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# THE EPHESIANS 4:15 RULE:

## A SOCRATIC APPROACH TO POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

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**Key Words** *political correctness, politically incorrect, Socratic Method, Golden Rule*

### **Abstract**

In the Apostle Paul's words, we should "[speak] the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). Many of us are good at doing one (i.e., speaking the truth) or the other (i.e., speaking in love). But few of us excel at doing both at the same time. I argue that this "Ephesians 4:15 Rule" is relevant to the many contemporary political debates that revolve around the concept of political correctness and push us into joining one or the other extreme ideological camp. In this essay, I lay out my Socratic approach to explaining to students what I take to be the proper approach to this somewhat elusive concept.

## Introduction

**I**f political correctness denotes basic decency—if, to put it in simple terms, it simply means not being a jerk—then we should, of course, be “politically correct.” I try to model such conduct for my children, sometimes to awkward effect, such as that one time that my daughter, then a toddler, described a brown mare as an “African-American horse.” Of course, this *is not* what political correctness means. I have considered it necessary to define this somewhat elusive concept for my students, as it figures so prominently in many contemporary political debates that, characteristically, push us into joining one or the other extreme camp. I employ the Socratic Method in explaining what I take to be the proper approach to the concept of political correctness. For the sake of fellow educators who might be interested in adopting a similar approach, I have emboldened my propositions—with each of which I secure my students’ general agreement before proceeding—as well as the conclusions that logically follow from them.

## Statement of the Problem

According to *Merriam Webster*, to be politically correct is to conform “to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated.” Thus, **political correctness condemns discourse on the basis of whether it is offensive, not whether it is true.** This is problematic for the obvious reason that **just because something is offensive doesn’t necessarily make that it false.** I have found that simply revealing—however delicately—my positions on certain controversial topics is enough to scandalize people. Merely identifying as pro-life runs the risk of being labeled a misogynist; simply professing traditional views on sexual morality may invite accusations of anti-gay hatred. These are but two examples reminding us that political correctness is not, as an article in the *Guardian* suggests, a “phantom enemy” concocted by the Right—even if there are those who, admittedly, use our aversion to political correctness in order to excuse their malice (Weigel, 2016, November 30).

## Method

Now assuming **it is generally good to be truthful**,<sup>1</sup> we are forced to conclude that **political correctness is not necessarily good**. For if it is generally good to be truthful, and if some truths are offensive, then it is generally wrong to censor truths that are otherwise offensive. But why do I not conclude that it is necessarily bad to uphold norms of political correctness? The answer is intimated in the following syllogism, which concerns how we should engage in social and political dialogue.

I begin with a premise that most of my students, religious or otherwise, at least claim to accept: **We should follow the Golden Rule**. In other words, we should treat people the way we wish to be treated (Luke 6:31). I then draw two logical corollaries of this rule for my students. First, **we should not seek to offend others for the sake of offending them**. After all, we do not wish to be offended ourselves. Of course, many will boast about not being easily offended. “I am not some snowflake,” they will say (oh, how I despise that word). But no reasonable person actually *wants* to be offended. If you desire to be offended for its own sake, then you are not being virtuous; you are being a masochist.

The second corollary is that **we should endeavor to teach others the truth**. After all, we wish to learn the truth ourselves. Some will reasonably take issue with this proposition. They will correctly point out that there are proud people who resist the notion that they have anything to learn from others. However, no one, save the most hopeless narcissist, will proudly admit this. In other words, they are aware that they have much to learn from other people. However, because of their pride, they are too weak to live in accordance with what they know to be true—that they are not omniscient.

Logically, this leads us to the conclusion that **we should promote truth in the least offensive way possible**. This principle is, I believe, perfectly encapsulated in Ephesians 4:15. In the Apostle Paul’s words,

1. We can admit of exceptions to this general rule that it is good to be truthful. Suppose, to use a familiar example, you were living under German occupation. Most people would morally approve of lying to the Nazis about hiding Jews in your home. Barring exceptional cases like that this, though, it is good to tell the truth

we should “[speak] the truth in love.” Many of us are good at doing one (i.e., speaking the truth) or the other (i.e., speaking in love). But few of us excel at doing both at the same time, and I am certainly no exception to this rule.

For the sake of illustration, let us apply this “Ephesians 4:15 rule” to a pair of statements, presented in Table 1 below, that express the same idea concerning the differences between men and women with respect to physical strength, but in very different ways.

Example	Is there an element of factual truth?	Is it expressed in an offensive manner?	Is it politically correct?	Does it pass the Ephesians 4:15 test?
A. “Scientific evidence suggests men are physically stronger than women.”	Yes	No	No	Yes
B. “Chicks are weaker than men.”	Yes	Yes	No	No

Table 1. *A Comparison of Two Statements*

## Results

Both of these statements have at least an element of truth.<sup>2</sup> Further, both are politically incorrect. Why? Because these days, practically any claim of a systematic difference between men and women invites the charge of sexism. But how do these statements differ from one another? First, Statement B is quite vague; it does not specify the *kind* of strength in which men generally surpass women. Second, by referring to women as “chicks,” the statement is expressed in a way that is unnecessarily offensive. Thus, in addition to being politically incorrect with respect to the *content* of the truth that is expressed, Statement B is politically (indeed, morally) incorrect with respect to the *language* in which it is expressed.

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2. I know from personal experience that no matter how I express this particular truth, it will offend some people.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In short, only the first statement passes the Ephesians 4:15 rule. For, as I explain to my students, if you can avoid offending people while educating them but choose not to do so, then it would seem to me that your ultimate objective is not, at least purely, to teach them the truth. Rather, it would appear that your *intention* is to offend them, either because you are a sadist or because you think—and sadly, you would be correct in thinking this—that this is an effective way of achieving popularity.<sup>3</sup> When you have such malicious intentions, you run the risk of losing the opportunity to win people over to the truth. You might end up closing their minds to the truth through the *avoidably* offensive way in which you have expressed myself. And that should concern you—if, that is, you genuinely honor the Golden Rule.

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3. Of course, it is conceivable that people consciously seek to offend others for altruistic reasons. They might reason that such “tough love” is an effective means of liberating people from falsehood. It seems to me, however, that this is not a common motivation.

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