



Introduction

Speaking the Truth in Love

One Sunday, while standing in the passageway to go on to the pulpit, Dr. Boice said to me, "I know a book for you to write." Naturally honored, I asked the topic. "How to be an executive minister." I must admit that I was a bit dejected, as I was anticipating some deep theological subject. My first reply was that I kept busy as the Executive Minister so that he could write the books! But my second response was that it would be a short book, very brief indeed. The single page would contain these words: use commonsense.

What will follow is simply a collection of commonsense lessons I have learned through life experience that has helped me in my role of Executive Minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church. The commonsense wisdom expressed is not profound; indeed, I believe that every person has or possesses the ability to have such wisdom. It is the type of practical knowledge passed on at the kitchen table or on the front porch. It is the wisdom of life experience.

I remember reading a brief article in *Leadership Journal* by Henri Nouwen in which he shared an experience from a personal spiritual retreat. It so happened that a youth group was meeting at the place he was staying. The youth leader discovered that Nouwen was present and asked him to speak to the group. Nouwen was frustrated over having to prepare a message and complained to his spiritual guide. The mentor replied that the youth were seeking not a message, but simply lessons from his life experience.

These are my lessons. They are not (at least mostly not) ideas that I have picked up by reading books on management and relationships. Some thoughts arise out of what I've known by commonsense or instinct; some rise out of the mistakes I've made. They all come from what to my mind is the key skill for gaining wisdom - observation. The keen observer knows that there is no such thing as wasted experience as long as he gains knowledge.

Have you ever watched a football game in which one team dominated the other in the first half, and then the losing team dominated the second half? What happened? The coach of the losing team was observing. He observed the effective strategy of the other coach and the vulnerability of his own team. Then, during halftime, he made the



adjustments that allowed his team to achieve victory. Winners turn into losers because they fail to observe the real reasons they are winning. They think they are winning because they are "hot," not realizing that minor adjustments by the other team can turn them "cold."

A theological perspective on commonsense wisdom is that it is knowledge derived from natural revelation. Through nature, but also through life experiences, God reveals common truth. Like the scientist who gains knowledge through keen observation, the wise person is one who gains knowledge through keen observation of anything that he experiences. The Christian, who possesses the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, has both the faculty and the resources to become wealthy in the wisdom of natural revelation.

He also, of course, draws from the special revelation of the Bible, God's Written Word. The Scriptures give us clear instruction and clues for what to look for in natural revelation. The scripture text that drives this series of messages is Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to 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. 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. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift...

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 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, 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. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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.

Two phrases in particular have impacted me. The first from verse 12 states that our gifts are to be used for "building up the body of Christ." The second from verse 15 lends the title for these messages, "speaking the truth in love." If we grasp the perspective of verse 12, that we are to build up one another, and if we master the art of speaking the truth in love, then we will achieve our desire to be fulfilled, useful servants of God.

Some of the following messages will address the matter of gaining the right perspective on how we are to function in Christ's body; others will present practical "tips" on how to carry out that perspective and speak the truth in love. What they all have in common is addressing the matter of how to relate to people.

Who are these messages for? They rose out of a talk given for Christians ministering in the church – ministry leaders, church officers, pastors, and teachers. Perhaps, in your service to the church, you have found yourself caught up more than you like in troubles that seem to follow you. There is more than your share of arguments, handling "problem" people, and dealing with bureaucratic red tape. These messages are for you.

However, they have practical application in other areas of life since they are about how to relate to others. I use many of the principles for marriage counseling, as well as advising on how to deal with people at work. I am thinking primarily of Christian to Christian relations, but most principles would be applicable in the world.

One other thing to note is that these tips are generally about how to respond to problems. I've come to understand that problems, because of sin, will always exist. What results from those problems depend on the reaction to them. If you react wisely, the problem gets resolved, usually quickly; if you respond inappropriately, the problem grows into a crisis and into animosity that is difficult to resolve. These tips and principles are meant to help you avoid the mistakes that lead to escalation of conflict. They are intended to guide you through the pitfalls inherent in ministry and human relationships, so that you can be instruments of peace and encouragement.



I write these messages and operate on the premise that all Christians want to be such instruments for the Lord. It is true that we have our sinful motivations; we are sinners after all. But it is also true as children of God that our deeper desire is to be obedient and to serve his kingdom effectively. And so we eagerly get involved in ministry only to find that because of sin (of others and of ourselves) problems pop up that catch us off guard. Instead of being happily engaged in ministry, we become caught up in managing the strange and sinful behavior of the people with whom we are ministering. Like a marching band out of line, we are tripped up by the feet of those next to us and bumping into the line in front of us. I want to help you walk the intricate patterns of your band. I want to help you learn how to recover when you do bump and trip.

Take your time listening to and reading these messages. Each recorded message is ten minutes long and takes less time to read. You can listen to one while running a short errand or easily read one during a lunch break. I hope that you will listen and/or read them more than once, and I encourage you to discuss them with others. I believe that as these principles and tips become engrained in your way of thinking, you will find your ministry and your relationships become more delightful.

And that is what I seek. My goal is not so much a church body that works hard and efficiently, as it is a church that takes pleasure in her calling to serve her Lord. Note the opening affirmation of the Larger and Shorter catechisms that our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Our joy will rise as we learn to relate well with our Christian brothers and sisters. Or to use the words of Ephesians 4:16, "when each part is working properly, mak[ing] the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."