

DRAFT

WATCH YOUR WORDS

Board Members communicate with each other and address conflict situations as Christians
Recently, I heard the following statement from military leader General Norman Schwarzkopf, "Leaders need two things – character and strategy. If you can do only one, drop strategy." Character counts. Really counts! The words we speak, as well as the actions we take, especially in pressure situations, portray the character qualities that flow from deep within the heart and soul of a leader.

Leaders often experience "pain" as we hold tightly to a 'vision' of the future while embracing just as firmly the 'realities' of the present situation. This is especially true when good and godly people do not accept the vision we have for our ministry assignment. This pain is often felt most keenly for the pastor, college president or community organization leader in board meetings where the leader's vision and the member's reluctance collide.

In these situations, strong and effective boards watch their words.

The subject of our speech and the power of our words are addressed several times by Paul in the New Testament. Read Ephesians 4:1-3, 25-32. Paul encouraged members of the body to use their speech for the help of others, for their up building as the occasion may offer (4:29). In so doing, Satan will not get a foothold in our lives (4:26-27).

In New Testament Perspective, Dialog is a sacrament

Our speech should be sacramental, or grace giving. We are to converse with each other within the fellowship in such a way that our words become a vehicle and demonstration of the very grace of God. In all our conversations, usage of language and subject matter need to be such that the up building and edification is of highest priority for the purpose of "ministering grace" to the hearer.

For Paul, there is no room for words that degrade another person. "Do not let any corrupt or unwholesome talk come from your mouth" 4:29. "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt..." Colossians 4:6. Throughout the biblical narrative, the mouth is representative of the whole body and reveals the whole person. For Paul, one's speech reveals the quality of his/her relationship with Christ. Jesus said, "out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks," Matthew 12:34.

We are not talking about a technique, but an attitude. Ways of thinking and speaking to others that communicate:

I need you (*you have gifts and strengths that I don't have to affirm, disciple, correct and up build*).

I love you (*you are my brother/sister in Christ*).

I accept you (*you are being changed by Christ as I am being changed*).

I trust you (*you desire to serve the same Christ as I*).

I respect you (*you are different, yet we are one in Christ*).

I serve you (*I want to minister grace to you*).

Our speech must go beyond just being motivated by the right attitude, it also must have an intense, intentional focus on our situationally sensitive, and relationally selective choice of words. Speak words that are "helpful in building others up, according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (4:29). There must be a focus beyond one's self, beyond self-serving comments and on the needs of the situation and those that will hear. . Words spoken must focus, they must be on the up-building of others.

Our words *can* be destructive

Myron C. Madden states in his book, *The Power to Bless*, that "All who have influence and weight with others have the power to bless and to withhold blessing, to cause to grow or to wither, to help or to hinder, to heal or to hurt."

The writer of this chapter listened recently by phone to a pastor friend who seemed to be in a state of shock and disbelief. He and his wife were enjoying their first pastorate after serving bi-vocationally in ministry for several years. But something happened. His "vision" for the congregation was not accepted, and conflict on other issues emerged. Without being told by the board, his wife discovered that the family insurance payments were not paid at the same time the salary was being withheld. According to him, several board members starting attending other churches. Something went terribly wrong.

Gratefully, he was able to secure his "old" job and his district superintendent placed him in a smaller church closer to his work. Board members, congregation, and parsonage family, individually and collectively were stunned and hurt. The church's witness in the community suffered.

We do not know what went wrong in the pastor/board relationship. However, Swen Walroos, in his book, *Family Communication*, discussed a series of "unfair communication techniques" used with families, techniques that may have been witnessed with in board meetings mentioned above. Walroos discusses the "unfair communication techniques" of silence, ignoring, pouting, sarcasm and ridicule.

He also expresses concern over unfavorable comparison, exposing "dirty linen" in public, blaming the person for something which he cannot help or for which he cannot do anything, intimidating, yelling, exploding, bragging, nagging and whining. That is quite a list! Yet how easy it is to fall into the defensive and ineffective use of these unfair communication techniques.

When tempted to use words in destructive ways, consider the following questions:

Will what I say build up or tear down the other person?

Would I say what I am saying directly to the person involved?

Do I know all the facts? Or am I responding on the basis of half-truths or partial facts?

Is my response triggered more by emotion than by reason? What is my motive, my intention, the real desire of my response – is it self-centered or Christ-honoring?

Is the issue really deserving of the attention and energy I am giving it?

Have I tried to accept the feelings of the other person, and understand why the other person feels the way they do?

Sometimes being emotionally honest requires criticism of another in an appropriate manner. Whaloo suggests that for every criticism of another person with whom we differ, find eight reasons to *praise* the person. This "praise to criticism" ratio can work in the home, at work, in the congregation and during board meetings!

Words cannot be superficial. They must be honest. Expressions like "thank you," "I appreciate you," "You were helpful," and "I am grateful for you."

Regarding conflict within the body of Christ, believers are challenged to "...not sin in your anger." Do not let the sun go down while you are still in conflict with another believer, and do not give the devil a foothold" Ephesians 4:26-27. Rather, Christians are instructed to be immediate and do not delay in dealing with the conflict. In delaying Satan gets a foothold in our lives...and into the congregation, the board, or any fellowship.

The choice is ours. If we are intentional, our words can be filled with blessings, encouragement and praise giving honor and witness to the marvelous grace of God. Or, if we are not careful, our words can be destructive to the fellowship of faith and even tarnish the testimony of the church to our communities.

Our speech must be devotional (Spirit-inspired)

We grieve God when we tear others down and we don't deal with our conflict in a mature, Christ-like manner (Ephesians 4:30) and in ways consistent with the holiness testimony we profess.

Do Christian Board members relate to their leader and to each other in ways are no different from the ways non-Christians relate to each other in conflict? For Spirit-filled believers serving on boards, we have a fundamentally different mode of operation and function differently in relationships based on Godly speech.

The Spirit of God is deeply concerned about the speech of his people. We are not to speak "unwholesome words" from our mouths. He instructs us to "build up" and to encourage one another. Again, we grieve God when we tear others down and we don't deal with our conflict in ways consistent with the holiness testimony we profess.

The fourth chapter of Ephesians begins with the challenge to walk worthy of our calling as Christians. The characteristics of this challenge for the believer "walking worthy" follows. These guidelines instructive us to be gentle, humble, patient and supportive of each other (v2) through "speaking the truth in love" (4:15). Specific directions are given in Ephesians 4:25-32 on how Christians are to speak truthfully in love to one another. Let us exam some of these principles.

Followers of Christ are to be co-laborers together in the body of Christ (v. 25). The people with whom we work are God's own creation. Because of this fundamental Christian conviction, we can *be honest* with believers; *immediate* in dealing with conflict; *up-building* with our words; and *forgiving*, even when others do not forgive us. Words and deeds done by others to us must never be permitted to create bitterness and resentment within us. By the empowerment of the Holy Spirit we must guard our hearts and be holy in our responses.

When we ignore our "family" relationship in Christ and treat those with whom we work as a "means to an end, "or to be manipulated for our purposes, Satan gets a "foothold" into the Christian community. The enemy of our soul laughs at unresolved conflict, which divides the fellowship of the faithful.

The resolution of conflict among Christians is an opportunity to bring glory and honor to God. Our words are to be channels of God's grace to others (Ephesians 4:30). God's forgiveness frees us to take the initiative in forgiving those who hurt us. When we do not live together by these guidelines as a Christian community, the Spirit of God is grieved (Ephesians 4:30a) and our collective witness to the world suffers.

In reviewing Ephesians 4:25-32, we as leaders see more clearly the means by which to "maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," and, in so doing, walk

(lead) worthy of our calling as leaders. Leaders translate their holiness testimony to a lifestyle of wholly *leading*.

The opening verses of the following chapter (Ephesians 5:1-2 NIV) challenges us to: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. We can sacrificially live and *lead* with "a life of love, just as Christ loved us" through being "filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in our hearts to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (see Ephesians 5:18b-21).

Talking Past Each Other

A friend of mine once had a very vivid dream of traveling to an inner city and finding that he was witnessing a violent argument in a convenient store. He discovered that the argument was between a man from the inner city and another man who was not from the inner city. Each side believed very intently in what they were passionately debating.

The startling conclusion of this revealing dream was the person from the inner city declaring to the outsider, "You will never understand, you are not from here."

As my friend told me of this experience he said that he awoke from his dream and reflected upon what he experienced and the meaning of his dream. He said, "I really do not know who was right and who was wrong. I don't even know what should be done in a situation like this." He paused, and then spoke with intense passion, "I really don't know who is right or wrong, but it seems like they were talking right past each other."

How often this scenario is played out in real life. How painful when it happens in local churches, college and community boards. Regardless of where we are or the perspective we bring to the board issue, board members must talk *to* each other. They seek first to understand. Members of strong and effective boards communicate with each other and address conflict situations as Christians.

"And in Him you too are being built together to come a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22). God the Holy Spirit is intensely interested in our "talking" and in our relationships. He will enable us to hear what we should hear, see what we should see, and speak what we should speak. If we believe our words spoken are of vital importance to him, then He can and will speak His very words through us. "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." "But the wisdom that comes from

heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 1:26 and 3:17).

Conclusion

Henri Nouwen stated, "When the door of the steam bath is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it."

Remember that the words we speak can bless or curse people. What comes out of my mouth reflects what is in my heart. Our words are to minister grace to others (Eph. 4:29).

As Christians serving on the church or school board, supervising an employee on the job, or discipline our children in the home, we either: encourage or discourage, uplift or "putdown," speak positively or negatively, focus on the other person, or focus on self.

How do others feel when they leave your presence? Stronger or weaker? Larger or smaller about themselves? Confident or "scared"? Blessed or "cursed"? The Spirit of God is deeply concerned about the speech of His people.

In the book, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer lists seven expressions of ministry by which a Christian community must be judged and characterized. The first "expression" is "The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue.

Bonhoeffer paraphrases the book of James with these words: "He who holds his tongue in check controls both mind and body" He reminds us of the Ephesian 4:29 passage which admonishes us to "...not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth...."

When these passages characterize us and in particular define our relationships in decision making situations, we bring healing and harmony by God's grace to difficult situations. We will be able to cease from constantly criticizing other people, judging them, and condemning them, always attempting to put them in their particular places. We can allow others to exist as God's own creation as brothers and sisters in Christ who are freed to serve as the graced, blessed, gifted and called People of God! Amen!

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2/2011