



Speaking the Truth in Love: Rules for a Good, Clean Fight

by Mary Holder Naegeli

The Apostle Paul's picture of a church in trouble is a dinghy tossed back and forth by the waves of a stormy sea, blown off course by winds of false doctrine and deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:14). The remedy involves "speaking the truth in love." Out of compassion for those in peril, we are called to drop an anchor and orient ourselves to an immovable reference point. This is the essential step for getting back on course and for making progress toward our destination, who is Jesus Christ (to mix metaphors, see Hebrews 12:1–2).

It grieves me to say this, but after almost ten years of observing and participating in General Assembly and presbytery, I cannot avoid the conclusion that false doctrine and deceitful scheming have at times confused and prolonged our denominational debates. Lest any of us be unwitting collaborators in this unfortunate and self-destructive course, I offer a few rules for a "good, clean fight." They conveniently fall into the framework of speaking the truth in love:

Speaking the Truth

1. My goal is not merely to speak *my* truth, but to promote the discovery of *the* truth and to find ways to order our common life around it (John 14:6). *I* am not out to prevail; *God's will* is to be discerned and done—through the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. I will focus my energy on tackling the problem rather than personalities. I will offer a clear definition of the actual issue at hand as logically and objectively as I can.
3. I will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I will not convey half-truths, misrepresented facts, or manipulated versions of events to gain advantage. I will demonstrate unimpeachable integrity in my testimony, and authenticity in my claims, and will expect nothing less from my opponents.
4. I will do my homework, so I can have confidence that what I say is supported by fact. When I quote others, I will not take their remarks out of context or twist them in ways the speaker did not intend. I will keep statistics and studies in proper perspective.
5. I will use my time to speak positively and passionately for my position (or to correct a misunderstanding or to clarify a point), rather than focus on putting the opposition in a bad light. I will not trivialize, marginalize, demonize, or characterize my opponents with labels that do not represent them fairly or honestly.
6. I will attribute to my opponents only the best of motive and intent, since I cannot presume to know their true intent better than they do. I will give them the benefit of the doubt unless evidence can be presented to expose inconsistencies between their stated intent and action.
7. I will listen carefully to the full debate. I will avoid basing my remarks on my assumptions, responding instead to what my opponents actually say. I will take responsibility for defining my position and my motives clearly, and will allow my opponents to do the same for themselves.

In Love

8. I will seek a fair framework for debate, in which major points of view can be clearly and adequately presented for consideration, and statements can be clarified or rebutted in an orderly manner. I will not seek unfair advantage, nor will I use inappropriate times and venues to further my agenda. (In other words, the prayer for the meal is not the time to launch the first salvo in anticipation of the battle after dinner.)
9. I will know, respect, and follow the rules of order that govern this deliberative body. If I feel a change in the rules is necessary, I will propose that change publicly and not manipulate the process behind closed doors. I will use the rules to clarify and articulate the debate, not to confuse or frustrate the proceedings.
10. I will speak in any gathering, private or public, as if my opponents or those who would be hurt by my views are listening and taking notes. This means I will speak in a loving and respectful manner, even if I must say things I expect my opponents would not want to hear.
11. I will not attack my opponents with name-calling, disparaging references, or character assassination. I will refer to them by the label *they* choose to use to characterize themselves, not by a negative one I coin for my advantage.
12. I will harbor neither hate nor fear in my heart, nor act from those motives. By the same token, neither will I be intimidated by those who falsely attribute hate or fear to me. Rather, I will concentrate on being a non-anxious presence who speaks the truth in love from a pure heart (1 Timothy 1:5).

13. I will not argue in public those matters more appropriately handled privately with the person who has offended me (Matthew 18:15f).
14. As I listen to other points of view or represent them to others, I will not make faces, roll my eyes, hiss, or in other nonverbal ways show disrespect or impatience toward an opposing point of view.
15. I will pray without prejudice for my opponents, because everyone has a family and ministry challenges and health concerns, just as I do.
16. If my position prevails, I will accept its implications with humility and grace, and without exuberant demonstrations, spontaneous or planned. If my position fails, I will be gracious to those who prevailed and prayerfully consider my next step. I will not act out my disappointment with public scenes of grief, anger, or disruption.

Unseen realities

As we approach the coming Assembly and ready ourselves for presbytery debates, it is helpful to remember that our ideological battles are fought on various levels. From a human standpoint, we are to be “shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). We must use our heads and maintain a clear conscience as we speak the truth in love.

From a spiritual standpoint, we realize that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). By this I do *not* mean that our opponents in any given debate are evil or dark, and it would be wrong to demonize anyone (please hear me clearly!). But we do recognize that the pressures and tensions we feel as a denomination within this culture are fundamentally spiritual in nature, and there *are* forces at work to discredit godliness, truth, and love.

In both the human and the spiritual realms, preparation is essential. Though the Presbyterian boat may toss back and forth in the storm, doing our homework, taking note of the winds, and praying for ourselves and our opponents will help us navigate the rough waters ahead.

(Reprinted from reNEWS, June 2001. Used by permission of Presbyterians For Renewal.)

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