

# Southern Baptist Convention Sermon

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### “The Quest for Balanced Truth”

John 1:14-17

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#### Introduction

John's prologue to his Gospel stands not just as the introduction to the fourth Gospel, not even as a magnificent monument to truth; it primarily presents an insightful portrait of our Lord Jesus Christ that is exceedingly pungent and to the point of current need, especially the need of Southern Baptists. John, describing Jesus, declared in verse 14, "And we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." That's the Lord Jesus Christ, filled to the full of truth. Most important! Truth is powerful, mightier than the sword: it changes lives, transforms societies, collapses citadels of self and Satan. Paul calls it "The Sword of the Spirit." It cuts, convicts, converts, and comforts. Truth is a coveted commodity. We *must* hold to it. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther complained that the vacillating Erasmus held, "It matters not a scrap what anyone believes anywhere, so long as the world is at peace."<sup>1</sup> In reaction, the non-vacillating Reformer said, "Take away (theological) assertions, and you take away Christianity."<sup>2</sup> We are compelled by our faith to *contend for truth* at all costs. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the "Prince of Preachers," compassionate philanthropist, and marvelous writer, knew well the personal power of truth. He clung to his convictions tenaciously—and found their stabilizing strength. But, he had rheumatic gout, and that generic malady can thrust one into a spirit of doubt, frustration, and serious depression—depression that spilled over into his spiritual life.

Spurgeon found himself in that sort of state on one occasion. Firm Calvinist he was notwithstanding, his depression caused him to doubt seriously his own salvation. In the midst of that disquieting situation, he went to a little church to worship. The pastor, practically an unknown, took to the pulpit and preached a marvelous sermon. It was one of Spurgeon's own messages, and the plagiarizing preacher preached it virtually verbatim. The theme of the sermon centered on "the assurance of faith." It deeply

touched the "Prince of Preachers." He said, "I made my handkerchief wet with my tears." He went on to declare that the wonderful biblical truth on assurance came home to his heart, and he knew he did possess Christ and had been genuinely converted. The Lord gave him marvelous reassurance from the truth that fell from the lips of that quite unknown pastor. After the service Spurgeon went up to the preacher and told him how the sermon had touched his life. Now the pastor did not know who the famous visitor was. He asked the visitor's name. Spurgeon said, "My name is Charles Haddon Spurgeon." Charles described the next few moments of the pastor's embarrassment. Spurgeon said, "The preacher turned all manner of colors." The pastor sputtered out, "Oh, Mr. Spurgeon, that was your sermon. I purchased it and I preached it. Oh, I am so sorry, I am so sorry, sir. That was your sermon." But listen to Spurgeon's reply to the embarrassed preacher. "Yes, I know. But wasn't it gracious of the Lord to feed me with the food I had prepared for others." The truth did it. God's timely truth is transforming. As the poet put it:

Where childhood needs a standard  
Or youth a beacon light,  
Where sorrow sighs for comfort  
Or weakness longs for might,  
Bring forth the Holy Bible,  
The Bible! There it stands!  
Resolving all life's problems  
And meeting its demands.

In John's Gospel, the writer speaks much about that quality and power of truth. It seems to emerge on almost every page of the fourth Gospel. And rightly so, without truth, God's truth, we are lost. However, it is most important to note that rarely do you find in John's Gospel truth merely "hanging by itself," as it were. Almost invariably truth is coupled with some other spiritual reality. For John, bare truth alone does not seem adequate for the Christian.

#### I. Grace and Truth

The first classic case of the principle is lodged in the passage already presented. John tells us Jesus was not only full of truth, He also overflowed with *grace*. He was "full of *grace* and truth." Of course, we are all on a search for truth, and rightly so. And you may immediately retort, "I know very well what I believe to be true." I hope you do know what you believe. You should have arrived at some convictions. God's biblical truth is central to life itself. Seek it. Cling to it. It changes lives, it gives assurance, it is the basis of knowing God and reality. But there is more: a "coupling," if you will. And the principle is perfectly presented in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ; He was "full of *grace*" as well as truth. This clearly implies God's truth must be permeated with God's *grace* to precipitate a God honoring theology, not to mention a Christ exalting life.

Let me share a testimony. The longer I live and study God's Word and attempt to walk with Jesus Christ, and thus get a firmer grasp and understanding of the truth of God, the more the basic foundational facts of the faith come alive and take on a deep

richness. The simple Gospel of our Lord: His life, death, resurrection, and His proffered salvation, all take on increasing meaning and glory. As the hymn writer expressed it,

I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love. I love to tell the story; 'tis pleasant to repeat, What seems each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet.

Just to know Christ and realize one's sins are forgiven is "wonderfully sweet." But there is a "companion" to those divine fundamental truths that makes such an experience so. The word is "grace." "Grace and peace be unto you," Paul stated in every Epistle, no exception. The heart of the simple, yet utterly profound Gospel is "by grace you are saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The grace of God stands out in bold relief on every page of the Bible, right along side the truth of the Gospel. Actually, you cannot separate grace and Gospel.

Ah, the wonderful grace of God! How can one describe it? It glitters like a beautiful jewel with many Spirit carved facets, each one reflecting a different light of truth and reality glorifying the sovereign God. It is saving grace. It is redeeming grace. It is adopting grace. It is regenerating grace. It is liberating grace. It is, as our Baptist forefathers described it, free grace. Grace is how God relates to us in all affairs. Pastor and hymn writer Robert Robinson had it right when he wrote:

Oh to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy grace, Lord, like a fetter,  
Bind my wandering heart to thee.

That grace is fully epitomized in Jesus Christ. He did something so utterly magnificent and inscrutable on Calvary that only *grace* can adequately describe it. That's where ultimate reality really resides; in the grace of God. One's entire personal encounter with God rests on the foundation of grace. And grace is, perhaps above all, *relational*. That is to say, grace is personally relational: between God and you and me—between "persons." To put it all in a word, people matter to God as well as truth. We can write bare truth. We can speak unvarnished truth. We can even declare facts on television. But for truth to come alive, even God's truth, it must be permeated with grace. The two must always co-exist together. Grace is the personal God giving Himself personally to us as persons. How then can we do less in our inter-personal relationships? How can we as Christians relate to each other on any basis other than grace?

There are significant reasons why the "grace and truth principle" must be actualized in life. If you let truth hang by itself without grace, you will soon slip into formalism, scholasticism, and if you're not exceedingly careful, into depersonalizing, legalistic Phariseism. A perfect example of the spirit of the Pharisee is recorded in John's Gospel, chapter 5. You will recall that at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus touched and healed a paralytic who had laid there as an invalid for thirty-eight miserable years. Jesus looked at the pitiful man and said, "Get up, pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8).

The paralytic was instantaneously and miraculously healed as he leapt to his feet. As the healed man went walking away, rejoicingly carrying his mat, the Pharisees accosted him and said, "It is the sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat" (John 5:10). But he

replied, "The man who made me well after thirty-eight miserable years said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk'" (John 5:11).

One can well imagine that which struck awe in practically everyone who witnessed the scene up to this point centered in the fact that here stood a 38-year-old paralytic who had been gloriously healed. How inconsequential and how utterly insignificant was the mat. But not for the mean, ungracious Pharisees. They asked the question in verse 12, "Who is this fellow that told you to pick that mat up and walk?" Imagine, they were not concerned about the man's miraculous healing or that a life had been touched and transformed by the grace of God in Christ. All their concern revolved around the fact that he had broken some minor point of their interpretation of the Law. Gracious truth would have asked, "Who was this wonderful person that healed you?" But no, the Pharisees asked, "Who told you to pick up your mat and walk?" The mat of straw meant more to them than the man of new strength. People did not really matter to them. That is Phariseism. That is truth without the permeating influence of divine grace. God's grace causes one to see the importance of people as well as truth. Remember, "the law came by Moses, but *grace* and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

Of course, if you let grace hang alone, your grasp of truth may be so uncertain that you slip into a superficial, subjective, non-definable existentialism. That too is an error and perversion of real Christianity. Truth truly counts. You must bring together the objective truth of God and His matchless relational grace. Keep the balance. Only then will your experience of truth and grace be mature and Christ-like.

Forgive the reference to Spurgeon again, but he has an insightful comment on John 1:17, "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Listen to what he said, "When it was demanded of Moses to prove whether or not he was sent by God, he took the wonder working rod in his hand and achieved marvels. But they were all miracles of judgment, not of mercy. Moses, the type of the law, had his credentials in judgment. How different from Jesus. He is full of grace and truth, and the seals of his ministry must be acts of mercy and kindness. He turned the water, not into blood, but into wine. He slays not their fish, but multiplies a few small fish and feeds thousands with them. He does not smite their wheat with hail, but he multiplies their bread and gives them many blessings. He sends no boils, but he heals their sicknesses. Instead of striking the first-born dead, he heals the dying and rescues from the grasp of death some of those who have even gone down to the grave! Moses came to show how the holy should behave. Jesus comes to reveal how the unholy may be cleansed." Our Lord was full of truth *and* grace.

Of course, the world wants to know what you believe about Jesus Christ and the truth of God's Word. But it also wants to know if you are *like* Jesus. Only a balanced commitment to God in grace and truth can make you like our Lord, who was—and is—"full of grace and truth." Simply put, you not only cling to truth, you relate to others in grace if you would exemplify Christ. One without the other becomes a travesty of Christianity. We are to cling to the truth and be gracious to *all* people, regardless of who they are—or what they believe. You are never to compromise truth, but you are never to be ungracious. People matter to God and they should matter to us. Put a premium on truth *and* people. Southern Baptists need to know that.

## II. Sanctification and Truth

Secondly, look at the real Lord's prayer, not that found in the Sermon on the Mount, but in John 17, which has been rightly called

the high priestly prayer of our Lord. In verse 16 of John 17, Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them through thy truth." There's truth again. Very important! Jesus or John would not let it be relegated to a secondary role. We must learn the right things, believe the right things, declare the right things, and minister the right realities. Defend the truth! Ah, but *God's truth* must be coupled with sanctification. Actually, in one sense, that is the end purpose of truth. God intends His truth to eventuate in sanctification.

The word John uses in recording our Lord's prayer is *Agiōs*, translated many times in the New Testament: *holy*. Simply put, holiness becomes the central goal of truth. We read in Hebrews 12:14, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." Thus our quest for truth should be bound up in a quest for holiness.

Now I am not talking about a superficial, "syrupy piety"; I am talking about a holy, godly life-style. I am talking about a mature piety. I am talking about ordering one's life like the Lord. Peter said, quoting even the Law, "Be ye holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). Granted, all regenerate believers are sanctified *positionally*. That is a glorious reality, but it is not enough. We are to be pragmatically sanctified, that is, made more *holy* every day. We are in covenant with a holy God. There are, therefore, some things God's holy people do not do. There are some things they do not say. There are some attitudes they do not entertain. There are relationships they do not foster. God's truth prohibits some actions.

But there are also positive things to practice if one aspires to be holy. Sanctification is upbeat, if you will. Why have some seemingly made shipwreck in holy living? They have forgotten the positive, disciplined aspects of holiness. For example, they pray but little. A recent Gallup Poll tells us the average Christian prays 3 minutes a day, the average pastor only 7 minutes. Too many believers only spasmodically open the Word of God to permit the Holy Spirit to speak to them. Of course, their word of witness is all but silenced. Incredible! This is sanctification? This is holiness?

This is spirituality? These are citizens of the "holy nation," to put it in Peter's words? This is the end result of truth? There are holy disciplines in the quest for truth, as well as negative prohibitions. The Holy Spirit, the great Sanctifier would have us go after holiness as well as correct theology. The Bible always puts them together.

Paul invariably saw truth resulting in godliness. In 1 Timothy 6:3-6 he said, "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strife of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railing, evil surmising, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, from such withdraw thyself. . . godliness with contentment is great gain." The Apostle told the Colossians in chapter 3, verse 10, that "true knowledge" is moral and ethical as well as theological. A true grasp of biblical truth sanctifies one's life. In the great Downgrade Controversy that rocked British Baptist life in the last century, the contenders for orthodoxy were as concerned over the "downgrade" in holiness as they were about theological erosion that had permeated the churches and institutions. The Bible and history constantly attest to such a concern. A real contender for Christian truth becomes a Christlike, holy person.

### III. Freedom and Truth

Then, in John 8:32, Jesus said, "You shall know the truth." What shall the truth then do? "Set you free," our Lord declared. Christ put a high premium on freedom. Ah, freedom! Everyone seems to be struggling for it. Have we not seen a dramatic demonstration of such a struggle these past two years in Eastern

Europe as the Iron Curtain crumbled into the dust of history? It has been a marvelous time for Eastern Europeans. Freedom, the first real breath of it, has come to the Communist countries after decades of oppression. The truth is what set them free. That's wonderful. And all that is not to mention the personal, inner freedom our very souls demand. In the Christian experience, freedom always comes hard on the heels of biblical truth. They are inseparably coupled.

Now, seeking freedom implies there must be bondage somewhere. Therefore, what does Christ, by the truth, liberate us from? Very simple! He frees us from self, Satan, sin, the world, and here's one for Southern Baptists, carnal ambition: climbing up the ecclesiastical ladder, usually at somebody else's expense. May I be quite pointed here? I do not think bare orthodox theology *per se* is going to move the Southern Baptist Convention dramatically ahead, as vital as orthodoxy is. Other qualities are needed as well. But I'll tell you what I feel can well ruin us—ambition: old, down to earth, fleshy, almost at times demonic, ambition. But by the truth, Christ sets us free from all those degrading and freedom robbing things and thus focuses our gaze upon the Savior rather than on one's own self.

Moreover, the truth sets us free to come to know the Father intimately. Christian freedom is more than freedom from sin, it is freedom to become all God intends us to become by His liberating power. The real challenge is, in all our learning, learn about Him personally and dynamically. There is a subtle, yet very real difference between God's truth and God Himself. Of course, knowing the Lord personally is not the antithesis of grasping objective truth. There is no polarization, but there is a distinct difference between the objective and subjective aspects of truth. You see, one can be very orthodox and not truly know Jesus Christ well at all. God's truth is designed to free one up to know and daily experience Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus said in His priestly prayer, "And this is eternal life, that they may *know thee*" (John 17:3).

A famous old preacher was once scheduled to speak to a large gathering. He was well-known and the people sat in rapt attention expecting a great message. He was a "Father in Israel" and deeply respected by all. But at the moment of his message he felt so ill and weak he just could not preach. Still, the crowd prevailed on him, so he hobbled up to the pulpit and simply said, "I glad that I know God," and sat down. That's it! That's what people want to see. They want to see these who truly know God! They want to see God; and they want to see Him in us. And we are free to come to know Him dynamically. A *real* grasp of God's liberating truth places us right there.

### IV. Spirit and Truth

Finally, Jesus described the Holy Spirit in John's record of our Lord's great discourse between the Last Supper and Gethsemane (John 14-17) as the "Spirit of Truth" (John 16:13). Truth, we must have it, but also the Spirit. Thus, these two, the Holy Spirit *and* truth, can never be divided. The truth of God is always to be administered by the "Spirit of Truth." To separate the two is to sail on a surging sea of uncertainty. Our ark of truth can never survive the deluge of deception unless guarded by the Holy Spirit. And what does the Spirit of Truth do with God's truth? Through it He gives life to the lost. Jesus said in John 6:63, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life." Truth is spiritual and very personal; Jesus said, "I am the way, *the truth* and the life" (John 14:6). It was the personal Holy Spirit of truth, bearing witness to our personal spirit, using the truth of the Gospel, that brought us to Christ initially. We simply cannot come to Christ through our own personal volition or knowledge. I once heard a Jewish rabbi elucidate the Gospel as clearly as one who had gone

through any Christian witness training program. But he was as lost as any unbeliever. Jesus said in John 6:44, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him." It takes the personal work of the Holy Spirit using the personal truth of Christ to effect personal salvation. That raises the question, are you "filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18).

Further, the Holy Spirit by the truth produces His fruit in the redeemed Christian. And what is the essential fruit of the Spirit? Love! (Galatians 5:22). In Colossians, the Apostle speaks of "love in the Spirit" (Colossians 1:8). The final test, you see, is not how much you believe or how much you know or even how orthodox you see yourself to be, as important as these things are—and you should not let them slip. The final, ultimate test is how well you love. "They will know we are Christians by our love." Paul said, "Now abides faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

An old Christian gentleman lay dying in Edinburgh when a friend came into the sick room to say farewell. "I have just had three other visitors," said the dying man, "and with two of them I parted; but the third I shall keep with me forever." "Who are they?" the visitor asked. "The first was Faith, and I said, 'Goodbye, Faith! I thank God for your company ever since I first trusted Christ; but now I am going where faith is lost in sight.' Then came Hope. 'Farewell, Hope!' I cried. 'You have helped me in many an hour of battle and distress, but now I shall not need you, for I am going where hope passes into fruition.' Last of all came Love. 'Love,' said I, 'you have indeed been my friend; you have linked me with God and with my fellow men; you have comforted and gladdened all my pilgrimage. But I cannot leave you behind; you must come with me through the gates, into the city of God, for love is perfected in heaven.'"

Henry Drummond (no kin) was right when he entitled his classic little volume on love, "The Greatest Thing in the World." Jesus called love the greatest commandment upon which all the Law hangs. John said in Revelation 2:5 if we depart from our "first love," God will remove our lampstand from His presence. The Ephesian church had not departed from orthodoxy, or hard, sacrificial labor, they had just left their Spirit-born love and that is solemnly serious. Remember, the Holy Spirit of truth "sheds abroad in our hearts the love of God" (Romans 5:5). The centrality of love in the Scriptures is self evident.

But love is often misunderstood. It is exceedingly easy to slip into one of two extremes. There are those on the one hand who emphasize over and over, as John expressed it in his First Epistle, chapter 4, verse 12, "God is love." They immediately put a strong period after quoting John's dictum. They assume that nothing else matters, especially concerning the other characteristics and truths of God; thus becoming superficial and sentimental. They thus fill the role of the typical "bleeding heart." Their approach is so existential that nothing about holiness, judgment, sovereignty, and those other central characteristics and truths of God seem to matter. God is just love and everything else is perfectly alright and so the world goes on. But then on the other extreme the so-called "Bible thumpers" reside. They too agree with John that God is love. However, they do not put a period after John's statement; they put a comma and say God is love, *but!* Thus they justify all manner of unloving things as they tramp over people, and then use the other aspects of God's character as an excuse for such behavior. Thus they become legalistic. They wield the Bible as a bludgeon. But, the Word of God is not a club, it is a sharp, two-edged sword. How vital it is that we hear the prayer of Paul for all saints in Ephesians 3:12 when he interceded that the believers "might be rooted and grounded in love, comprehending with all the saints, what is the

breadth and length and height and depth and knowing (by experience) the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge."

Now this love must be understood as it relates to God in the *agape* sense. *Agape* stems from God alone. It is His primary characteristic. So it stands as vital that *agape*, self-giving love permeate our understanding, grasp, dissemination, and our stand for the truth. We must never forget, as Paul put it in the great love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling 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, and 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, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing." If our lives do not blossom out with the *agape* fruit of the Spirit, our quest for truth has failed, or at least fallen far short. Paul said, in a parallel passage, we are to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Of course, we must go after truth. It resides at the core of the Christian faith and everything that we are and everything we stand for. Paul said in I Timothy 1:3-5, "As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables . . . which minister questions." But notice how the Apostle went on in the same passage. "Now the end of the commandment is love out of a pure heart." If you fail to pursue and stand for truth, your life will be a travesty of your call. But, let it be permeated with love—yes with grace and holiness and freedom and the life giving Spirit of truth and love. Christian truth is practical and the very essence of life.

#### Conclusion

I must ask in closing, is your contention for truth permeated with grace; do you truly relate to people in grace, or are people just not important? Does your grasp of truth foster sanctification? Are you growing in holiness like Jesus? Has the truth of Christ set you free from all that would blur the image of holy God in your life? Above all, has the Holy Spirit of truth been able to bear the true, self-giving, *agape* love of God in your daily life? Bible truth does those things. Orthodox Christians believe and *live like that*.

In John 18:38, Pilate asked, "What is truth?" The answer is: truth resides in the person of Jesus Christ. Remember, John tells us He is "the way, *the truth*, and the life" (John 14:6). Thus we must, of necessity, cling to the truth and defend it against all error. No excuse can be found to gloss over heresy. But, grace, holiness, freedom, and love also emanate from the very personhood of our Lord. Therefore, in all your getting of truth, get these qualities as well. It just could be that people will see you as they saw our Lord—"full of grace and truth." I believe that is the balance the Southern Baptist Convention needs today. At least I fully confess, that is what I need, and I venture to be so bold as to say, that is probably what many of us need. And surely the world is waiting to experience just that: the communication of the unequivocal Truth of God, ministered from a life of grace, holiness, freedom, and love. That beautiful blend may just bring about the revival we Southern Baptists sorely need, for that is real Christianity.

#### Endnotes

1 Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, (Old Tappan, N.J., Revell 1957), p. 69.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 67.