

# The #1 Key to Reach People for Christ

How do we live in the tension between what God's people currently are and the unified faith, knowledge and maturity that God is moving us all toward? Paul has already given instructions on the necessity of humility and persevering love to maintain unity in the body of Christ. Now he gives us a concise summary statement we would all do well to make the guiding principle for all of our relationships within and without the church: speaking the truth in love.

The first thing I notice in this phrase is that speaking the truth is not necessarily loving in and of itself. I grew up in a segment of Christianity in which the greatest command was minimized while obnoxious methods of proclaiming the truth were promoted. During my teenage years, I asked one pastor why our church never talked about the greatest command to love. His response was that "liberal" churches had abused the concept of love so much that he was justified in rudely proclaiming truth without any effort to be loving and obedient to the greatest command.

Paul is teaching here that both positions—love without truth and truth without love—are unhelpful to, and downright destructive of, the ultimate goal that God has painted for us of the mature, unified, doctrinally steady body of Christ. We must both speak the truth and be loving. The two are not synonymous. We must not choose one or the other, and we must not delude ourselves into thinking that the fact we have one of them right excuses us from incorporating the other. We must do both!

I think of truth as the gas and love as the oil in the engine of Christian community. Without the truth, we are going nowhere. We are powerless, living in a world of relativity with no foundation on which to firmly stand. But without love, friction quickly arises and destroys the working parts of the engine.

When discussing the concept of love, some might argue, "But is it loving to allow someone to continue in their folly? Is it loving to look past sin?" This argument implies that sometimes love might look unloving—that even though the words expressed or actions taken might not *look* like the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, they really were loving because the person who did them held love as their motive. This logic trap seems to justify using words and actions to confront sin that are not characteristic of biblical love at all.

Fortunately, we are not left with the task of determining what is or is not loving on our own because Paul does not deal with this concept subjectively. We have already mentioned it once, but it bears repeating here. The term *love* is not used in Scripture the same way it is used in our culture. Biblically, it is not a touchy-feely emotion that leaves you warm and fuzzy but is otherwise hard to define. Instead, God gives us clear instructions in 1 Corinthians 13 as to exactly what He means when He instructs us to speak the truth in love. Did we speak truth kindly, patiently and humbly? Or were we envious, proud and boastful? Were we rude, self-seeking and easily angered? Did we keep a list of the wrongs we suffered? Did we secretly take joy in evil? Or did we rejoice in the truth and protect others? Did we give the benefit of the doubt, believe the best, hope and endure with others?

With the 1 Corinthians 13 definition of love in mind, it is easy to see that love does not require sin to be overlooked. It requires that our confrontation of sin be consistent with the example of Christ for the unity and growth of the body. Any argument that diminishes the importance of love in how we handle sin is in conflict with Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 13, placing biblical unity at risk. By the 1 Corinthians 13 definition, love is not simply a characteristic we should have when there is no sin, but it defines how we respond when there is sin. In fact, some of 1 Corinthians 13's characteristics of love have no function at all except in response to sin and conflict.

In Ephesians 4:15-16, Paul continues drawing the picture of

the finished product that God is making for himself—the mature body of Christ, with Christ as the Head and individual members joined and held together, growing and working properly together. At the end of this section, he repeats the words that are becoming the central idea when we consider what distinguishes healthy church practices from unhealthy ones—in love.

It may seem that I am overemphasizing the issue of love. However, since Jesus teaches that loving God and loving our neighbor are the greatest commandments—i.e., the most important things—I think it would be helpful for us to park on the concept of biblical love for a moment longer and meditate on other Scriptures that teach us about the term.

Love is absolutely essential to Christian testimony. It is the key component of evangelism.

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

In fact, if you do not get biblical love and exhibit it to others, John goes as far to say in 1 John 4 that you do not know God at all: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ... We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (vv. 7-9, 19-21).

There is no perfect church. Perfection right now is a totally unreasonable standard to expect of a church. The Bible is clear that the perfection Christ promises to work in us is not going to be fully realized until we are seated with him in heaven. First Corinthians 13:12 says that we are seeing a dim, distorted reflection in a mirror right now. The clear picture

will be seen only when we are face to face with Jesus in heaven.

We are part of an imperfect church—both corporately and individually. And imperfect churches only demonstrate the profound need for consistent love. Without love, every issue is potentially divisive; but with it, the details can be covered with grace.

Consider 1 Peter 4:8: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” I love the phrase “love covers a multitude of sins.” The idea is not that love sweeps sin under the carpet. Rather, love keeps others out of the room until the appropriate people can deal with the sin.

Love gives us a specific way for speaking the truth, for teaching correct doctrine, for calling others (and ourselves) to repentance, and it involves kindness, gentleness, humility and patience. You cannot present truth without love and expect a healthy church.

Thank God there are those in the contemporary church who are determined at all costs to defend and uphold God’s revealed truth. But sometimes they are conspicuously lacking in love. When they think they smell heresy, their nose begins to twitch, their muscles ripple and the light of battle enters their eye. They seem to enjoy nothing more than a fight.

Others make the opposite mistake. They are determined at all costs to maintain and exhibit brotherly love, but in order to do so are prepared even to sacrifice the central truths of revelation. Both these tendencies are unbalanced and unbiblical. Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love; love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth.

The apostles call us to hold the two together, which should not be difficult for Spirit-filled believers, since the Holy Spirit is Himself “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17) and His firstfruit is “love” (Galatians 5:22). There is no other route than this to a fully mature Christian unity. (John Stott, *The*

## Message of Ephesians)

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*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books, including By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*