

“Speak the Truth in Love”

Proverbs 10:19; 15:1; Ephesians 4:11-16

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Guess how many things are posted by people from all over the world on Facebook daily: 293,000 statuses, 510,000 comments, and 136,000 photos. This means that people around the world will have written 422 million posts by the end of this year. How many tweets do people publish? 350,000 every minute, or 500 million per day. And to top it all off, there are over 350 million blogs on the Internet. Everyone wants to be heard – not just celebrities, politicians – but people from all walks of life.

Christians as well – both pastors and lay people – want to be heard. According to researchers, 2/3 of pastors used Facebook in 2013, so it may easily be 3/4 this year. What do Christians often post on Facebook? From my observations, in addition to personal things and photos, they could be church events, pet doctrines, critiques of other churches, and the book they’re reading.

Facebook, Twitter and social media have both positives and negatives. It connects us with family and friends near and far. We can get the latest news updates and photos locally and around the world. We can be warned about crimes and weather alerts. We can advertise and promote ourselves if we’re looking for a job or customers. However, Facebook users can unknowingly give away personal information that otherwise should be kept private. Facebook also has many fake profiles which are created to deceive and scam unknowing people. And of all of Facebook’s negatives, wasting time is the most concerning. On the average, Americans are said to spend an hour a day posting updates and photos, scrolling through posts, and commenting on Facebook.

Use of Facebook by churches and pastors also has advantages and disadvantages. A church can attract visitors through its Facebook page with announcements of services and other activities. Members can invite their friends to visit their church. Two churches that our Lord planted in the Philippines grew this year by about 40 percent through Facebook invitations. Pastors can teach worldwide through online sermons and lessons. However, some pastors and lay people have used Facebook in the wrong way: arguing, disputing, insulting, even condemning those who don’t agree with their pet views. This misuse of Facebook almost destroyed one of those churches in the Philippines. One of the members started contradicting the teachings of the church, and the members started taking sides with one view or the other.

Our text this morning tells us that this misuse of social media is not what Scripture calls us to say and do. In Ephesians Chapter 4, the Apostle Paul begins with a call to *“humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”* This is because the church of Christ is one body united in one faith in the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (2-6). And how is this unity attained? By being united in sound doctrine, which is Biblical **truth**. In this way, the people are not tossed to and fro by every wind of teaching. But Paul also exhorts us who have the truth to *“speak the truth in love.”*

The Content of Our Speech

Our main text is verse 15, “*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.*” The center of this verse is “the truth in love,” and the context is about sound doctrine (14), which is the truth. This sound doctrine enables believers to “grow so that it builds itself up in love” (15-16). Back in verses 11-13, this truth is proclaimed first by Christ’s apostles, prophets and evangelists, then by pastors and teachers. The purpose of teaching this truth is to attain unity and maturity in the church.

What is the content of this “truth”? It is first of all, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And what is the gospel? Many Christians misunderstand the gospel as a life of good works, or “gospel living.” But the gospel is not about how we live as Christians. The gospel *is* Christ, *about* Christ, and preached *by* Christ. It is the “good news” of the Son of God coming down from heaven to live a perfectly righteous life, to die an accursed death on the cross, and to rise again from the grave. All of this he did to save his people from sin, death and God’s wrath. The good news is that when a person puts his faith and trust in Christ alone, two things happen: First, all our sins are counted or “imputed” to Christ’s account (2 Cor 5:21). Second, our Lord’s perfect righteousness is counted to our account (Rom 4:3-11, 22). Therefore, Christ was our Righteous Substitute for our sins when he suffered God’s wrath on the cross. We find this gospel defined clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 19 teaches that we learn about Christ as our Savior and Mediator through this “holy gospel” beginning in the Garden of Eden when God promised our first parents that the serpent would be crushed by the Seed of the woman, Jesus Christ himself. Later, this gospel was proclaimed by the Old Testament forefathers and prophets and foreshadowed in the animal sacrifices under the law. And finally, it was fulfilled by the coming of his own Son.

Zacharius Ursinus, one of the writers of the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism, defines the gospel as:

The gospel is, therefore, the doctrine which the Son of God, our Mediator, revealed from heaven in Paradise, immediately after the fall, and which he brought from the bosom of the Eternal Father; which promises, and announces, in view of the free grace and mercy of God, to all those that repent and believe, deliverance from sin, death, condemnation, and the wrath of God; which is the same thing as to say that it promises and proclaims the remission of sin, salvation, and eternal life, by and for the sake of the Son of God, the Mediator; and is that through which the Holy Spirit works effectually in the hearts of the faithful, kindling and exciting in them, faith, repentance, and the beginning of eternal life... The Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; which is to say that he is a perfect Mediator, satisfying for the sins of the human race, restoring righteousness and eternal life to all those who by a true faith are ingrafted into him, and embrace his benefits.

This “good news” is in contrast to the “law,” God’s commandments. The law cannot save because obedience to God’s law will never make anyone perfectly righteous. Rather, obedience is the fruit of salvation. How then is the law useful? It has a threefold use. First, it points us to God’s holiness and our sinfulness. Through the law, a person learns that the holy God does not accept and tolerate sin; rather, God hates sin. The law then leads a sinner to repent of his sin and to put his faith and trust in Christ alone. Second, as the “civil law,” it regulates and orders society by restraining evil and lawlessness. Third and last, God’s law is a guide for a believer in his life as a citizen of God’s kingdom. The law answers the question, “What must I do to obey God who saved me from sin?”

So the law and the gospel are the basic truths or doctrines of Scripture that a person must know, wholeheartedly trust, and accept as truth in order to be saved. But there are other truths in Scripture that a Christian must know in order to grow in faith and in the knowledge of Christ. One of these truths – and there are many others – distinguishes our church from others. It is commonly called the “Five Points of Calvinism” or the “doctrines of grace,” and widely known with the acronym T-U-L-I-P.

T stands for total depravity. After the Fall of our first parents into sin, their perfect holy and righteous nature became sinful. Now, all human beings inherit their sinful nature. We are now “dead in sin.” No one is righteous, no one understands God, no one seeks after God, not even one. No one can come to God on his own because his will is a slave to sin. The Holy Spirit himself has to give a person the gift of a new heart and mind before he can even come to Christ.

U stands for unconditional election. “Election” means that God chose an exact number of people to save out of all humanity. This he declared in eternity past before the creation of the world. Because he is the Sovereign God, he chose them only according to his grace and mercy for sinners. He did not have to do this, but because of his grace and mercy, he did. And he did this only according to his purpose and will, and not according to any good thing that he saw in those whom he chose.

L stands for limited atonement. No one can atone for his own sins because one sin condemns a sinner to death and God’s wrath. Therefore, to those whom God elected or chose, he provided his beloved Son Jesus Christ as an atonement for their sins. This Christ did by willingly sacrificing himself on the cross. On the cross, he finally, completely and perfectly finished his atoning work for the sins of his people. This is why he declared on the cross, “*It is finished.*” His atoning sacrifice was for his sheep. He died for his church.

I stands for irresistible grace. For those whom God has elected and for whom Christ died, the Holy Spirit gives new hearts and minds. This new heart enables a sinner dead in sin and enslaved by sin to believe in the gospel and come to Christ with a willing heart. This is God’s work of grace in a sinner’s heart. His new heart does not resist God’s will anymore because the Spirit has transformed his heart from a stony, rebellious heart into a willing, obedience heart.

And P stands for perseverance of the saints. If a sinner was chosen by God; if Christ died for his sins; and if the Holy Spirit has renewed his mind and heart; then he will persevere in the faith all the way

to the end of his life. The saying is true: If you have true faith, you will never lose it. If you lose it, you actually never had it. No Christian will ever totally and finally fall from God's grace.

These then are the contents of the truth we speak. First, we speak the true gospel, together with God's law. A sinner is saved when he believes in the gospel of Christ. Then we speak of the deeper truths of the Scripture such as the doctrines of grace in order that we may mature in knowledge and in faith.

The Way of Our Speaking

But how do we speak these truths. Speaking the truth to unbelievers, and even to Christians, is often difficult and challenging. But in defending Biblical truth, we also plead and persuade with Christian love. How then do we "speak the truth in love"?

Some Christians become obnoxious or offensive in the way they speak the truth. I have often heard other Christians who say that Reformed believers often seem to be proud, arrogant and even offensive when they speak the truths of the Reformed faith. Paul warns us to avoid "*foolish and ignorant controversies*" because they only lead to quarrels (2 Tim 2:23). So whether speaking to a believer or unbeliever, we must speak in a manner that honors Christ and builds up the church (1 Pet 3:15).

Most Christians are astonished when they first discover the truths of the Reformed faith, especially the TULIP doctrines. And often, they turn into "cage-stage Calvinists." This term refers to those who turn every conversation into an argument for unconditional election and limited atonement. They are so angry that no one taught them the riches of the Reformed faith, that they want to shout to the whole world what they just discovered. They become so belligerent and impatient that they should be *locked in a cage* for a time, so they can cool down to mature a little more in the Reformed faith. And often, they become hyper-Calvinists, doubting the salvation of all who are not "Calvinists." They become obnoxious, arrogant and argumentative. So instead of attracting other Christians to the Reformed faith, they actually drive them away!

Biblical love is patient, kind, humble, selfless, and not arrogant or rude (1 Cor 13:4-5). Christian love is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), so it is not quarrelsome, but kind, patient, and correcting opponents with gentleness (2 Tim 2:24-25). It does not tolerate sin, error or false teaching; but it is spoken with courtesy (Tit 3:2). Our readings in Proverbs exhorts us to answer those who disagree with us softly and with restraint (Prov 10:19; 15:1).

Patience is an important virtue when we speak to persuade others. In the New Testament, it is used 14 times, mostly in the context of being patient in teaching. We speak the truth not to win arguments but to win people, to restore fellow believers, and to build one another up. Paul preached and taught "*by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God*" (2 Cor 6:6-7). We are to preach the Word and "*reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching*" (2 Tim 4:2). Paul sometimes combines patience and humility in teaching. He taught "*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love*" (Eph 4:2). We are to put on "*compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience*" (Col 3:12).

Paul knew how to be patient. He preached the gospel to the church in Corinth for 1-1/2 years, and in Ephesus for three years. Yet, after spending so much time in these places, there were still many controversies in the church. The Corinthians had divisions, sexual immorality, and questions about marriage, divorce, pagan religions, disorder, and the resurrection. As well, the church in Ephesus had to be taught again what is predestination, law and gospel, faith, the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom of God, unity and love, and Christian conduct in the home and workplace. This is why he commends Timothy, *“You, however, followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness”* (2 Tim 3:10).

Beloved friends: As a Reformed church, we are totally convinced that Reformed doctrines are the best summary of Biblical teachings. But we are not to consider others who don't agree with the Reformed faith as unbelievers. John Wesley and George Whitefield were famous English preachers in the early 18th century. They were good friends, but they had a major difference: Whitefield was Reformed, while Wesley was not. But this difference did not hinder their friendship even in death. They argued much, but with words of honor and respect. And who preached the funeral sermon when Whitefield died? It was Wesley, at the request of Whitefield himself.

Truth and love are wedded together in a church. Jesus practiced this. He boldly defended the truth against Jews, but he mixed his preaching with compassion, love and patience. Many of you took a long time to be convinced of the beauty of the Reformed faith. So be also gracious, humble and patient with others. With truth and love, the words that we speak, or post, or tweet, will honor Christ, build others, and – who knows – may even persuade others to repent and believe and become citizens of the kingdom of God.