

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth.” John 1:14. We have been considering the implications of this verse as we start a new year. Since Jesus was full of grace and truth then it stands to reason that any follower who bears His name or any church that worships Him would be champions of grace and purveyors of truth. In fact, these are two of the vital signs of a healthy church. In spite of declining numbers, people still seek out churches for many reasons – to educate their children, to help with their marriages, to find friends who share their values, to be inspired and find some hope in a scary world. But the two common denominators of healthy churches are grace and truth.

In the 1970's an experiment called Fellowship Bible Church was conducted by Dr. Gene Getz who was leading a group of people who were living out the practical application of ancient biblical practices. In his book, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, Dr. Getz pointed out that, “The church exists to carry out two functions, evangelism and edification.” These two priorities are based on the Great Commission, “Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Mt. 28:18-20. In the first four books of the NT Jesus goes about inviting the multitudes to follow Him and to accept God's gift of eternal life. That's called evangelism. Once you get past those first four books there are few instructions given to traveling Christ-followers regarding direct evangelistic efforts. The emphasis shifts to the corporate responsibility of local churches. “Opportunities to present the gospel of Christ were to grow naturally out of the saturation that took place in the community, saturation that reflected love and concern for all men. Life styles were to be so different and dramatically changed by Christ that unbelievers could not help but notice and inquire what made the difference.” Getz, p. 30.

In other words, the local church was to be a welcoming community who practiced hospitality to all people so that they could hear the gospel and see it lived out. Then they challenged one another to be a learning community growing in their understanding of God's unchanging truth. Welcoming and challenging. Grace and truth. Evangelism and discipleship.

These qualities were inspired by Jesus. As a champion of God's grace, **Jesus was highly welcoming**. Wherever He went people crowded around just to be close to Him. He touched the untouchable and sought the unreachable. He was criticized by the religious establishment for the kind of people He spent time with. He welcomed blind beggars (Bartimaeus) and rich tax collectors (Zaccheus). Lk. 18:35-19:10

He made astounding claims like, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Mt. 11:28-30

Any church that is serious about reflecting the nature of God will be a welcoming church. We serve a God who loves everybody. It's that simple. Everybody matters to God. Hospitality is making space for people you don't have to make space for. That's what God does. When you were lost in your sin and destined to spend eternity apart from God, He made space for you in His kingdom and did for you what you could never do for yourself. He saved you. He didn't have to do that. It's called grace. And now we're part of a movement, the first movement of its kind that said, "We want to create a community where there is no more them. Everybody is invited to

be us." If you're wondering who's on the welcome team at our church, if you've been here for about three weeks, you're on the team. Grace is an invisible quality made visible when we welcome strangers.

As the embodiment of God's truth, **Jesus was also highly challenging.** Jesus did not appeal to potential followers by calling them to the least minimum requirements of discipleship. He didn't say to the rich, young ruler, "Keep your stuff. You'll be an inspiration to other rich, young rulers." He said, "Sell everything you have and come follow Me." He knew that this man's stuff was an impediment to his spiritual formation.

Jesus made it clear that following Him would not be easy. "And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.'" Mk. 8:34-35

Sometimes His teaching even scared people away like the exchange in John 6 when He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." Jn. 6:53-54. "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' Jn. 6:60. "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." Jn. 6:66

Followers of Jesus are passionately committed to the truth. We are not only a welcoming community but a learning community. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Jn. 8:31-32

Evangelism means extending God's grace to people, all people, wherever we live, work and play. Edification means pursuing the truth so that we grow in our understanding and devotion to Christ. If grace and truth provide convincing evidence for the presence of God, then every church should be grace and truth specialists.

Now let me show you how our application of grace and truth impact those around us. Chart...

Low grace, low truth - the cultural Christianity of Bible belt civil religion. These religious social institutions ignore the truth and define grace as being nice.

High grace, low truth - very welcoming congregations of unknowledgeable people who fall prey to "every wind of doctrine." "Grace-oriented Christians love forgiveness and freedom. But sometimes they neglect Bible study and see moral standards as "legalism." They're strong on grace, weak on truth." Alcorn, p. 17. They sometimes tolerate immoral behavior by saying, "We're about grace."

High truth, low grace - this is a church that measures maturity by how well you know the Bible. Visitors often feel unwelcome, like they just walked into the middle of the movie. Truth-oriented Christians love studying Scripture and theology. But sometimes they're quick to judge and slow to forgive. They're strong on truth, weak on grace." Alcorn, p. 17.

High grace, high truth - the closest expression to the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. This is the church I dream of...

Where grace leads to a welcoming environment and no one is excluded because of their appearance or their accent or their past.

Where truth leads to a learning community where we don't apologize for our belief in the word of God no matter how out of step we are with the world.

This is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, a day that tests our ability to demonstrate grace and truth. Can we show grace and love and compassion and understanding to those who are surprised by an unexpected or unwanted pregnancy while at the same time insisting on the truth that from conception all the ingredients of life are present in the womb? It is not a lump of tissue it's a child.

Can we be full of grace and truth? We don't have a choice. We must be if we are going to reflect the nature of God. People need God's infallible truth to know where to go but they also need God's empowering grace to help them get there. If we err on the side of grace we mislead people. If we err on the side of truth we dishearten people. Let's be full of grace and truth by being full of Jesus.