

SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE:
COUNSEL IN COMMUNITY

DAVID POWLISON



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PREFACE
GOOD INTENTIONS

We pray for you always, that our God will . . . fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power.
(2 Thess. 1:11)

It's hard enough to think right, but it's harder to live right. This is a book on how we are to live together. What ought to be the quality and dynamic of our relationships with each other? What is right and true, good and loving, lovely and desirable? We want that.

This book is also about how we *can* live. Of course our achievements will be imperfect, halting, erratic. But we can do this to some measure by the grace of God. We can go forward in this direction and grow in these ways. Any progress at all is solid joy, lasting treasure, radiant wisdom. We want that.

This book is also about how we *will* live. When all that we can now barely imagine becomes reality, we will fully savor what we have already tasted. No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him – yet he lets us glimpse, overhear, and catch a sense of things. We want that.

This book is about how we treat each other, how we work together, how we help each other. It's about constructive relationships: how we counsel and encourage one another. It's about what church really is: how we all grow up together. Paul's request early in 2 Thessalonians recognizes that even our *desire*

for what's right counts. It's better to want what's right than to want what's wrong, or not to know what's right, or not to care. We may fall short of turning intention into action, but intentions matter. Even our "willing of his good pleasure," wanting what is right, is something God works in us. In effect, we can ask, "Our Father, please make our good intentions actually happen, for your sake."

This is a book of good intentions. A James Ward song puts it this way: "Faith takes a vision, turns a dream into a mission." This book presents vision seeking realization in mission. I will describe a *direction* and trace out a few steps in that direction. Direction matters. In effect, we can ask, "Lord, for your name's sake, please make the work that faith imagines a reality."

COUNSEL AND COUNSELING

Speaking Truth in Love is the second in a series. It builds upon *Seeing with New Eyes*.¹ That previous book was an attempt to think right. I sought to bring Scripture to life and to reinterpret common life struggles through God's gaze. It was about "counsel," the content of truth. This second book is about "counseling," the process of love. Part I will wrestle out how to speak the truth in love in order to do counseling ministry well. Part II will hammer out ways to shape and reshape communities of faith in order to do church well. In other words, this second book describes living right. We will glimpse essential dynamics of relationship and sketch the shape of communities that pursue such relationships.

It's hard to *do counseling ministry well*. How do we converse with others to make the right kind of difference? How do we understand the problems of life so that we can offer real help? We all know that wise, mutual, life-changing counseling means that "speaking the truth in love, we . . . grow up . . . [speak] only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear . . . encourage one another day after day" (as Ephesians 4 and Hebrews 3 put it). But *how* do we do something so easy to say and so hard to do? A counseling model designs relationships

and methods to facilitate the change process; it is counseling as well as counsel.

It's hard to *do church well*. Church so easily becomes . . . well, becomes "church" (you fill in whatever ruts are most familiar). But if Jesus is full of grace and truth, it must be possible to form communities more full of grace and truth. The flourishing of wise, mutual, life-changing counseling is one proof that everything else about church is accomplishing what it's supposed to. Every counseling model entails a "delivery system," a social structure. Ideas and practices inhabit *institutions*. The most magnificent institutional structure imaginable is a community living out how Ephesians 4 weds pastoral leadership with every-member mutuality.

This book is not an exposition of Ephesians 4 – or, more exactly, of the words we now identify as Ephesians 3:14 to 5:2. But that is the thought unit that most shapes these pages. Grab a handful of verses in either direction from Ephesians 4 – we might call it "Ephesians 4+" – and you capture to perfection a half dozen questions that fill libraries with books. These questions ponder the dance between God's immediate power and our significant choices, between our dependent faith and our active love, between individual experience and the dynamics of the social group, between leadership and mutuality within the social group, between the relationally destructive dynamics of sin and the constructive dynamics of gracious love, between remnant sin and emergent love. These are six perennially perplexing questions. Paul does not so much "answer" them as illustrate how the answers work out in reality. These words from Christ via his messenger will occasionally be visible, but they will always provide the living, invisible structure that informs this book. We might say that Ephesians 4+ forms the neuro-electrical grid, cardiovascular network, and musculo-skeletal system for everything in the pages that follow. In that spectacular revelation, we witness the essential elements of a church functioning as a community characterized by the dynamics of fruitful mutual counseling.

Or we might put it the other way. *Speaking Truth in Love* seeks to recapture how the dynamics of fruitful mutual counseling characterize a church that functions as a community.

PART I SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE

I suppose that all of us who try to help people find ourselves marveling at how mere words, the simplest actions, and the most subtle interpersonal attitudes can have such profound effects on others. Human beings affect each other – for good or ill. If we want to help, not harm, we must consider what affects others for good.

All of us have experienced how an insightful, humane voice can work for good in our lives. (And certainly all of us have experienced how false or callous voices have harmful effects.) It is a fine thing when another human being takes you seriously. Someone wants to know how you are really doing, listens to what you say, and cares enough to respond constructively, saying what is both true and helpful. By word and deed in relationship, one person truly helps another.

LOVE IN ACTION

Wise counseling embodies the human and humane impact of relevant truth. It gives a new perspective and opens up new choices. It both sustains and redirects. For decades, counselors of all stripes have debated the question: Is counseling essentially a matter of *technique* or is it essentially an *art*? Of course, there are elements both of craftsmanship and artistry, but neither is the core. Wise counseling is essentially a way of loving another person well. It is a way of speaking what is true and constructive into *this* person's life right now. Good counseling

is essentially wise love in action. It is the image of God made flesh among us, full of grace and truth. Questions of love and truth are foundational and primary for understanding how to counsel. Questions of methodology and artistry are significant but secondary.

Wise love is often both skillful and creative, but it cannot be reduced to a skill set or to creative imagination. I have seen wrecked lives changed simply because a friend cared and was willing to speak honestly like this: "I love and respect you as a person, and I want what is good for you. But you are destroying yourself with what you believe and how you are living." Those were precisely the words that changed *my* life. The cruise missile of wise love blew apart the bunker of self-will in which I lived. My friend's words were not a product of technique. They were artless. But they had four things going for them. They were true, loving, personal, and appropriate.

The living God himself brought my friend's words home with power. He was right. Out of the collapse of core willfulness, I could hear for the first time the voice of another, even greater friend: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). This Wonderful Counselor's approach is best described as true, loving, personal, appropriate – rather than by categories describing technique, skill set, methodology, or imaginative intuition. Speaking the truth in love comes first. And those words of the Life-giver, the merciful Shepherd, my Father, were precisely the words that changed my life forever.

COUNSELING: PURPOSE, PERSON AND PROCESS

Part I of this book focuses on the counseling conversation between two (or more) people. We will explore several elements that make such conversations fruitful. Think of these chapters as a series of core samples, not a complete excavation of the construction site. I'm not trying to present a model but to give a feel for what it looks like, thinks like, and talks like to counsel

biblically. Each chapter is a “for instance,” not one segment of a textbook.¹

But there is a logic to the progression of these nine chapters. The first three concentrate on what you bring to the table as you enter into counseling relationships. Do you know where you are going? What you are aiming for and why? Who you are and your role? The later chapters portray the actual questioning, and listening, and responding. What are you listening for? What do you say? What makes a substantial difference in another person’s life?

I think of Chapter 1 as the “Surprise!” in this book. “Suffering and Psalm 119” turns upside down how we think about “counseling.” It is my favorite chapter. By instinct, habit, and enculturation, all of us tend to think of counseling as a human-with-human interaction. But in fact a human-with-Savior interaction must come first. When I as a counselor don’t get that straight, I inevitably offer others some sort of saviorette. If my counseling does not help others rely upon Another (upon whom I also rely), I will inevitably teach them to rely on themselves – or on me, or other friends, or medications, or techniques, or pabulum “truths” (that are in fact empty or even fictional). This cornerstone chapter explores Psalm 119: “If your law had not been my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction” (v. 92).

Chapter 2, “The Facts of Life,” explores our resistance to knowing ourselves. Wise counseling helps people face themselves honestly. It helps them look in the only true mirror: What does God see in me? It helps people look suffering in the eye: What is the scene in which God has placed me, and how am I going to respond? We humans fiercely resist seeing ourselves as God sees us. The breaking of our resistance to that light opens the door to God’s goodness, intimacy, and grace.

Chapter 3, “Hearing the Music of the Gospel,” brings in a third essential ingredient. People who relate their lives to God and who look evils in the eye need something: grace. You can’t do life right without the mercies of God in Christ. Wise counseling knows that and brings it. We don’t just need a perspective or a strategy. We need a Savior, right here, right now.

The first three chapters tackle the largest matters concerning what you bring to the table in any counseling conversation. Chapter 4 explores the tiniest matters. “How Healthy is Your Preparation?” looks at the simple things you do to prepare to talk to another human being. Your responses to those larger issues are revealed in these little corners of life.

From your foundation, the ten thousand particulars of wise counseling method are built. Chapter 5 moves into the actual human-with-human interaction. “What Questions Do You Ask?” uncovers the deeper questions that must thread through the swarms of particular questions and comments by which you get to know another person. The most commonplace questions – “What happened?” “How do you feel about that?” “What is your problem?” “What do you think would make a difference?” – are altered when we align our agenda with the way that Jesus Christ probes people.

Chapter 6, “Think Globally, Act Locally,” presents a case study in how to use Scripture within a counseling conversation. By necessity, to be human means that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Wise counseling must be biblical counseling. Counseling that offers no word from God will parch, starve, mislead, and ultimately kill the very people it tries hard to help. But how does counseling present and work with Scripture?

“Illustrative Counseling” (Chapter 7) provides one small illustration of how “speaking the truth in love” gets up close and personal. Biblical counseling is not the mere citation and recitation of Bible verses (any more than biblical preaching is). Truth always adapts, comes down to earth, wears the clothes of this person’s life experience. Listen well to people, and you will find stories and metaphors that will help you to speak well into their lives.

Chapter 8 takes up the problem of how to talk with people who talk-talk-talk-talk-talk. Have you ever tried to converse with someone who talks at you? Such monologues make for some of the most maddening counseling imaginable. “Talk Incessantly? Listen Intently!” works on how to turn monologues into dialogue.

Chapter 9 takes on a problem common in contemporary western cultures. You will counsel people who have already been listening hard to other counselors. Those counselors have persuasively misinterpreted life and earnestly offered saviorettes. “How Do You Help a ‘Psychologized’ Counselee?” considers a woman who needs to radically reframe the way she understands herself, her sufferings, her motives, and her God.