



The Danger of Cautious Speech

by Kevin DeYoung

The danger of cautious speech is that no one hears you speaking.

Now, already I feel welling up within in me the desire to qualify everything I'm about to say. Something along the lines of, "Of course, caution is good sometimes. Of course, we want to be sensitive. Of course, we need to explain ourselves." But that's my whole point. When every assertion is qualified with half a dozen, "I'm not saying..." and "He really loves the Lord, but..." our speech is watered down to the point of being ineffective and uninteresting—two characteristics that usually go hand in hand.

We live in a linguini spine, limp noodle culture where every disagreement is an offense, every offense a hurt, every hurt a sin. Ergo, every disagreement or hard word is a sin somehow. The cultural rules of the day, especially in Christian circles, dictates that if you are going to say one critical thing about someone or someone's position, you must first pad the criticism with no fewer than three and no more than five meaningless affirmations. "She's probably a great mother. I don't doubt she has a gift with children. I'm not saying she's not a kind person. But she boiled my son and ate him and in my opinion that's wrong" (see 2 King 6). You can almost hear the ubiquitous explanations about how she was a victim of hunger and the gutless caveats about how we've all eaten something we shouldn't have before. Pure silliness.

There's a way to write and speak that is cruel and vindictive. But there's also a way to write and speak that is over-qualified and under-stimulating. It's a sign

of the decadence of our age that we have both shock jocks who never met a opinion they couldn't make outrageous and namby-pamby sentimentalists who never met an opinion they couldn't qualify. Why do Christians think the first is worst than the second? Why are we so afraid of making bald assertions? Is it because we care so much about our neighbor's feelings? Perhaps. But I bet more of it stems from personal cowardice and a cultural ethos which makes all of us, and all those around us, easily wounded.

Because I write a little and speak a lot for a living, I think about these issues all the time. Can I mention Mothers' Day in passing without having to add a word about all those who wish they were mothers or had bad mothers? Can I use an example about a godly child without explaining that some of us have wayward children too? Can I call abortion a sin without going into a discursion about the forgiveness available for those who have had

abortions? Can I boldly say that your life must bear good fruit without also explaining in detail justification by faith just to make sure everyone knows what I'm not saying?

Do I have to preface every

disagreement with someone by saying, "He's a great guy, really nice. I'm sure he is doing a lot of good, but I just think he is off in this area"? What happened to letting our yes be yes, our no be no, and our statements be statements. Do we have to guard our word from a hundred different angles if they aren't meant to say a hundred different things?

And what about hyperbole, shock, or irony. Are these ever appropriate? Imagine today's Elijah on Mount Carmel tussling with the prophets of Baal. "I know you are very sincere in your spirituality, O prophets. You probably understand some things about God

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better than I do. I'm not saying I have a monopoly on the truth. I just think that Yahweh is the true God, at least that's my interpretation of things." Granted—see, I'm qualifying again—Elijah on Mt. Carmel is not the model for every situation. But surely he is the model for some situation. There is a time to avoid the niceties and flat out ask the prophets of Baal, tongue firmly in cheek, if their God is taking a nap or just out of commission on the job. Irony, shock, hyperbole.

The problem is more than boring blandness. Cautious speech, when it fails to convey the seriousness of a situation, can actually be false speech. "I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" Paul informed the Galatians (Gal 5:12). How's that for throwing caution to the wind? Or what about Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and Alexander? How do you think they felt when Paul called them out by name as faithless deserters? There is a time for calling a spade a spade. Wandering sheep get the tough love. False teachers get shock and awe. "These are blemishes on your love feasts," Jude supernaturally opined, blasting the false teachers as "waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever" (Jude 12-13). Come on Jude, can anyone really be that bad? Apparently they were. "Nice guys, but mistaken on a few points" just wouldn't have cut it.

I'm not sure which is my greater danger as a preacher, over-qualification or over-provocation. No doubt, I've been guilty of both. But I have to tell you each time I read the gospels I think I ought to err on the side of over-provocation. Jesus never gave people an easy out. He never watered down his messages with umpteen caveats and qualifications. Little wonder, then, that Jesus was profoundly misunderstood by almost everyone who heard him. Jesus practically invited misunderstanding. It's as if he wanted people to be pricked and prodded, even if it meant they got ticked off in the wrong direction once in awhile.

Jesus is a wonderful case study in cautious-free speech. "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25). Really, Jesus? There's no laughing for Christians? "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18). Don't you want to say anything about

the pain of divorce or the grounds for biblical divorce or at least give a few introductory comments, Jesus? "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus, someone is really going to take this hate stuff the wrong way. Don't you think this would be a perfect time to throw in a little "I'm not saying, I'm just saying..." "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2-3). Hold on a minute, Jesus. What about a little compassion for the grieving? Do you really want to turn this tragedy into one of your preaching points? Why don't you give us a few "We can't fully understand God's ways" or "God weeps more than anyone at this suffering" before you start railing on repentance?

Jesus didn't punch with kid gloves. His speech was direct, to the point, free from puffery, and free from endless qualification. He didn't talk about God the Father and then add in parentheses "I understand some of you didn't have good fathers." He didn't damn the Pharisees only after making clear, "I'm not saying all the Pharisees are scoundrels." He didn't preface his cry of dereliction on the cross with theological niceties like "Father, I trust you and know that you are sovereign and good in this difficult situation." Instead, he cried out from the depths of his soul "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me!"

Jesus was never cruel, never unkind. He loved every conscience stricken sinner. He loved them enough to speak dangerously and without caution. Because he understood that speaking with caution, when eternity hangs in the balance, is frighteningly dangerous. Jesus spoke like he had something to say. You could take it or leave. You may even misunderstand it. But you had to deal with it. That's what the truth is supposed to do. No wonder they said he spoke with authority unlike the scribes and the pharisees.

Let me just say in closing that obviously, I'm not saying we should speak just like Jesus. He was the Messiah after all. We will want to be sensitive and go out of our way to avoid offending and being misunderstood wherever possible, even as we try to speak the truth clearly. Right?

Like I said, the danger with cautious speech is that no one hears you speaking.