

Kindly candor: Ephesians 4:25–5:2

by [Paul Stroble](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

"I have a philosophy about life," a friend said recently. "The world would be a much better place if people took a moment to let people know about the positive impact they have had on others' lives. Too much time is spent on negativity. The good in people simply isn't recognized; too often it is taken for granted."

At the time, we were talking about the importance of thanking people who'd done a good job or had made a difference in our lives. I remembered two occasions, among others, when I felt glad that I'd expressed gratitude. In one case, a person who had rotated off the presidency of a service organization to which I belonged was overwhelmed by my thank-you note. The other case involved a coach whom I thanked because years before he had taken time to encourage me, a kid utterly inept at sports. Coincidentally, both these people died shortly thereafter. What if I'd not taken the time to speak positively?

I value bluntness, but only to a degree. You hear people say, "Oh, he's refreshingly candid," or "You always know where he stands," or "She speaks her mind." Some of the folks they're talking about seem merely negative. It is the rare, secure person who is candid in a perceptive and ultimately positive way.

Having a positive, affirming outlook seems out of fashion. Political discourse is often about attack and spin rather than consensus. Conflict being more dramatically interesting than concord, harsh judges and abusive employers draw big ratings on television programs. Although part of this is simply entertainment, one wonders the extent to which this brutal honesty and schadenfreude reflect cultural attitudes.

Ephesians gives us a different model for relationships: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."

The epistle's author is not against speaking truth. But speaking truth happens within the context of being members of Christ with one another. We speak truth when we do so in love. We're truthful when we build up others and help them grow, when

we're kind, tenderhearted and forgiving, "as God in Christ has forgiven you." To "speak the truth in love" (4:15) is not one way (among others) to speak the truth; speaking is not truthful if it does not also "build up" and "give grace."

Ephesians is one of my favorite biblical writings because of the lush, spatial language with which it depicts God's grace. God is "rich in mercy" (2:4), has "lavished" the "riches of his grace" on us (1:7), has given us "the riches of his glorious inheritance" by the "immeasurable greatness of his power" (1:18, 19). God has "broken down the dividing wall . . . the hostility between us" (2:14). Part of the good news of Ephesians is that peace is the actual state of being between persons—not just a goal for the future, but a reality in the present. The reconciliation that we enjoy with God through Christ can also be a state of reconciliation among persons. Truthfulness and reconciliation are twin aspects of our Christian life together.

Of course, it never quite works that way. Like everyone involved in congregational life, I have memories of less-than-positive conversations and encounters at church. I doubt that there is a Christian leader, ordained or lay, who has never provoked anger or irritation in a church situation, and I doubt that there is a single churchgoer who hasn't experienced hurt feelings and discouragement from a congregational incident of some sort. A book that I've appreciated over the years, Robert Cueni's *What Ministers Can't Learn in Seminary*, cautions pastors that some folks find church a natural place to nurture and express their harsh and angry attitudes.

In one sense, we should bring our anger to church. Christ came not for those who are well but for those who are sick; he came to help sinners. Although anger is not itself a sin, its results and effects can certainly be. Thus Ephesians teaches, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." But if we address our angry feelings at the time (or as soon as possible), we act in a loving fashion. We'd be naive to expect church to be a place of continual sweetness and affirmation. But Ephesians provides a way of addressing difficult emotions with the goal of actualizing our reconciliation in Christ.

It is important to make an honest assessment of our spiritual life in the congregations we are a part of. "Do not make room for the devil," teaches Ephesians. "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Do you feel comfortable with the way people relate to one another in your congregation? Does your church conform to the world's standards of communication, or to biblical teachings like these?

Let me close by suggesting an activity. Write down all the things you love about your church and all the things you don't care for. Then write down the things in your life that make you feel angry. Finally, write down how those things either find healing or are aggravated by your congregation. Make a plan for dealing with your feelings.

Now write down the name of a person to whom you can offer a positive word. Maybe it's someone with whom you need to reconcile, or someone from your past who made a difference in your life. Maybe it's someone who's struggling. When we speak truth and love together, we give the riches of God's grace.