

Graciousness

Graciousness

Tempering Truth with Love



John Crotts



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*Dedicated to my wife, Lynn,
who by God's grace has patiently endured
my growth in graciousness.*

Although we met a few years into our Christian lives and after the Lord had already knocked off a few of my rough edges, you have been by my side for many more steps of refinement. May God help us both to be more like our Lord, who was full of grace and truth.



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Preface

The story behind this book about cultivating graciousness in the hearts of those enflamed for God's truth is highly personal. Early in my Christian life, the Lord used biblical debates with Christians from many different theological traditions to sharpen my understanding of the teaching of the Bible and to develop a passion to know and communicate more and more of God's truth. Sadly, in those early days, my sincerity and earnestness were not always coupled with Christlike kindness; in other words, I sometimes used the Bible as a club, leaving fellow Christians battered and bruised.

The Lord has used His truth and many wonderful people to help me grow in graciousness. Serving as the pastor of Faith Bible Church, Sharpsburg, Georgia, for over twenty-two years has provided a precious opportunity to minister God's truth while becoming refined by it. I am grateful to God for the wonderful Christian brothers and sisters in the church whom I have served alongside of throughout these years. Anna Maupin, a church member before Lynn and I arrived, was especially helpful with her early editorial work on this book.

Much of the material forming the content of this book originated from my doctor of ministry program at The

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the area of biblical spirituality. The professors Don Whitney, Michael Haykin, and Joe Harrod all helped me with their investments of wonderful lectures, meaningful assignments, and personal time. The program was a shot of spiritual vitality into my long-term pastorate. I especially appreciate Don's personal encouragements and suggestions throughout this work.

I am grateful to Joel Beeke, Jay Collier, and the staff of Reformation Heritage Books for their desire to see the message of this book broadcast to the wider body of Christ. Special thanks goes to Annette Gysen for her excellent editorial work.

My precious wife, Lynn, and our children, Charissa, Danielle, Chloe, and Josiah, have patiently supported their busy husband and dad throughout this book project. I thank God for the grace He has given to our family as we seek to serve Him and love one another, and to have a great time doing both. Thank you for your encouragements, sacrifices, patience, and love. May He help us to excel still more in love.

Chapter 1



Why This Issue Is Important for You

Imagine if you had the opportunity to spend an afternoon with an expert in an area in which you really could use help. Or, what if a famous PGA golfer hits the brakes in front of your house after he notices your tragic efforts at swinging a golf club? He then climbs out of his car with an offer of personal instruction. What if you need a money makeover and Dave Ramsey happens to call you to get together to plan your path to financial freedom?

Now—and I'm just making this up—suppose that when your personal expert finally appears, his breath is awful. As he blows his much-needed wisdom at you, the garlic cloves in your cupboard start to shrivel up and die. Is it possible that this person actually digested a skunk? No matter how good and necessary the content of his conversation, you no longer want to hear it. You need space. You need oxygen. The message may be clear and good for your ears to hear, but your nose wants nothing to do with it.

Sometimes we have some important things to say to our Christian brothers and sisters, but the way we say it directly affects the way they receive our message. Sharing your

message with harshness, a critical spirit, a condescending attitude, anger, or even a scowl is like communicating wonderful things with terribly bad breath. The person you are talking to could completely miss out on the benefits of your message simply because of the way you deliver it.

God cares about more than just the words you say. He also cares about how you say those words. It is not enough always to say the truth; you must also say the truth in love. The Lord Jesus Christ provides the greatest model of a person with zeal both to know and to apply the truth of God. Although He knew the truth better than anyone who ever lived, He was never guilty of selfishly showing off His understanding of the Scriptures. While He used the Word of God to correct and admonish others who needed it, His necessary corrections came accompanied with virtues such as love, gentleness, and kindness. These virtues can be summarized as graciousness. The apostle John describes Jesus as “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). For zealous Christians to faithfully follow their Lord, they must pursue God’s truth in their minds and practice, but they must also intentionally cultivate graciousness in their hearts and lives.

The first decades of the twenty-first century have seen a massive revival of the study of the Protestant Reformation’s theological teachings. In the late twentieth century, many evangelical pastors and church leaders were drawn primarily to pragmatic conferences and read a diet of devotional and practical Christian titles. Today, however, attendance at Christian conferences, especially those that feature distinctively theological and in-depth biblical messages, has now swelled to the thousands. Publishers are springing up to produce more and more theological and biblical books to satisfy

the appetites of hungry readers. The demand for expositional sermons and even Reformed theological lectures online has multiplied, too.¹ This increased appetite for biblical and theological truth among Christians all over the world positively reflects more of the Bible's ideals for Christians and churches. These new attitudes embody the heart of the psalmist, who wrote:

Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night. (Ps. 1:1–2)

The law of Your mouth is better to me
Than thousands of coins of gold and silver....

How sweet are Your words to my taste,
Sweeter than honey to my mouth!...

Therefore I love Your commandments
More than gold, yes, than fine gold! (Ps. 119:72, 103, 127)

We who value the Bible's importance in Christians' lives rejoice at the new zeal for God's truth throughout the Western world. According to the Bible, zeal for the truth is

1. These trends have been traced in John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010); Colin Hansen, *Young, Restless, and Reformed* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008); Jeremy Walker, *New Calvinism Considered* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2013); and Mark Oppenheimer, "Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2014, sec. U.S., accessed November 13, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/04/us/a-calvinist-revival-for-evangelicals.html>.

a vital part of a faithful Christian's life. God has given His Word to reveal Himself to His creatures, and it is the means by which people see their sinfulness and need for the Savior. God's Word has all that Christians need for life and godliness as they grow with respect to their salvation (2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Peter 1:3–4). Is it enough, however, for faithful believers to be merely zealous for God's truth?

The Christian life must be filled with an increasing knowledge and application of biblical truth. Christians who have accurate knowledge of the Bible and theology yet have not thoroughly applied that knowledge to their own hearts, however, may become swollen with pride (1 Cor. 8:1). Many young Christians who discover Reformed theology for the first time enter what has been called the "cage phase." In their first months of being convinced of correct doctrine, these passionate Christians tend to use their new understanding of God's truth to impress, crush, or coerce those around them and should be put into a cage until the phase passes. They are using their newfound knowledge of the truth like a club to assault those around them who have different understandings of the Bible. Although it may have taken these zealous Christians years to understand a point of theology and advocate it as a conviction, they impatiently and aggressively challenge those who delay agreeing with them. In a contemporary expression of Reformation theology, authors Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones describe the Bible's teachings about God's sovereignty over man's salvation. They advocate the proper application of these teachings as humility and grace, but they confess that they have been guilty of expressing the truth with more zeal than love. "At times Calvinists—the two of us included—have defended these five points about grace in ways that showed

little grace toward fellow believers. And for that, it's time to repent. Calvinism for the sake of Calvinism is not worth fighting for—but grace is always worth fighting for.”²

Some suppose the antidote to the truth zealots' harsh tones is a lesser love for the truth. Instead of fighting for truth, we should ignore theological distinctiveness and all get along, they advocate. But the truth of the Bible is manifestly so important for the believer's grasp of the identity of the Creator God—His character, His ways, and His will for humanity—that he or she cannot love truth too much. The Lord Jesus Christ proves to be the ideal to which Christians must strive. While Jesus knew God's revealed truth like no other person, He never used God's truth in inappropriate ways. His graciousness always matched His knowledge of the truth.

In 1 Corinthians 13:1–3, Paul uses hyperbole to emphasize the profound importance of Christian love. In three overstated examples, Paul moves from extreme high to extreme low to demonstrate the importance of love:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

2. Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones, *PROOF: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 137.

According to the apostle, a person can fluently speak the language of angels, know all spiritual mysteries, and sacrifice all that they have for others, but if those extreme virtues don't also come with corresponding love, they accomplish nothing, they count for nothing, and that person is nothing. Love is that important to the Lord.

What is the real antidote to the crisis of truth zealots who verbally club people over the heads with their Bibles? The rich contents of the Bible must work through their minds and down into their hearts and lives. In his epistle, James says, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). The Bible tells us about God and His ways—that God is loving and kind and all His followers should be loving and kind as well. Christians must put that truth into action. They cannot love in the ways God wants them to apart from the truth, but they must never try to separate God's truth in their minds from God's love in their lifestyles. The Bible describes the graciousness antidote that zealous Christians are to pursue.

While much has been said in both practical and technical works about the importance of Christians cultivating graciousness, there is a notable absence of practical instructions for Christians to work out this grace in their lives. The purpose of this book is to address that issue.

The faithful Christian life cannot be lived merely with zeal for truth but must also cultivate corresponding graciousness. This book will describe graciousness biblically and demonstrate its essential place in the hearts of faithful Christians. Doing so will involve the study of positive examples and commands about graciousness as well as the negative consequences for those who lack grace. Also included in this book

is a wide variety of practical methods for cultivating graciousness in the Christian life. This will equip Christians who are passionately committed to truth to put on a corresponding Christlike heart of graciousness.