



# Telling the Truth In Love and Loyalty

How conversation keeps the community where it belongs—  
at the heart of the theological enterprise.

*by John C. Brunt*

I HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF CARRYING OUT MY theological reflection, writing, and teaching within the context of community. Perhaps I should say “communities,” for smaller communities always exist within the larger one. In a broad sense I have worked within the Seventh-day Adventist Church community. In a narrower sense I have worked within a community of faculty and colleagues in the School of Theology at Walla Walla College. For the past 23 years these colleagues have nurtured, stimulated, and taught me. Our community has always shared basic commitments to intellectual honesty and the search for truth, to loyalty for the broader church community, and to lots and lots of conversation. (“Fellowship junkies,” Charles Scriven called us.) In these conversations we have not only shared our work, but challenged each other’s theses, and tested the thoroughness of

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our homework. Inevitably, another kind of question is asked as well: Is the material presented in such a way that the larger church community will be able to understand and benefit from it?

Although the group’s sharpening of my ideas through conversation and its loyalty to the church has hardly protected me from controversy, it has helped me address controversial issues in ways that have found acceptance in church publications and other forums.

## Truth and Community

A fair question might be raised as to whether AI and my colleagues have preserved the integrity always asked of theologians. Doesn’t integrity demand that we speak out when we recognize that the church is wrong? In a society that values freedom of speech and personal integrity, who could possibly wish to mute criticism?

I wish to question the traditional picture of personal integrity as the autonomous indi-

vidual standing alone for truth over against the community. I believe, instead, that true integrity includes loyalty and commitment to the community. In other words, true integrity is not merely individualistic, but also communal.

The communal dimension of integrity is celebrated, I believe, by Scripture, particularly in two passages in the New Testament letter to the community called Ephesians. In the first Paul says, "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25).<sup>1</sup> A more literal translation would say that we must put off falsehood and speak truthfully because we are "members of each other." While we often think the motive for truth telling is our sense of autonomous, personal integrity, for Paul, the impetus to truth telling is our sense of community, our mutuality, our responsibility to each other. Paul believed that when we don't tell the truth, we destroy community; when we lie we ignore the fact that we are not autonomous and separate, but a part of each other. Falsehood destroys our interrelatedness, the integrity of the community. What belongs together is torn apart.

Paul makes a similar point in another passage: "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:14, 15).

Here, truth obviously matters to Paul. He

has no use for the instability of constantly being blown in every direction. He will speak the truth, but it will be truth spoken in love. For Paul, truth is so integrally bound with the good news of God's gracious love, that truth not spoken in love ceases to be truth.

In both of these passages we see a strongly communal element to truth and truth-telling.

## Love Versus Integrity

Krister Stendahl addresses the same issue with an unlikely phrase: "Love Rather Than Integrity." This chapter title certainly sounds strange to contemporary ears.<sup>2</sup> How can anything be "rather than integrity"? Stendahl argues that, for Paul, love is not a super-virtue or the romantic term that is so over-used today. Rather, love is concern for the church and one's fellow Christians. It shows itself in a desire to build up or strengthen the

church.<sup>3</sup> Stendahl suggests that Paul's advice to the Corinthians about food offered to idols shows that the true Christian must be willing to give up doing it his or her way for the sake of others. Stendahl, commenting on 1 Corinthians 8-10, says, "To order one's life by the conscience of the other weaker person is the extreme example of love rather than integrity."<sup>4</sup>

Stendahl is certainly right in at least one sense. Paul does not see the ideal Christian as the single individual standing alone in his or her autonomy making decisions. Rather, Paul sees Christians as part of a body, part of a larger community, willing to give up even

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their legitimate rights for the sake of others. However, this is not a matter of giving up one's integrity. Paul isn't saying that one should ever violate his or her own convictions for the sake of others. Rather, one must be so free that rights don't have to be expressed and freedoms don't have to be acted out.

Stendahl captures an important aspect of Paul's thought, but his choice of terminology is unfortunate. It is wrong to speak of love *rather than* integrity. Paul is really insisting on a higher integrity, an integrity that recognizes the importance of community as well as the single individual. True integrity doesn't have to be individualistic. As Stendahl himself later suggests, integrity is broad enough to include loyalty to others in community.<sup>5</sup> One doesn't give up personal integrity for the sake of love. To act in love and loyalty is to act with integrity. This is true because no one of us is an island who stands alone. To ignore others when we speak the truth is not integrity at all.

## Dissent and the Church

What does all this mean for the question of dissent in the church today?

First, we must speak the truth. It is folly to think that the community can be served by speaking falsehood or even suppressing the truth. The results of the 1919 Bible Conference post-session should have made that clear forever. In recent years we have paid a terrible price because some church leaders in 1919 felt that members should not know the truth about how inspiration worked in the composition of Ellen White's books, including her use of sources. Failure to speak the truth should not be an option.

And yet it should hardly surprise us to find that we are not always appreciated when we speak in ways that seem new or different to the community. After all, there is a human tendency to find security in past truth, and

resist present truth. That is in no way limited to the church. The same is true in the scientific community. Read, for instance, Evelyn Fox Keller's biography of recently deceased biologist Barbara McClintock, entitled *A Feeling for the Organism*, to see how difficult it was for a scientist (especially a woman scientist) who was clearly ahead of her time to find acceptance within the scientific community.<sup>6</sup>

This leads to the second suggestion. We must speak the truth in love. Unfortunately, I find it difficult to find the love portion of this formula in most of the broadsides I read from those on both the right and the left who speak about the church. Yet when truth is understood holistically, in the context of the gospel, the "truth" of these clearly unloving messages is called into question. Given the nature of the gospel, if it isn't given in love, is it really truth?

Third, we must speak the truth in loyalty and concern for the community. We live in an individualistic society. Many years ago, when I lived in southern California, I frequently drove from Los Angeles to Riverside. I saw hundreds, indeed, thousands of cars with only one occupant. On a recent trip to southern California I was amazed that, despite carpooling, most cars are still occupied by a solitary driver.

This individualistic spirit makes it difficult for us to capture Paul's emphasis on the importance of community for Christians. His words to the Corinthians, where the church was divided into factions, become painfully intense. He speaks of the church as God's temple. By using plural, second-person pronouns (unfortunately this is not seen in English translations since only southern English allows a distinction between "you" and "ya'll"), along with the singular reference to the temple, it is clear that Paul is speaking about the church when he says, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's

temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17).

Sometimes, truth needs to cut like a two-edged sword. But today we probably need to hear less of swords and more of temples. Those of us who feel the need to speak the truth as we see it, need to think of how we can express the truth without destroying the temple.

We will be helped to think about enhancing, rather than demolishing the temple, by remembering that we all see dimly through a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12). The truth we speak is never ultimate, but is only as one finite person understands it. Most of us have changed our minds enough times to warn us that our truths must be spoken in humility.

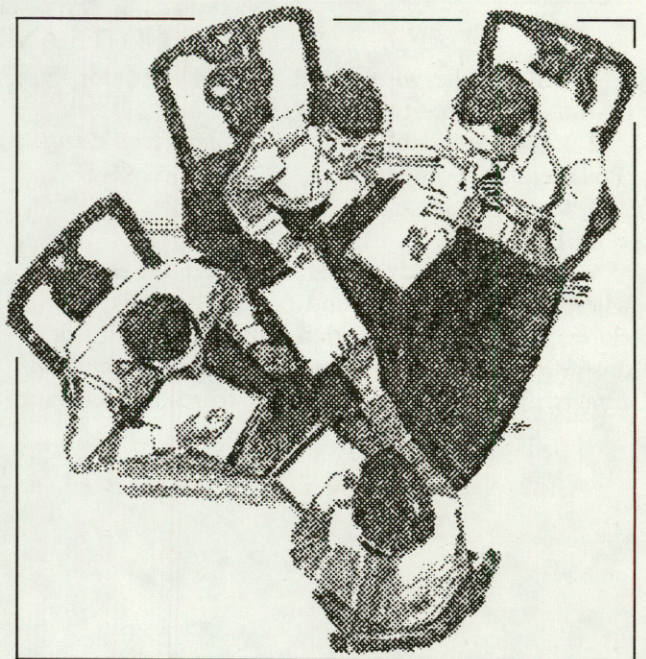
Finally, we must differentiate between basic principles and peripheral matters. Beliefs matter and truth is important. Even though I cannot conceive of Christianity without community, I could never be part of a church merely for the sake of community. If I didn't believe in basic teachings of the church, such as the Sabbath, the second coming of Jesus, and the wholeness of human beings, I would have to find a different Christian community. Beliefs are important, and to me Adventist beliefs are particularly important because of their relationship to Christian lifestyle. Doctrines are not merely bits of gnostic information, promising salvation through knowledge. Rather, doctrines are explications of the Christian's walk with Christ. Unfortunately, many debates are merely abstract disputes over theoretical issues that have little real importance for life or our commitments to God. The essentials binding us together should take a more important place than peripheral or theoretical matters that divide us.

## Beyond Dissent

**I**saw a vivid example of the difference between the essential and the peripheral

several years ago at a Society of Biblical Literature convention in Chicago. Several biblical scholars were debating fairly technical points concerning the interpretation and understanding of the book of Galatians. After the debate went on for some time, they stopped, according to plan, and experimented with something quite foreign to the usual scholarly environment at such occasions. A New Testament scholar named David Rhodes, who has emphasized oral recitation of Scripture, was called upon to recite the book of Galatians. The panelists and audience all joined in listening to this presentation of the letter. The purpose was to see if an oral hearing of the letter would support one position or the other.

The oral presentation of Galatians was a powerfully moving experience. I not only felt it myself; I could see it in those sitting around me. When the reading was over, the panelists were called back to the front of the room to continue their debate. The question was asked again, how does this reading support your interpretation? Interestingly, there was silence. The silence was rather long, and finally one scholar said, "After such a powerful, moving experience, it seems to me that theological



quibbling is inappropriate."

I have observed similar experiences during long weekends, when the Walla Walla theology faculty has shared fellowship, worship, and theological conversation with the conference presidents in our North Pacific Union conference. Even though the talk includes many "Yes, but" statements about theological interpretation, the overall impact of the weekends has been to remind all of us that what is more important are our shared spiritual experiences.

In those moments of fellowship, no one more transparently and fully embodied Christian truth in love with fellowship than Dr. Sakae Kubo, for several years our chairman. My former seminary professor and guide in New Testament studies, he always exemplified honest study of the Bible combined with deep loyalty to the Adventist community.

None of us can ever be free of frustrations and disappointments in the church. For me, it was a terribly sad moment to sit in Indianapolis four years ago and hear so many speeches that tied faithfulness to God with failure to recognize the ministry of women together in one package. It was horribly painful to see the

hurt in the faces of women ministers whom I respect and who have ministered to me. But reading the New Testament should alert us to the fact that the church will not always be right. It wasn't true in the early church. It is only a delusion that the early church was a perfect community of pristine purity. Just read Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Any pastor would find that congregation more than a challenge. The church has always had its problems. Communities of human beings always do. None of us has come from a perfect family. There are no perfect human communities, and the church is no exception.

This is no excuse for sitting back and tolerating evil or injustice in the church or anywhere else. We must speak the truth, but we must also keep from becoming so frustrated and discouraged that we lose a sense of how important community is to Christian faith. It is so important that integrity is not merely an individualistic, autonomous experience of faithfulness to oneself. Since we are members of each other, Christian integrity means a mutual respect that demands truth-telling for the sake of each other. Truth-telling in love and loyalty.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the New International Version.
2. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 52-66.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
5. In fact, Stendahl does sharpen the language when he comes to the end of his chapter. He concludes, "As we have wandered through various demonstrations of Paul's principle, *Love Rather Than Integrity*, we may now be ready to re-phrase it and

sharpen it by saying: 'Love allows for not insisting on one's own integrity at the expense of the unity of the community.' Love, as Paul understands it, urges us to respect fully the integrity of those who think and feel otherwise.... Love allows for the full respect of the integrity of the other, and overcomes the divisiveness of my zeal for having it my way in the name of my own integrity" (*Ibid.*, p. 67).

6. Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1983).