

Christian Hospitality: Truth and Love

2 John 1–4

Most sinners loved being around Jesus. They enjoyed His company, sought Him out, invited Him to their homes and parties. Today, most sinners do not want to be around Christians. Non-believers tore off the roof to get to Jesus. Sometimes, they crawl out of the windows to get away from us!

Why is that? What did Jesus show them that we don't? Love. People sensed that Jesus loved them. He drew non-believers out with love like light draws moths out of the night.

Some churches realize this and try to make this goal a reality in their churches. They say, "We want to draw people in the name of love," so they never talk about sin—never offend anyone. They replace truth with tolerance, lowering the bar so everyone can jump over it and so we can all feel good about ourselves.

But they are desperately missing it. Firstly, because Jesus did not show love this way, and, secondly, because Jesus drew people not with love only, but with love and truth. You cannot sacrifice truth on the altar of love; nor can you sacrifice love on the altar of truth.

Do you see truth and love as opposite ends of the spectrum? Most people view truth as firm and love as agreeable.

I have met a lot of intolerable people who claim to walk under the banner of Christianity, but they are missing the love of Jesus. The detestable, despicable manner in which they proclaim truth is lacking love.

You show me unloving people, and I will show you people who have never truly seen God's love for themselves. They have never experienced it. There is no grace in their life toward others.

Here are two principles from Randy Alcorn that should guide us in our study of hospitality:

- Something's wrong if all non-believers hate us.
- Something's wrong if all non-believers love us.

Love and truth do not simply co-exist; they are inseparable. You cannot truly have one without the other.

Some churches are very truth-driven. They are often marked by expository preaching, apologetics, and confronting error. All three of these things are good. Some churches are love-driven. They are often marked by justice ministries, caring for the homeless, counseling lots of people, and so on. Again, all of these things are good. The problem comes in when you exalt one above the other.

Some churches today embrace truth, but need a heavy dose of love. Other churches talk about love, but cry out for a heavy dose of truth.

The gospel flies on two wings: love and truth. Birds need wings to fly. With only one wing, they are grounded. So is a church. A church will not fly with the gospel to their neighbors or to their city unless it goes on the wings of love and truth.

Jesus wasn't 50% love and 50% truth. No, He was fully love (100%) and fully truth (100%).

If you err, to which side do you lean? Are you most likely to be a truth-oriented Christian or a love-oriented Christian?

- Truth oriented Christians feel affection for studying Scripture and theology. But sometimes they're quick to judge and slow to forgive. They're strong on truth, weak on love.
- Love oriented Christians feel affection for forgiveness and freedom. But sometimes they neglect Bible study and see moral standards as legalism. They're strong on love, weak on truth.

Most of the mistakes in your marriage are the result of a failure to balance love and truth. Most of the failures in parenting are the result of favoring truth over love or love over truth. A lot of problems in the church could be traced back to this failure as well—sometimes promoting one with the exclusion of the other or sometimes just neglecting both.¹

Transition: The little book of 2 John stands upon two legs: truth and love. Truth and love make up the theme of the book. Here is the initial reality we face in the first two verses:

¹ Much of the introductory material is adapted from Randy Alcorn, *Grace and Truth Paradox: Responding with Christlike Balance* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2003), 17–20.

1. We love one another in truth (verses 1–2).

2 John 1–2 says, “The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.”

This is the shortest letter in the English Bible. In the original language, there are only 245 Greek words.² In my Bible, it does not even take up a half of a page. John could fill up a book with what he wants to say, but he is keeping it short. He will give them the book version when he sees them in person (verse 12).

John is the anonymous writer of this letter. John does not refer to himself in any of his letters. You will remember in the Gospel according to John, he referred to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Here he refers to himself as the “elder.” This likely refers to his age. He was an aged man at this time. All of the other disciples had died. It also points to the fact that he was a respected leader. The definite article before the word elder indicates that he was very well-known. He was *the* elder.

He is writing to the elect (chosen) lady and her children. It is here that we must come to the text with humility. There is no reason to be dogmatic about the interpretation of who this lady was. Good men who have studied the Bible for years, throughout all generations of church history, have arrived at different conclusions. I want to make sure that I do not arrive at a strict, narrow view of who this lady was because, frankly, the Bible leaves this as a little grey area.

Here are two possibilities:

- The term *lady* could be used metaphorically and refer to a church. The elect lady’s children would be the members of the church. John is using personification here. This is the most popular view. In this view, the elect lady’s sister in verse 13 would be a sister church. Daniel Akin (President of Southeastern Seminary), Mark Dever (theologian and pastor in D.C.), Eugene Peterson (author of the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*), and John Piper all hold to this view.
- Others believe it was written to a particular lady (e.g., John MacArthur). I tend to lean in this direction because 3 John is written to a particular man. The only difference is that his

² 3 John is actually shorter in the Greek with 219 words.

name is mentioned.³ Both are also written in a classic Roman style of a personal letter.

This position seems to be the least problematic while reading the text through the lens of historical-grammatical interpretation.

Even though I have to intellectually arrive at this position, to be unbending is unnecessary and unwarranted. Whether John addressed it to one individual or to an entire church does not matter because God, through John, is addressing every church by placing it in the Scriptures. That means this letter is for our church.

John's love is rooted and grounded *in* the truth. He does not love strictly *in* emotion. Someone could have an emotional attachment to someone else and become accepting of error. John will not allow this to happen because his love is not rooted in feelings; it is rooted in the unchangeable truth.

A friend in the ministry named Tom (pseudonym) told me that one of his friends called him and said, "My daughter sat me down and had a talk with me." What did she say? Tom responded, "She told me, 'Dad, you have lost your filter. You are saying things that you would never have said before. It's hard for me to tell you this, but you have lost your intuition.'" Because she loved her dad in truth she had to tell him. Her love involved emotion, but it was grounded in truth.

In verse two, John is saying, "You love what I love: Jesus Christ." This is what a Christian community looks like in the end times. They have a mutual love for the truth—love that is grounded in the truth and is known by all who possess this truth.

I have a friend from Togo, West Africa. Sarah and I would often have him over to our home for lunch. Our conversations were always a little broken because I struggled to understand his English. Even though communication was slightly difficult, we had a common bond. The truth in me reaches out to the truth in him. The spirit of Christ in me bears witness with the spirit of Christ in him.

A Christian's life is meant to be lived in community. Not locking yourselves away in a closet with the truth, but going through life with others Christians together in truth.

Transition: When we love one another in truth and love . . .

³ It is interesting that Clement of Alexandra believed that *Eklektē* was this woman's name—a name we would translate as "Electa."

2. We experience the benefits of the truth and love life (verse 3).

2 John 3 says, “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.”

I look at John’s life and I see someone who matured in Christ the older he became. When he was young, he was quick tempered. He wanted to call down fire and brimstone on a city that would not allow Jesus to stay in a Holiday Inn Express. He and his brother were nicknamed “sons of thunder” by Jesus because of this incident. They thundered truth, but not love. John was heavy on truth and weak on love.

He writes this letter at the end of his life, and he is growing in Christ. Have you ever met anyone who became more and more bitter the older they became? Sometimes they are just unbearable to be around because they are constantly negative and spew out bitterness. That is not natural. When you possess truth and love, it does not result in that kind of behavior. The older you become, the sweeter and more forgiving you become, because that is what it looks like when Christ’s love matures in your life.

Truth and love have companions: grace, mercy, and peace. Typically, you will find a biblical writer beginning or ending a letter using the Greek greeting, “Grace and peace.” I will often sign my emails like that. Here, John uses grace, mercy, and peace. It is only used here and in 1 and 2 Timothy.

- Grace is God doing *for us* what we do not deserve—He gave us His Son.
- Mercy is God not doing *to us* what we do deserve—facing the wrath of God.
- Peace is God doing *in us* what we cannot deserve—calming our rebel hearts.⁴

Where do grace, mercy, and peace come from? They flow *from* the Father and *from* Jesus Christ. The repetition of the preposition *from* is important. It shows that God and Jesus are equal, yet distinct.

Transition: So let’s capture the flow of John’s writing: we love in truth, and then we experience the benefits of truth and love in our lives. Finally . . .

⁴ Adapted from Daniel Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1, 2, & 3 John* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2014), 154.

3. We *believe* truth and love and we *live* truth and love (verse 4).

2 John 4 says, “I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.”

The phrase “to find some of your children” speaks of a personal encounter with this woman’s children or, if you hold to the other interpretation, to certain members of the church. John is not necessarily saying he has seen other children not walking in the truth, but he is pointing out that he has definitely seen some that are.

In verse 4, we are commanded to walk in truth. In verses 5–6, we are commanded to walk in love. These are not two different paths—one path of love and one path of truth. No! they are the same path.

Walking is used as a metaphor for living. So when it says “walk in truth,” it’s saying “live in truth.” When it says “walk in love,” it means “live a life of love.”

Truth and love are not things that you just mentally affirm. You should not only *believe* truth and love, but *live* truth and love. Right thinking leads to right behavior. If you hold to a belief, it will always affect your behavior. Your creeds affect your conduct. Vance Havner said it this way: “What you live is what you really believe. Everything else is just religious talk.”

I am going to ask you two questions. Why am I telling you that I am going to ask questions and not just ask the questions? Because I want you to open your heart and allow these questions to rest on your spirit.

- The love question: Why did sinners want to be around Jesus, but they don’t want to be around us?
- The truth question: Why did sinners crucify Jesus, but have no problem with us?

Truth without love breeds self-righteous legalism that poisons the church and pushes the world away from Christ. Love without truth breeds moral indifference and keeps people from seeing their need for Christ.⁵

Conclusion

Which is more dangerous: lacking truth, or lacking love? If you were to falter, which side do you think would cause the least amount of damage?

⁵ Alcorn, *Grace and Truth Paradox*, 17.

The truth is that both are equally dangerous. Both are an all-out assault on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was full of love; that's why He did not condemn the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus was full of truth that's why He drove those greedy for money out of the temple.

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