
Title: Speaking the Truth in Love

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

Speaker: Pastor Chad Bresson

Introduction Tonight we begin a two part series on Christian speaking. In the providence of the Oversepherd's timing of this series, not only will we provide some summary of what it means to be a Christian and speak, it will provide a prelude to our fall series in Adult Bible Education, War of Words, a study based on a book of the same title by Paul David Tripp. Tonight we will look at "Speaking the Truth In Love". And then, next week, Pastor Greg will cover "Speaking to Build Up". Next week, we will have more details about our fall Adult Bible Education series.

It has become Christianly fashionable in our day to tell the story of a 13th century Italian who gathered his followers together one morning and told them they were headed into a nearby city where they would spend the day preaching. This group followed one Francis di Bernadone into town walking throughout the streets of the city helping the sick and feeding the hungry. The day grew late and as this band of do-gooders headed out of town they realized they had not yet preached to the townspeople. As the story goes Francis di Bernadone reassured the group that they had indeed been preaching as they were walking. It was then that the one history knows as St. Francis of Assisi uttered his famous line: "Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary." That phrase has become a mantra not merely for charitable Catholics, but for contemporary evangelicals. Never mind that the story is a legend and Franciscans themselves say there is no record of Francis of Assisi saying or writing such a memorable quote. One wonders, even if he had said it, what possesses evangelicals to freely quote a 13th century mystic who claimed to have seen Jesus, claimed to have the visible wounds of Christ, and once asked the pope for and was granted an indulgence for the remission of sins in the name of his mountain retreat. Surely "preach the gospel; use words if necessary", regardless of origin, is a noble sentiment is it not? Especially our postmodern culture that values the tangible deed to intangible speech? Actions speak louder than words, do they not?

No doubt the relationship between words and meaning has fallen to new lows. This is a generation that has been told, "talk to the hand". We really don't know what *it* is, made all the more obvious by the incessant talk on 24-hour cable television news channels trying to ascertain what *it* means. What better way to cut through the cacophonous noise of our society with more action and less speaking?

The church has done nothing to improve communication. "Resurrection" is an attitude. "Conversion" is a mindset. While the flocks are fleeced by positive thinking and bad hair, prima donnas transverse the globe cavorting with those who are not their wives. Basketball arenas are filled by cheesy smiles. American Idol has nothing on Sunday morning's megaworship. How could there be a better solution in answering a skeptical world with more walking and less talking? Francis looks positively insightful centuries before his time with wisdom he never uttered: "Preach the gospel; use words if necessary."

Is it true that our words and our speech are a last resort in presenting the gospel? Is verbal communication of the good news a secondary medium? Even as we consider the answer to those questions tonight, our answer will be derived from a passage of scripture that has itself enjoyed wide acclaim in our pop Christianity. But before we get there, I would like to begin our study in Genesis 1, which will begin to provide a backdrop for what we are about to cover. Genesis 1, beginning with verse 1. This is what God's Word proclaims to us:

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. 3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. 6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. 8 And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

The Divine Voice

God spoke. God acted. God interpreted his actions. This redemptive-historical pattern that is established in creation holds true throughout the rest of revelation. God would say what he was about to do, he would do what he promised and then He would interpret the fulfillment of his promises.

Not only did God speak before he acted in creation, the very act of creating was itself speech. The Psalmist says God spoke and all of creation came into existence. The very voice of God has creative power. Thus, the creative activities of God in creation and later in salvation are closely identified with God's speech.

The Image-bearing voice

Is it any wonder then, that one of the distinguishing marks of the crown of God's creation, man who bears God's image, is that of speech? As man bears God's image, man speaks. While it is devoid of creative power, the creature mimics the creator by speaking names onto animals. In filling the earth and having dominion over it, man will speak God's name to the ends of the earth.

It's quite apparent in the garden story that man's speech is to be patterned after that of his Creator. He does not speak on his own. As Pastor Russ pointed out in Adult Bible Education last week, Eve's words to the serpent are notable precisely because they significantly deviate from the Creator's own words.

The “Terrible” Voice

Shortly thereafter, the cataclysmic deviation occurs, and man’s speech is infinitely disconnected from the Creator’s speaking. In fact, Genesis 3 tells us that it is God’s voice walking in the garden in the cool of the day that prompts Adam and Eve to hide themselves from his presence.

The very voice that had spoken the image bearer into existence for conversational communion becomes a terror of judgment to the creature. And the image-bearing voice that had been meant to bless God now can do nothing but curse God. When man attempts to circumvent God’s purposes by asserting himself as god at Babel, God’s judgment lands squarely on the defiant creature’s speech. Not only has the creature’s speech been disconnected from the divine voice after which it was patterned, but now the speech has been garbled. There is permanent static in the frequency.

This picture of a terrible voice from which the creature flees is further confirmed at Sinai when God spoke to Moses and Israel out of fire and thunder. That voice forces Israel to wilt in terror from the mountain even as that voice “declares” the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:16-25, 24:3; Deuteronomy 4:11-13).

Even later, Isaiah hears God’s voice shake the foundations of heaven and Isaiah cries out “Woe is me. I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips”. The infinite gap between God and man is manifested in the vile mouthpiece of the rebellious creature. It is only when the coals of righteousness are applied to Isaiah’s mouth is he able to continue the conversation in the throne room of heaven.

The WORD became flesh

But the fractured conversation has been reconciled. In the beginning was the Word. The very voice that spoke all of creation into existence took on flesh and made his dwelling among us. This Incarnate Word has sheep who hear his voice and, like the first Adam, he calls them by name. This Word from heaven spoke life into his best friend, shouting “Lazarus, Come Out.” And this divine word has spoken a New Creation into existence with the rushing voice-sound visibly displayed as tongues of fire, and in doing so, unifies and clarifies the speech that had been confounded at Babel.

The divine pattern seen in creation is ultimately fulfilled in Christ: God spoke in the Old Testament, God acted in Christ, the Living Word, and God interpreted Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension through the rest of the New Testament authors. In fact, what we have with Christ as the mediator between God and man, Christ the ultimate divine author, interpreting himself to the New Testament authors. That same Divine Voice has restored communion with His image-bearers. The image-bearers are no longer fleeing the dreadful voice in the cool of the garden. There is voice recognition. Christ’s sheep hear his voice and they follow him.

What impact then, does this reconciliation between the Word and his image-bearers have on the speech patterns of the New Creation? Turn to Ephesians 4. This is where we will spend the rest of our time this evening. Among other things, Paul mentions speech activity in describing the life of the church, or what is called the New Creation, in Ephesians 4.

Paul has already stated emphatically that the church is Christ's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Ephesians 2:10). This new creation has been described as a holy temple in Christ, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20-22). Jews and Gentiles together as one body have been created into a new humanity in Christ (Ephesians 2:15). The life of this new humanity has come from above (Ephesians 1:3-5). Gentiles have joined the Jews in God's plan for the ages (Ephesians 2:11-13, 3:6)... now both are being built into God's dwelling place on earth and in heaven through the reconciling work of Christ (Ephesians 3:10-12). The identity of the church is wrapped up in Christ who gives to both Jews and Gentiles all the privileges, the blessings, and the status in adoption as sons. With that new identity then, will come the evidence of the new creation in Christ, evidence that shows up in the life of the church. Which brings us to chapter 4.

We are going to start with verse 1 rather than verse 7. This is what the Word of God proclaims to us:

Ephesians 4:1-16 (ESV) ¹ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." ⁹ (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ 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.

Speaking the Truth in Love

There's much that could be said from this passage about the new humanity, the church as Christ's body, which is made up of Jews and Gentiles. We are not going to go into the specifics of this entire passage. Our focus this evening is going to be on one phrase from what we've just read in verse 15, "speaking the truth in love". The picture Paul paints here is that of the church as a new man in Christ, the corporate body, growing up into ma-

turity in Christ. And one of the critical components necessary for the church’s growth is “speaking the truth in love”.

We’ve already concluded from other portions of scripture that the original image bearer Adam was given the gift of speaking by his Creator. His speech was to be patterned after his Creator. Just as the Creator spoke righteousness, truthfulness, justice, and love, so too the mouth of the creature was to speak what was right, true, holy, and kind. The voice of the image bearer was to sound off in praise and glory for the Creator. Obviously, that didn’t happen. The conversation between Creator and Creature was cut short. This image-bearing creature’s speech became deceitful, malicious, full of lies, crafty, convoluted, and confusing.

But the New Adam changed everything. Christ has risen. The new humanity is being conformed to the image of Christ. A new man has been created to bear God’s image not only as Adam failed to do, but more than Adam could have ever done. How is it then that this new creation has moved from speaking that is full of lies to speaking the truth in love?

New speech from a new man

We can note a couple of things in this immediate passage. First, this new man, the church, has been created in a new regenerating speech-act. Just as God spoke all things into existence by the word of his power, so too THE WORD has spoken the church into existence with the very same creative breath-speech. Verse 1 of this chapter... I urge you therefore to walk worthy of the *calling* to which you have been called. Verse 4: There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were *called* to the one hope that belong to your call. Now, again, we could spend some time detailing all that is involved with this call. Theologically, this word is typically relegated to our election and the work of the Spirit in bringing us to Christ. While these things may be within the scope of what Paul is saying here, we should not miss the inherent verbal activity suggested by the word. This call is a speech act of God through which he brings into existence the new creation. And this vocal action is not as we would think of call, in that what we usually mean by call is that we are attempting to get someone or something to act. No, this call creates its own result. This call doesn’t try to make a new humanity, this call brings the new humanity into existence.

Second, the medium by which Christ has spoken his church into existence is The Word. Chapter 1 verse 13: In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit... these saints in Ephesus have been saved by grace through hearing the word *spoken*. Chapter 2, verse 17, (Christ) came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. Chapter 3, verse 8, “to me (Paul)...grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for the ages in God who created all things...” It is through the spoken word, the living and active Word Proclaimed, that God breathes life into those who were dead in trespasses and sins.

Third, the exalted Christ has gifted his new creation with speech gifts. Notice verse 8, therefore it says, When he ascended on high he led a host of captives and he gave gifts to men. Verse 11: And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry... Paul quotes Psalm 68 here. Christ the triumphant warrior has ascended to his rightful place on the throne and from that throne exercises his rule over the church. Because Christ has ascended in glory, he has lavished on the church all spiritual blessings, including gifts of men to equip His church. Christ has equipped his church with all that is necessary for the new creation to grow to maturity and completeness in Christ.

Notice though, the nature of these men-gifts. The gifts that have been given to these men, who in turn have been given to the church are speech gifts. The spoken word that brings to life the new creation is communicated through those speech-gifted men who have been given to the church. Resident in the new humanity functioning as a new temple in which God dwells is new speech. It is through God's creative speech act that God has created this new man and it is through speech gifts that he then equips his church for the work of the ministry.

Speaking the truth in love, then, is an activity that is the result of God's divine activity in speaking His church into existence. It is an activity that results from the word being spoken by speech gifts given to this church that has been spoken into existence. (I trust we are beginning to notice a pattern here.)

The Truth

We must also ask not only what is the nature of this speaking in verse 15, but what is the nature of the word "truth" here? It's on this point, I believe that this passage has suffered abuse at the hands of pop Christianity. How often have we heard this passage cited as a reason to be brutally honest with people as long as we're loving about it? I suppose the surprising thing for me in studying this passage was to find out how many commentators actually went down this road. This is the danger of ripping pet phrases, no matter how common sensible they seem to be, out of their biblical context. When this passage speaks of truth, is it talking about brutal honesty or even propositional truth? If this "truth" is not brutal honesty or the veracity of my speech, what is it?

Verses 4-6 are the first indication this is not the kind of truth on verse 15's radar. Verse 4: "There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." When we see this kind of language grouped together like this in Paul's epistles what we are seeing is an early confession of faith. This confession expresses the gospel through the salvation experience... it moves from the body and the Spirit upward and outward to one God and Father who is infinitely sovereign over all things. Christ has called his church into existence for the purpose of glorifying God in confessing Christ as Lord over all. "Speaking the truth in love" is speaking the confession of faith in love.

Another term for this confession is the gospel. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father... all of these are elements of the gospel. This hope of the

new creation is the hope of the gospel. And this is precisely what the truth is called in chapter 1. Back to verse 13 which we read earlier: “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him, were sealed with the Holy Spirit...” This gospel and its confession is not only life-giving, but life sustaining.

Speaking the truth in love is not being brutally honest with someone; it is not speaking to the veracity of our speech (although the truthfulness of our speech does come up later in this chapter... we’ll leave to Greg for next week.) This truth that we are to be speaking as the new creation is the confession of the gospel. It is through the gospel that the church has been given its new life and it is in the interests of the gospel the exalted Christ has gifted his church with gifted men.

Another indication that this truth is not merely truthfulness in speech is found in verse 14, just prior to verse 15 where we find our statement. Christ gave the church gifts of men in order to attain maturity so that, verse 14, “we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in very way into him who is the head, into Christ...” Verse 15 is the positive contrast to the negative warning of verse 14. Not only is children who are tossed to and fro being contrasted with growing up into Christ, the “truth” mentioned in verse 15 is being contrasted to “every wind of doctrine”, “human cunning”, and “deceitful schemes”. Paul is contrasting error in doctrine and its consequences to the gospel and its growth effect on the new creation. The word “truth” is used this same way in chapter 6 where the Christian warrior is outfitted with the belt of truth. The gospel not only brings the new creation to life, it not only sustains the life of the church, but it also defends and protects the new creation against error that would drain the life right out of it. The truth of the gospel, and in this instance, even a simple confession of the gospel, is always the antidote for ruinous doctrine. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all... that is what we confess so that we are not easily seduced by deceitful men.

Love

What do we make of the word love? Love contextualizes this entire passage. Verse 1: walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And why is it that we bear with one another in love? Because the voice act of God that brought the church into existence was an act of love. Chapter 1, verse 4: “In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will...”. The speech-act that gave life to the new creation was one of love: Chapter 2 verse 4: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, Seven when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...” And the love that produced the temple made without hands is now manifest in the life of that temple, chapter 3, verse 17, where Paul says the church is rooted and grounded in love, a love that is outside of themselves, a love that has been granted to them, in order that the church “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19and to know the love of

Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Speaking the truth is identified by love because without love there is no identification with Christ. Christ says those who have legitimate claim to his name as disciples are those who have love for each other and obey his commands (John 13:35, 14:15). The new creation is to verbalize and confess the gospel in love because it is love through the gospel that has voiced the new creation into existence.

Maturity in Christ

What is the result of the church speaking the truth in love? The trajectory of this entire passage is found in verse 13 and it is a thought that is repeated in verses 15 and 16. Christ has called the church into existence, has made his dwelling in the church and has gifted the church with gifted men, who will in turn equip the church so that the church, the new creation verse 13, “will attain to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” While Christ dwells in our corporate assembly as the new temple, he continues his work of sustaining and maturing the church through his Word. Through the Word spoken, THE WORD -- that divine voice that spoke all things into being -- conforms the new man to His own image.

As Christ exercises his authority as the exalted head of the church, we are to be “speaking the truth in love” and “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ...” This confession of the truth of the gospel is the outworking of our submission to the headship of Christ as the Lord and authority of the church. As we confess the gospel, we are conformed to Christ. Christ not only voiced the church into existence, he continues to be its source of life, making the church more like Himself. He is working through the gifts he has given the church to bring the church to complete maturity as the image-bearer intended for Adam in the garden. As Christ works toward the maturity of the new creation, the speech pattern of the creature will more and more mimic the speech pattern of the creator.

The final question we want to consider is this: How does the church speak the truth in love? What does confessing the gospel as truth look like? First, we speak the truth in love as the gifts Christ has lavished on his new creation are exercised. In this instance, we confess the gospel even as gifted men exercise their own speech gifts in proclaiming the gospel. Christ’s aim in giving these speech-gifted men to the church is to proclaim the word necessary for the life of the body. The proclamation of the word, whatever form that proclamation takes, is to be characterized by the confession of the gospel in love. Christ continues to speak to His people through His word that is proclaimed in the gifts He has lavished on His new creation.

Second, we speak the truth in love by defending the gospel against error and avoiding the same crafty speech of those who would do the gospel harm. What makes this “speaking the truth in love” statement notable is that this confession of the gospel and its defense against error is an activity for the entire body, not just the gifted men given to the church. Speaking the truth in love is an activity for all of us. While the proclamation of the gospel is the primary responsibility of the gifted men, here in this passage, the task of gifted men given to the church is for the equipping of the rest of the body. If these gifted men

Conclusion

are equipping the body, then the body *will* be “speaking the truth in love.” The entire body, both the gifted men given to the church and those who are being equipped, is involved in speaking the truth in love, so that the *whole* body grows up into Christ, who is our supreme authority.

Third, we speak the truth *in love*, when we drench our confession of the gospel in love for Christ and love for each other. This confession of the gospel as truth is not an academic exercise. This gospel has flesh and blood because it came to us in flesh and blood. Truth is first and foremost a Person. Christ is the Truth and as we incarnate Christ as the hands and feet of Christ we also “speak the truth in love.” The church as the new humanity embodies the gospel and gives witness to the gospel in Word.

Fourth, we speak the truth in love when we put off the old man and put on the new man. There is an interesting use of the word truth a little later in this chapter (Ephesians 4:21): Paul says, “you have heard about Christ (again, the result of proclamation) and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus (here’s the idea of Christ being truth, John 14:6), to put off your old self... and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”. Here again we find reference to the new creation, a new creation that is both new (it has been created) and is in process. Not only have we been taught about Christ, but we have been placed *in* Christ in the new creation. When we conform ourselves to the spoken truth of the gospel that has been and is Incarnated by Jesus, the result is that we will put off our old life and continue our transformation by putting on our new identity in Christ. Our lives will bear witness to the truthfulness of the gospel, even as we speak truth because we have been placed *in* the Truth, in Christ.

And interestingly enough, included in this restoration process of put off/put on is speaking the truth to our neighbors (Ephesians 4:25). This kind of truthfulness in our speech flows out of our verbal confession of the gospel in the life of the church. We must insist on this kind of sequence. There is a reason why Paul has developed for us “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) first, and then “speaking the truth with our neighbor” (Ephesians 4:25). Proclaiming the Word, confessing the gospel, and “speaking the truth in love” come first. It is then, and only then, that we will speak truth with our neighbor. Otherwise, speaking the truth with our neighbor is mere behaviorism. Without first confessing the gospel in our preaching and speaking, there will be no putting off and putting on from the old life to the new life. All you have, without first confessing the gospel, is moralism.

And finally, we speak the truth in love when we make the confession and proclamation of the gospel primary in our church life. Speaking the truth in love is Christ’s chosen means by which he creates, nourishes, and sustains the corporate body. Speaking the truth is irreplaceable because it follows the pattern first established by God in creation: God speaks, then God acts. This pattern of redemptive history which is lived out in the life of the new creation, the church, renders “preach the gospel always, use words if necessary” a false sentimentality that ultimately has the creature supplanting the creator of His rightful exaltation.

Should our actions back up what we say about the gospel? Absolutely. If the actions are absent should we question the presence of the gospel? Absolutely. Does that necessarily

mean that actions are primary in the church's witness to the gospel? No, it does not. And our assertions run tonight run contrary to a postmodern culture bent on forcing the primacy of the visual over the audible and written. There is no substituting for the centrality of God's speech not only in creation, but also regeneration, redemption, and our sanctification. Yes, God has acted on our behalf in Christ. Christ died and God gloriously raised him from the dead.

But we would still be damned were it not for the verbal. Why? Because not only has God spoken the church into existence by the power of His voice, not only has he *acted* on our behalf in Christ, but he has also used that same Voice to *declare* us to be righteous. God has not merely acted on our behalf. God has spoken on our behalf for our salvation. In speaking on our behalf, Christ's voice has given us life as the new creation and he now sustains our life by the word of his power (Colossians 1:17).

When we gather at the foot of Mount Sinai in our worship, according to Hebrews 12, we no longer tremble in terror at His voice. When we speak the truth in love by confessing the gospel of truth, we give evidence of a new creation that we cannot see, the new temple of God in which Christ has chosen to dwell, a new humanity that has a new speech, and a new speech that is patterned after the Creator's Voice.