of gossip, sabotage, rumor, and triangulation. *Did you hear what Tom told Bill about Joe?* Tom just “triangled” Bill. Tom needs to talk to Joe. What can Bill do? Jesus was not always “nice.” He had difficult conversations with people. He was direct, honest, and confrontational. We must tell the truth balanced by doing it in a loving way. We can communicate effectively or ineffectively. Failure to communicate can result in passive despair or aggressive and destructive patterns. Be kind. Being “nice” often avoids telling the truth. Kindness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. “Niceness” is not. (*“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* Galatians 5:22-24) Our passage ends with this phrase: *“makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”* Like Jesus, Paul confronted. We can tell he was agitated at times for a variety of reasons. We will look at some of these situations in this week’s readings.

APPLICATION: When have you been successful and unsuccessful at telling the truth in love? Who do you need to talk to? Do you need additional resources to help you have a crucial conversation? “How to Have That Difficult Conversation” by Townsend and Cloud and “Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High” are both excellent.

This series, “Grow Together,” has stressed the point how essential unity is for the church. A team effort always outperforms an individual effort. Even a great pitcher in baseball needs someone to catch, field, throw, hit, and score runs to win the game. Likewise, unity among believers is vitally important. However, unity in the church is not the ultimate goal! Unity in Christ is the goal. Anything that moves us away from Jesus as Lord as affirmed by scripture and tradition must be avoided. From my perception of church history, churches generally split for 3 reasons:

1) **Theology.** Martin Luther broke with Roman Catholicism over theological reasons: scripture over tradition, faith over works, & grace over merit.

2) **Issues.** American Methodists, led by Frances Asbury, broke from John Wesley and the English Methodists after the Revolutionary War. The Methodist Episcopal Church began in America. Wesley died as an Anglican (“Church of England”) priest. He did not establish a “Methodist Church” in England – Methodists were a movement, not a church. However, after the Revolutionary War, the Church of England was a non-starter in America. We became the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was born in 1794. In 1844, the ME Church North and the ME Church South over the issue of slavery. 1st UMC in downtown Tulsa was an ME North Church and a few blocks away was the ME South Church – Boston Ave. The North/South didn’t reunite for nearly 100 years later (1839). In 1860 the Free Methodist Church split over slavery (+ “free” pews –didn’t think people should buy/rent a church pew).

3) **Personalities.** Strong personalities can lead to division, often over trivial issues. (Joke about guy stranded alone on a desert isle. When rescued, they asked: “You built 3 huts. What are they for?” “The first is my house, and the second is my church.” “Why did you build the third hut?” “Because my church had a split.” (Islam/Judaism also has various factions). I have seen these types of things in every church I’ve pastored – people just don’t like someone else. Sometimes it’s hardest in the smallest congregations because you don’t have options of worship times, classes, etc.

Asbury Staff’s Core Behaviors:

1) **Confident Humility.** Humility is essential. We see through a glass dimly (1 Cor. 13). We need confidence, to have difficult and crucial conversations.

2) **Committed Team Player** – the challenge for Phil Jackson was to convince Kobe Bryant to play on a team and not just for himself. “Team Kobe” wouldn’t win championships, but the Lakers could.

3) **Genuine Kindness** – this is what we’re talking about today. It can be confrontational. The church doesn’t do this well. We tend to do two things instead:

a.) We are “nice” instead of “kind.”

b.) We “triangle” instead of going to the person directly.

Eph 4:15-16 (Pew 1161) 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.

For today’s message, let’s focus on verse 15:

Rather, “Instead...” strive for something different. Don’t avoid the issue; don’t break unity. **speaking** Speaking is only ONE form of communication and sometimes our speaking is unhelpful (as in “I must tell them off.”) Good communication is a dialogue, not a diatribe or

monologue. **James 1:19** *let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.* One “quick” and two slows. “*Slow to speak.*” Listen. Don’t assume you have all the facts. Ask questions. Pause. If you’re right you don’t need to yell, if you are wrong, you can’t afford it. Be humble. Build the team. Be kind. Exercise discipline.

Verbal communication is one thing, but there are other ways of “speaking,” too.

James 1:22 *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.* “Speaking” comes through our actions. Last weekend, our daughter told me of a childhood incident when she and her older brother were little kids, probably 8 and 5. They went with me to the Christian bookstore in an OKC mall. When we got home, they had some Christian stickers, pencils, erasers, etc. I did not buy them. When I asked how they got them, they admitted they stole. I called the store, gave the manager a heads-up, and we returned to the mall where he played his role perfectly. He informed the little criminals stealing had consequences. Jesse told me last weekend that of all her childhood memories, our return to the store was one of the most powerful impacts. That was 30 years ago.

the truth Be honest. Be direct. This means to speak up. Don’t compromise. We avoid the truth because of pride (we don’t want to be corrected) and because of sloth (laziness – because it means we have to work at it – we’d rather just not deal with the issue).

in love Some love to “speak the truth,” but are angry, arrogant, blaming, condemning, demeaning, harsh, judgmental, and mean.

1 John 3:18 *Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.* It doesn’t mean we won’t speak words of love, but it does mean they will be backed up by action.

“rather” (instead of avoiding the issue), *speaking* (communicating well in all its forms), *the truth* (honesty)

“in love” (grace, healing, etc.). When we love others, we affirm they are created in the Image of God and are people of sacred worth.

Jesus loved people enough to have crucial conversations and tell them the truth. John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Sometimes people resisted the truth. He didn’t force them to accept it. But He didn’t compromise His message because of their response. Truth and love go together. They are not exclusive. We must not compromise truth. But in our truth-telling, we must listen to others, and be kind.

A pastor’s 6-year-old daughter, Sydney, once had a hard day. She threw a temper tantrum and was sent to her room. While in her room, her parents strategized, “How do we respond? What should we do?” After a while, they noticed that the tantrum had subsided. It was quiet in Sydney’s room. Soon they noticed a handwritten note was sliding out from under the door. They anticipated a list of demands but hoped it was an apology. Instead, the note read: *“I am running away from home. You have been mean to me my whole life. I will miss you. Love, Sydney.”* She’d had six hard years and that was enough. The note was sad, sweet, alarming, and a bit funny. But the best part of the letter was this: *“P.S. I’ll be at the Young’s.”* The Young’s were next door neighbors. Think of this letter framed in this way: *“I’m running away*

from home, but here's where I'll be. Please come and get me." The truth: you can't act like this Sydney. But we love you. Always have – always will. That story became part of their family folklore.

Is there someone you need to have a conversation with? Tell the truth – do it with confident humility and genuine kindness because we're on the same team. If you communicate in a loving way, it has a much better chance of connecting.