



Genuine Grace... Unedited Truth

by Randy Alcorn, Director of Eternal Perspectives Ministries

The world is desperately hungry for two things—grace and truth. Jesus Christ is full of both: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). When Jesus stepped onto the world’s stage, people could not only hear the demands of truth but also see Truth Himself. No longer fleeting glimmers of grace, but Grace Himself.

To see Christ through us, the world must see grace and truth in His followers. Paradoxically, the church is simultaneously too hostile to the world and too friendly to it. Sinners wanted to be around Jesus, but today many don’t want to be around Jesus’ followers. On the other hand, when the church tries to make itself a place where everyone is comfortable, its distinctives are often sacrificed. The church becomes one more social club that helps people feel good but fails to help them *be* good.

In the one case, Christians emphasize truth but neglect grace. In the other, they emphasize grace but neglect truth. Some churches are strong on truth but weak on grace. Some are strong on grace but weak on truth. Truth is not complete without grace and grace is not complete without truth. Grace without truth deceives people. Truth without grace crushes people. Sometimes I write mostly about grace. This time, I am writing mostly about truth.

REMAKING JESUS IN THE CULTURE’S IMAGE?

The only “church growth formula” the early church possessed was the body of truth flowing with the blood of grace. They drew thousands to Jesus by being like Jesus. Unfortunately, today many professing Christians agree with Jesus only when He speaks about love and says “Judge not.” When He takes moral stands and says there’s an eternal hell to punish sins, that’s a different story. They take a “cut and paste” approach to the Bible—“when I like what it says I’ll quote it; when I don’t like it, I’ll ignore, reinterpret or deny it.” That means the Bible is not their authority. Rather, culture and themselves are their authority.

It concerns me when those who profess to be Christians simply redefine what it means to be a Christian to accommodate whatever the culture currently believes, supposing they are more loving, kind and relevant Christians.

Once we deny parts of God’s truth, we’re no longer under the authority of Scripture. If Christians try to be relevant and accepted by making up truth on the fly, then the Jesus we speak of will not be the Scripture-believing Jesus of the Bible who was full of both grace and truth. He will just be the “loving Jesus” remade in our culture’s image, in which we redefine love as absolute tolerance and moral indifference.

Christ’s followers are to be both loving *and* holy. Our job is not to be God’s PR team or speechwriters, but to be His ambassadors, not making policy but humbly representing what God has declared to be true.

DISCOVERING WHAT TRUE, CHRIST-LIKE LOVE LOOKS LIKE

If we hold to what God’s Word says is true, does that mean we can’t be empathetic and caring about those who are living lifestyles contrary to God’s intention, apart from Christ? Of course not. Yes, it would be easier and feel better to be able to say to everyone, “No problem, I love you and that means however you want to live is fine with God.” Rather, in compassion and kindness, we can point out that all sin—including ours—goes against God’s design. Ultimately, it is always deadly for any of us to choose the path of sin. We too are sinners, and we still love people who choose sin. But that doesn’t mean we say sin isn’t sin.

Tim Keller writes, “Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws.”

Ephesians 4:15 tells us we need to “speak the truth in love.” We are not to choose between being loving and being truthful. We are to be both. Jesus loved the woman who committed adultery (John 8:3-11). He loved her the way she was, but loved her too much to let her stay that way. His love didn’t compel Him to say, “Adultery is okay, you don’t have to change,” but “Go and sin no more.” If I truly love someone, I will come to them as Jesus did, in grace *and* truth.

The important thing is not to *appear* to love our neighbors (by withholding the truth), but to *actually* love our

neighbors by acting in their best interests—even when speaking the truth is hard for us and them.

A CALL TO GRACIOUSLY SPEAK THE TRUTH, INCLUDING FROM THE PULPIT

Trying to fly under the radar of our culture on moral issues is no better than the always-in-your-face method. The grace-only approach, in the end, is as deficient as the truth-only approach. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). He is our perfect example.

For pastors and leaders, this means we should not hold back from speaking biblical truth in any area. To do so would be unloving. Paul says in Acts 20:27, “for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” We’re not to preach just from our favorite portions of the Word, but all of it.

Addressing the pastor’s role, Martin Luther wrote: “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proven, and to be steady on all the battle fronts besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.”

Garry Randall, director of Faith & Freedom writes, “The fact is that churches are generally not speaking to the issues that are destroying our culture, and many pastors don’t intend to do so in 2014—for a variety of reasons.” He cites a 2013 poll by George Barna that found while 97% of pastors believe what the Scriptures say about homosexual behavior is clear, only 31% plan to address the issue of same sex-marriage. (See <http://bit.ly/N9OaBw>)

Yes, there are many more issues and sins that need to be addressed from the pulpit and in our own lives besides homosexual behavior! We need to be careful to search our hearts and speak against sin such as gluttony, gossip, lust, greed and self-righteousness. After all, the vast majority of sins addressed in Scripture have nothing to do with homosexuality. While we need to stand up against accepting homosexuality as moral, we also need to be more passionate about decrying what we do that offends God.

We live in a strange new world in which those who affirm what nearly all Christians everywhere have believed for two thousand years—that both homosexual *and* heterosexual relations outside marriage are prohibited Scripturally—are seen as bigots. Those who believe in an eternal hell are seen as unloving and narrow-minded. Those who believe abortion kills children, and that they don’t deserve to die, are seen as angry, judgmental and backwards.

Many pastors have grown weary of the abortion issue. Some who used to speak up for unborn children no longer do. In my own church there are people who say they stay home on the Sanctity of Life Sunday (which thankfully our church still observes) because they don’t want to be told that abortion kills children. And if anyone in church dares to show a photo of an aborted child—even if they warn people and tell them they can close their eyes—that’s considered outrageous. (Interesting, since newspapers in the mid-forties were applauded for courageously showing the pictures of murdered people in concentration camps—and those pictures were what made the Holocaust finally seem real.)

The only way to redeem yourself as a Christian in the eyes of popular culture, and increasingly even in the church, is to deny what it means to be a Christian. The only way to be a credible pastor is to deny what it means to be a biblical pastor.

When we believe and teach the Bible, it’s guaranteed you and I will be seen as bigots. Unless, of course, we either outright deny the Scriptures or are so quiet about our beliefs that no one finds us out. (Imagine an ambassador who lives in fear of divulging his King’s policies.)

Of course we will be mocked and despised by some. Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). Paul said, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

But our call is clear: in the balance of grace and truth, to follow the example of Peter and the Apostles, who told the Sanhedrin: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

THE FINAL APPRAISAL

As a young pastor I cared too much what people thought of me. The best cure for this was twenty-five years ago when I was repeatedly arrested and went to jail for peaceful nonviolent civil disobedience at abortion clinics.

During that time a pastor told me he believed Christians shouldn’t ever break the law and go to jail. But I said the day would likely come when he would go to jail, not for refusing to go along with abortion, but for preaching against homosexual behavior, which would eventually be declared illegal “hate speech.” What seemed far-fetched to many then becomes increasingly more likely as the years go by.

I participated in the civil disobedience because I believed God wanted me to stand up for unborn children. But it was extremely unpopular in Oregon, to say the least, and even many Christians, including some of our church folk, disapproved. I learned to accept that. The key is to understand that we live out our lives before the Audience of One. If our goal is to hear others say, “Well done,” we won’t do what we should to hear Him say it.

We need to ask ourselves whether we are living for the culture’s approval or for God’s approval. By all means, let’s reach out to people with love and grace—but in the end, other people’s opinions of us won’t matter. Our opinion of ourselves won’t matter. God’s opinion alone will matter, and His “opinion” is truth. *He* is the One we should seek to please. There is only one true Judge—a Savior who is full of both grace and truth.