

# A Passion for God's Glory

## John 1:14

By Phil Johnson

There's no shortage of passion in the world today—but for the most part it is utterly misplaced passion: Passion for all the wrong things. The wrong *kind* of passion.

The one pervasive passion that most seems to dominate the world today (especially in the realm of politics and power) is *anger*. It's a destructive anger, too, usually driven by greed, a lust for power, or some other self-interest. That's a perfect example of the wrong *kind* of passion. The world is full of "**the wrath of man[, which] worketh not the righteousness of God**" (James 1:20). No wonder terrorism is one of the biggest threats in the world today. This worldwide glut of anger also explains why (even in a democratic country like ours) the political process is so dysfunctional and divided. Despite all the talk we hear about peace and brotherhood, it often seems as if anger has become the main driving passion in the affairs of men and nations.

There's plenty of *positive* passion in the world today, too, but it seems like whatever good feelings there are in this world are mostly reserved for trivial things—sports, entertainment, recreation, and the pursuit of personal happiness. We're *expected* to be deliriously excited about things like that; and we're generally discouraged from taking serious things seriously.

In fact, it's one of the supreme ironies of our culture that devotion to God is generally seen as a sign of serious imbalance. An earnest worshiper of God may even be regarded by society as a deranged person—especially if he declares his faith. But you can be as fanatical as you like about your favorite sports team; *you can be wholly obsessed with some celebrity or pop star you have never even met*; or you can thoroughly immerse yourself in some mindless fantasy game—and no one bats an eye. Celebrity

worship is the real religion of our culture. In fact, dead celebrities in particular have the very same status in our culture as the mythological Greek gods who filled the pantheon of Rome in the first century.

So there's no shortage of passion in modern society. It's just the wrong kind of passion, and passion for all the wrong things.

If there's one thing we *ought* to be passionate about, it's the glory of God. There is no greater reality in all the universe. There is nothing more worthy of our deepest, most heartfelt emotion than God's glory. This is the very end for which we were created: to relish the glory of God, to reflect that glory, and to rejoice in the privilege of basking in and declaring that glory to the world. The very first answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism says it like this: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."

The glory of God, of course, is one of the central themes of Scripture. God's glory features prominently in all the major eras of Old Testament history. You have the visible Shekinah cloud that led the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years. You have the visible reflection of God's glory that made Moses' face shine when he came down from Sinai. You have the vivid descriptions of divine glory around the heavenly throne in Isaiah 6, and then again in Ezekiel 1 and 10.

All those passages in the Old Testament mention the visible, palpable splendor of God's glory. And of course, the beauty of divine glory is not conducive to verbal descriptions. It is indescribable, unimaginable, and mysterious. Ezekiel's account in particular is a breathless narrative about bright lights, amazing angelic creatures, lightning flashes, intricate, interconnected wheels with countless eyes and sparkling facets like awesome crystal and colorful gemstones. It was a stunning vision, and (speaking of passion) it provoked terror, astonishment, unspeakable awe, great affection, and deep humility in Ezekiel.

As we read Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 10 without actually seeing what Ezekiel saw, it's impossible to envision the spectacle. The most popular New-Age theory is that Ezekiel was describing a massive UFO, like a scene out of "Close Encounters" or something. And of course, that's nonsense. I don't think any amount of special effects wizardry could accurately portray the majesty of what Ezekiel saw. The verbal description gives us only the barest hint of it. All that really comes through clearly is a sense of indescribable grandeur, beauty far beyond the reach of any human explanation, unfathomable radiance and infinite brilliance. It's a vision we cannot perceive from mere words, but between you and me if you can read Ezekiel's account of it and not have a passionate longing to see it with your own eyes, you must have a heart of stone.

It's clear from the Old Testament alone that *passion for the glory of God* is one of the key evidences of authentic faith. In fact, a yearning to see and perceive God's glory is perhaps the *truest* expression of saving faith and genuine love for God. I can't wait to see the full display of God's glory with my own eyes. The thought of it frightens and intimidates me, but I want it more than anything in this world. That's the deepest hope of every true believer who thinks carefully about all that awaits us in heaven.

And that has always been the hope of true believers. Moses desperately wanted to see God's face. Even though he knew an unhindered look at the radiance of God would be fatal to him as a fallen creature, Moses *did* get to see some of the glory of God through a shielded view from behind. Only as that glory receded did Moses get a small glimpse, and the splendor of that little peek reflected with such a glow off Moses' face that the people of Israel were frightened for their lives when they saw how Moses' face shone. They begged him to cover it up with a veil.

David likewise longed to see God's glory face to face, and in Psalm 17:15, he said that was the one thing he knew would ultimately satisfy him. All his desires, all his longings, and the

object of his every passion lay in that one goal: he wanted an unhindered vision of the glory of God.

Man was *created* to enjoy and to reflect God's glory. Our race was supposed to be the perfect vehicle for God's likeness. We were designed to be living lanterns through which God's own glory would shine. That's what Scripture means when it says in Genesis 1:27: "**God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him**"

Sin marred the image of God in man and left us with a deep longing for what Adam lost. It's a longing that can *only* be satisfied by God's glory, and that is just another reason God's glory is the one thing in the universe that ought to enflame our deepest passions more than any other. In other words, not only is God's glory inherently worthy of all our affections, it's the very thing our affections were created for in the first place—and it's also the only thing that can ultimately *satisfy* our most basic urges and longings. A lot of this life's sins and frustrations would be eliminated if we could just bear that in mind.

One of the central truths of the New Testament is that the glory of God is now revealed to us in a better and different way that *won't* kill us if we look it straight in the eye. The fullness of God's glory is embodied in all its perfection in human form in the Person of Christ. Jesus is what Adam was designed to be—and more. He doesn't merely mirror the glory of God; He is the incarnation of it. He lets us see not merely a fading reflection of the divine glory; He personifies that glory in all its fullness.

Colossians 1:15: "**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.**" Second Corinthians 4:6: "**God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.**" Hebrews 1:3: Christ "**is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.**" And (2 Corinthians 3:18) "**We all, with unveiled face, beholding [in Christ] the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.**"

Now, consider how passionate those Old Testament saints were when they were privileged from time to time to glimpse visible manifestations of divine glory from behind veils—always in cloudy or shadowy form. We ought to be so much *more* passionate about the glory embodied in the Person and the character of Christ, because we can see that glory with no veil on our faces. We can study it, and enjoy it, and by the Holy Spirit's enablement, we can reflect it, and lift it up for the world to see. And that is what we ought to be most passionate about. Certainly it ought to stir our passions and our energies much more than some mud-spattered sports team whose only glory is worldly, meager, and always fleeting.

When we consider the glory of God, and especially when we realize how Christ is the very incarnation of that glory, it ought to put all our other passions in proper perspective. It ought to make us ashamed that we are not really passionate about the one thing that ought to excite us the most.

We imitate all the world's passions. We invent gimmicks to try to win worldly people by appealing to their worldly passions. We devote our energies and our emotions to things that are not even worthy of our attention. We do things to stir *artificial* passions—which is a form of false worship, no better than idolatry, really.

Our passions should not need to be artificially stirred up by spiritual cheerleaders and stadium chants. We shouldn't have to be worked into an emotional state by melodrama and musical manipulation. If we can get pumped to a fever pitch by some preacher's antics rather than by the truth of the biblical message, then whatever we are feeling isn't even a legitimate passion in the first place.

Someone sent me an article last week about a youth leader who likes to provoke his students to a state of screaming enthusiasm with gross-out games. The reporter described how this youth leader had a teenager with hairy armpits smear gobs of peanut butter on his underarms; then the youth pastor asked for

volunteers to lick it clean and swallow the peanut butter. The youth leader does stuff like that to "shock and astound." (Those are his exact words.) He told the reporter he does things like that all the time to get the students excited, so that they will talk about the church. He says he wants to start "a buzz that [will] go viral, [so] that teens [will] text and Twitter about [it]." I'm quoting directly from the article. Here's what the youth leader said about his strategy: "The idea is to get students here to meet our Savior. They are getting all this crazy stuff out there in the world all the time. We are trying to show them that God is cooler."

Now, that's obviously an *extreme* example, but it illustrates rather vividly the foolishness of trying to stir artificial passions by making God seem "cool" rather than simply uplifting His glory and letting the grandeur and majesty of our God move people's hearts to more legitimate expressions of deep passion.

That sort of artificial enthusiasm actually hinders (and in some cases totally nullifies) the message we're supposed to be proclaiming. With so many churches merely trying to entertain people, or lull them into a state of self-satisfaction, or simply gross them out, it's no wonder the world is not being won to Christ but actually becoming steadily more hostile to Christianity.

By the way, the passions stirred by a clear vision of God's glory aren't necessarily warm and comforting. It's not always a *good* feeling. In fact, it is much more likely that the first time someone catches a glimpse of God's glory, the result will be intense fear. "**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom**" (Psalm 11:10). Do a study on this in Scripture and take note of how people usually respond when they first see God for who He is. *They fall on their faces in sheer terror.* Almost every time.

God's glory also provokes profound amazement and wonder. Sometimes it's delight and rejoicing. (Peter fell on his face and confessed his sin when he first began to realize who Jesus was. But he sounded almost giddy when he saw Christ's glory unveiled on the Mount of Transfiguration.) All of those are legitimate

emotions, and if they are real, they will make a lasting difference in us.

(That, by the way, is another reason I tend to be skeptical of the artificial emotions provoked by modern charismatic worship. I once attended the evening service in a famous charismatic church when the so-called Toronto Blessing was at its height. The intensity of everything from the music to the preaching to the healing service was carefully orchestrated so that the entire service was one long crescendo. By the end of the evening, virtually everyone in the building was on the floor in one form or another, all of them supposedly brought to that state by a manifestation of divine power through a visitation of the Holy Spirit. But there was no sobriety in the occasion, because (of course) the driving passion in the Toronto Blessing was a kind of irrational, uncontrollable laughter. But what troubled me most was that the moment the service ended, so did the supposed visitation of the Holy Spirit. It was as if on cue everyone returned to earth instantly and every conversation immediately turned to worldly subjects. Walking back to my car, I passed a group of young couples who were gathering because they were going to see a movie afterwards. I overheard part of the conversation, and the movie they were planning to go see was "Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey." They chose that movie because one of the guys in the group had already seen it, and he said the depiction of hell in that movie was absolutely hilarious.)

Artificial religious passion is the bane of our age, and it's a powerful detriment to the church's testimony. On the other hand, if we really grasped and meditated on how the glory of God is revealed to us in Christ, we would never *need* any artificial gimmicks to stir our passions, and we certainly would never dream that we needed to try to make God seem "cooler" or more appealing than He actually is.

Tonight I want to take you to a single text that speaks of the incarnation of God's glory of God and describes for us in as few words as possible what that glory is like. It's a familiar verse in the first chapter of John's gospel—one most of you probably know by heart: John 1:14. It says, "**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.**"

"**The Word,**" of course, is Christ. He's both the starting point and the central focus of John's gospel. Unlike Matthew and Luke, John does not start his gospel with the human genealogy or the birth of Christ. He goes even further back—as far back as it's possible to go in eternity past—and starts in the same place as Genesis 1:1: "**In the beginning . . .**"—at the dawn of creation, that time before time. John is giving Jesus' divine pedigree; showing us that Christ is eternally God. In fact, John states his case as explicitly as possible: "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.**" This is the creator, the One who made every created thing and therefore by definition cannot himself be a created being.

The foundations of trinitarian doctrine are established by this passage, of course, and I don't need to defend the deity of Christ to most of you, I'm sure. But let's just note that this whole passage is a clear and unambiguous affirmation of the eternal deity of Christ. Not just the phrase "**The Word was God,**" but every proposition in that passage affirms the deity of Christ.

And John's main point in the extended passage is to declare that the glory of this Person whom he describes as "**the Word**"—the divine *logos*—is an innate, intrinsic glory. It's not a glory that was bestowed on Him. It's not a created glory. It is not a reflected glory. The *logos* possesses the glory of God Himself in all its fullness and ineffability. Verse 4: "**In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**" That's the eternal glory of God.



Then follows verses 6-8, which talk about John the Baptist, whose mission (it says) was (v. 8) **"to bear witness about the light."** To declare the glory of God in Christ. Christ is (v. 9) **"The true light, which enlightens everyone, [and John's mission was to announce that the Light] was coming into the world."**

Verse 11: **"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But . . . all who did receive him, who believed in his name"** were reborn, saved, delivered from the guilt and condemnation of their sin.

Now look at this: Everything from verse 6 through verse 13 is a digression. It's a *crucial* digression; this is John's first brief summary of gospel truth. But then in verse 14 John comes back to the point he started with. **"In the beginning was the Word"**—eternal God; the Creator; the eternal and only-begotten Son of God. **"He was in the beginning with God."**

Then verse 14 completes that thought and shows where John has been going from that first sentence: **"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."** You have heard, I'm sure, that the expression **"dwelt among us"** is from a Greek word that speaks of tent-camping. A literal translation could say *"he tabernacled among us."*

It's a fitting word-picture, because the glory of God *filled* the tabernacle in the Old Testament. Exodus 40:34-35, when Moses completed construction of the original tabernacle, Scripture says, **"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."** Likewise, when Solomon completed construction of the permanent Temple in Jerusalem, 2 Chronicles 7:1-2 says, **"As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house."** Likewise, in Ezekiel 10:4, when the prophet describes his vision of the inner

court of the heavenly tabernacle, he writes, "**And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD.**" Again in Ezekiel 43:5, Ezekiel says, "**The Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple.**" Then, jumping to the end of the New Testament, in the apostle John's apocalyptic vision of heaven, he says the same thing (Revelation 15:8): "**the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple.**" So whenever you have the presence of God in any tabernacle, the place is full of glory.

Christ's human body is a tabernacle enabling Him to dwell with men as a man Himself—yet without divesting Himself of any aspect of His divinity. Naturally, this tabernacle is full of glory.

But John describes glory of Christ in a distinctive way, and that's what I want you to notice: "**glory . . . full of grace and truth.**" There are three key words in that expression—*glory, grace, and truth*—and I want to spend some time with each one of them. Everything up to this point has been merely introduction. Now I want to get into the meat of this text, and we'll do it by considering (one at a time) each of these words: *Glory, Grace, and Truth*.

First—

## 1. GLORY

Now, I've already said quite a lot about this term *glory*, but I haven't even attempted to define it yet. John Piper, who has perhaps written more about the glory of God than anyone else in our generation, says the word is impossible to define. He says it's not like a basketball—something with precise dimensions that you can touch, and hold, and put in a box or even take a picture of. Piper says *glory* is like the word *beauty* in that we know what it is, but we find it impossible to express adequately in words. I agree. In fact, glory is an even bigger concept, and everything you could possibly say about true beauty is just one aspect of what we mean when we speak of the glory of God.

But Piper *does* set forth a kind of provisional definition of God's glory. It's short and to the point. He says, "*The glory of God is the infinite beauty and greatness of his manifold perfections.*"

It's pretty hard to improve on that, but as Piper said to begin with, the words don't really do justice to the concept. Scripture describes God as resplendent in His glory—unspeakably majestic, overpoweringly radiant, irresistibly powerful, consummately holy, exquisitely wonderful, and breathtakingly awe-inspiring. *Glory* is a shorthand word that gathers up and includes all that and more.

A glimpse of the glory of God is simply the most compelling, most amazing, most terrifying, and most beautiful sight human eyes could ever hope to see. God's glory is more moving, more exciting, and more powerful than any other stimulus that ever stirred the human heart. You can't think rightly about the glory of God without being moved with the deepest kind of passion. And frankly, in one way or another, the glory of God stirs just about every kind of passion you can name.

God's glory is everything we ought to love. It summarizes and incorporates everything that really matters from eternity past to eternity future. It's the only thing that makes this world and all its evil worth enduring. It's the one thing that makes sense of

everything else. It's what God created everything for in the first place, and it's where all creatures find their true and ultimate purpose.

We sometimes speak of "giving God glory." That's a biblical expression. Joshua 7:19: "**Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and give praise to him.'**" First Samuel 6:5: "**Give glory to the God of Israel.**" Isaiah 24:15: "**Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel.**"

That's a common expression. It doesn't mean we can add something to God's glory or increase the splendor of His glory in any way by something we do. To give God glory means to give Him praise. We "glorify God" not by making Him more glorious than He is. That would be impossible. We give Him glory by declaring His glory with our lips and by reflecting His glory with our lives.

There's a necessary aspect of humility involved in truly giving God glory. In Acts 12, Herod was stricken down, and he died a very sudden and horrible death in front of a crowd who were shouting his praise. He was immediately "**eaten by worms,**" according to Luke. I gather he was infected by some bubonic form of flatworms that incubate in larval form in a mass like a tumor. And sometimes when that mass of larvae bursts, it causes intense pain followed by a very quick death—sometimes within an hour or so. Acts 12:23 says this happened to Herod "**because he did not give God the glory.**" He tried to claim for himself glory that belongs to God. As Luke describes it, he was in the very act of accepting worship from his subjects as if he were God incarnate.

The very opposite of that, then, would be what it means to give glory to God: to declare God's glory; to acknowledge that God alone is worthy of all praise; to fear and yet to adore the grandeur of His glory; to praise him with our hearts and minds and lips; and to reflect His glory in the humble, obedient way we live our lives.

That is exactly how Christ manifested the glory of God as a man—except that instead of "reflecting" the glory of God, He literally embodied and radiated with that glory. As our text says, He was "**full of grace and truth.**" That's one of the reasons I believe in the impeccability of Christ. He *couldn't* sin—He *wouldn't* sin—because there was nothing in him that sin could appeal to. In John 14:30, Jesus Himself said, "**the ruler of this world . . . has nothing in Me.**" In Christ there was no evil motive, no sinful desire, no erroneous beliefs, none of our fallenness—nothing Satan could exploit against Christ, and no claim the devil could make against Him. He was quite simply "**full of grace and truth.**"

None of *us* is full of grace and truth—in fact, in our natural fallen state we are utterly devoid of both grace and truth—utterly dependent on the Spirit of God to supply those virtues for us. And only as we trust Him for that can we truly reflect His glory.

But here's what I want you to notice about this: There is a distinct difference between the many ways God's glory was manifest in the Old Testament and the way that glory is brought to us in the New Testament. The Old Testament manifestations of divine glory centered on the sparkle and spectacle of visible radiance. You have the cloud of shekinah glory, which illuminated the camp of Israel at night—and I presume that even in the daytime that same cloud shone with a peculiar radiance that made it unlike all the other clouds in the sky. You have the glow that lit up Moses' face in reflection that was so powerful it took time to diminish. You have the gemstones and wheels and crystals and lightning flashes in Ezekiel's vision. Everything the glory of God touches glows or shines or sparkles or flashes in some way. The stress is always on the visible radiance.

The other aspects of divine glory are all there, of course, but when you think of glory in the Old Testament, what stands out are the bright physical displays of visible divine luminescence. Glory is pictured as blinding, stunning, like the brightest conceivable light.

Of course, it's the very same *glory* in the New Testament, so even here in John 1 (and throughout the gospel of John), the divine glory is repeatedly spoken of as light—"The light of men" (v. 4). "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (v. 5). Christ Himself is "the true light, which enlightens everyone" (v. 9). But the *stress* here, it seems to me, is not on the literal, visible brilliance of physical light. The emphasis here is on spiritual light—that which enlightens us with grace and truth.

That in no way alters or diminishes the physical brilliance of divine glory, and on the Mount of Transfiguration, in one stunning moment during His earthly ministry, Christ pulled back the veil of His humanity and allowed Peter, James, and John to see the physical manifestation of that glory as He shone from head to foot with a glow that must have been impossible to stare at with eyes of flesh. Matthew 17:2 says, "He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light."

And when John says, "we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" I'm certain the glory of the transfiguration is a key aspect of the point he is making. He saw that glory in its fullness in a way most of the disciples weren't even privileged to see it.

By the way, the expression John uses here is a definitive affirmation of the deity of Christ. Christ's glory, John says, was the glory of God Himself. He calls it "**glory as of the only Son from the Father**"—and of course in that semitic culture, the full-grown son of a king was not of lesser stature than the king Himself. The king's son was treated with the same respect owed to the king, deemed one with the king and equal in stature. That's why in John 5, when Jesus calls God "My Father" verse 18 says "**the Jews [sought] to kill Him, because . . . [He] was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.**" The Jews would sometimes use the expression "our Father," because the Old Testament portrayed God as a father to Israel. But Jesus spoke of God as *His own Father*, which was a whole different matter.

And that's an important point of theology. John underscores it by saying the glory of Christ is "**glory as of the *only* Son from the Father**" (emphasis on the word *only*). The Greek term is *monogenes*—which means "one of a kind," or more literally and in King James terms, "only begotten." We're adopted sons of God, and He is our Father in that sense. Christ stands alone as the only-begotten Son of God. He is *eternally* begotten, not created or conceived. He is eternal, just as God is, but in some ineffable sense, eternally begotten of the Father and therefore eternally He stands in relationship to God as a one-of-a-kind Son.

All of that is wrapped up in what John is saying here, and His point is that the glory of Christ *is* the glory of God. He's not saying it's "like" God's glory, merely a reflection of God's glory, or some kind of lesser-but-similar glory. He is saying what Jesus Himself said to Philip in John 14:9: "**Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.**" Christ's glory is the glory of God, incarnated and put on display for us in human form.

But it is significant that what John describes in the next phrase is not the brightness of physical light or a glow like the brightness of the sun. He seems to bring out the moral beauty of God's glory more than the physical glow of it.

Here is John's description of the glory of God as seen in the incarnation of Christ: It's a "**glory . . . full of grace and truth.**"

Those, of course, are the other two key words we want to examine from this text. First *glory*. I have described the idea of divine glory to the best of my ability with human language in such a short time, and I confess to you that it falls far short of doing justice to the glory of God. But we must move on. First *glory*, now—

## 2. GRACE

I almost hesitate to break up this pair of words, because the linkage is important. Grace and truth always go together in Scripture. Grace, of course, is God's blessing freely bestowed on fallen sinners who deserve the exact opposite. Truth is reality as seen from God's perspective. More precisely (and I am borrowing a statement from John MacArthur's book *The Truth War*), "Truth is that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, and being of God. Even more to the point: Truth is the self-expression of God."

We tend to think of truth as something harsh and unyielding and grace as something tender and forgiving. The two words evoke such different ideas in our minds that we have a hard time bringing them together.

Still, as I said, those ideas are inextricably linked throughout Scripture. Try to divorce them and you destroy both concepts. Think of it this way: grace itself is an expression of God's character, so it cannot be in conflict with truth. And the reverse is true as well. Yet because the two words seem to contrast in so many ways, we want to classify them as rivals; treat them as competing values. And if we're not careful, we begin to think of them as incompatible virtues. In fact, there is an almost irrepressible human tendency to try to split the two ideas as if they were complete opposites, utterly hostile to one another.

You can hear that kind of thinking embodied in the rhetoric of the postmodern Emergent Church movement. In fact, I would say this is perhaps the defining characteristic of Emergent religion: it is an attempt to pit grace against truth. Emergents have elevated a twisted notion of grace practically devoid of any real concern for the truth. Emergent writings labor to portray grace as a virtue that should take precedence over truth—especially **sound doctrine**, *propositional truth-claims*, and even objectivity itself. It is common nowadays for people to characterize truth as something utterly hostile to grace and incompatible with it.



That's because they don't have a biblical notion of grace. Again, the term *grace* speaks of undeserved kindness and divine blessing sovereignly bestowed on undeserving sinners. It is the most benevolent and generous of all the divine virtues. But grace by definition is neither automatic nor universal. God is sovereign in the dispensing of His grace, and when God does show grace to sinners, one of the key benefits that comes with that blessing is the lesson described in Titus 2:12: Grace "**Teach[es] us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.**" And further (according to Titus 2:14) Grace "**redeem[s] us from all iniquity, and purif[ies us] unto [God].**"

So authentic grace is never apathetic about truth, and it certainly cannot be reduced to the idea of friendship with the world or camaraderie with the enemies of God. In other words, it *doesn't* mean always being nice and friendly, especially toward the sworn enemies of truth. Although Jesus was full of grace, He was not always tender and mild. (In fact, I'd say "mild" is probably one of the most inappropriate adjectives that has ever been applied to Christ.) But he was full of grace. Even His harshest public denunciations of the Pharisees had a gracious purpose. Those were life-giving words, and though the tone may have been stern or even angry, those were liberating diatribes—especially for those who had lived their whole lives in bondage to the Pharisees' legalism.

Now, here's an interesting fact, in all of John's gospel, the word *grace* appears only four times, and all of them are found in this short pericope that begins with verse 14 and ends with verse 17. Look at it. You have the word *grace* once in verse 14, twice in verse 16, and once more in verse 16. That's it. Outside those three verses, John never uses the word *grace* anywhere in his gospel. By contrast, the word *truth* is one of the key words in all of Johannine theology. You'll find the word *truth* 25 times in the

gospel of John alone and 20 more times in the three epistles of John.

Nevertheless, we see vivid displays of divine grace in practically every chapter of John's gospel as John traces the ministry of Christ from incident to incident. There's the grace He showed to the Samaritan woman in John 4, grace to the man born blind in John 9, grace as He washes the disciples' feet in John 13, and so on. Read John's gospel and the whole thing reads like a commentary on the expression "**full of grace.**" That's how John portrays Christ throughout—gracious toward sinners; but relentlessly aggressive in His opposition to the enemies of truth.

And that *is* authentic grace in action.

Consider now the third word in this trilogy: *Glory, Grace,* and—

### 3. TRUTH

"**We Beheld His glory,**" John writes, "**full of grace and truth.**" One of the most appealing features of Christ's glory is the way His lavish grace never clouds His love for the truth.

He embodied truth itself, and that's one aspect of John's point here. Jesus said in John 14:6, "**I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**" He is truth incarnate—the very embodiment of truth. That's what John is implicitly saying when He calls Jesus the divine *logos*. That's one of the main connotations of that name, *logos*, "the Word"—the Word of Truth. Jesus is truth incarnate.

But that's not all this expression signifies. Jesus was a *proclaimer* and *expositor* and a defender of the truth. In John 8:45, Jesus says, "**I tell [you] the truth.**" He frequently contrasted the truth of his teaching with the lies of the Pharisees. And listen to the very last words of Jesus in the gospel of John—chapter 18, verse 37. Jesus says, "**For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.**"

So grace and truth defined His earthly mission. He came not only to seek and to save the lost, but also to bear witness with the truth. Those who lack a passionate concern for the truth cannot honestly claim to be passionate about the glory of God. Christ is our model in that—certainly not worldly notions of artificial collegiality and superficial charitableness toward people who corrupt or oppose the truth of the gospel.

One other point and then I'll close. Notice that these same twin concepts appear again in verse 17: "**For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**" John is not saying that the Mosaic covenant was devoid of either grace or truth. He's certainly not saying that Moses gave a different way of salvation, through legal means, or that divine grace was a new concept introduced by Christ. Nor is he saying that Christ overturned or nullified the moral principles taught in Moses' law. Everyone who was ever saved has been saved by *grace* through faith. (That's the whole point of Romans 4.) And faith by definition lays hold of the *truth*. The law itself was a revelation of truth, and one of its purposes was to leave sinners with no hope other than grace. So both grace and truth were vital concepts, even under the Old Covenant.

Here's what John means: The prominent feature of the Mosaic covenant was the law. The law itself has no saving efficacy; it offers no help to fallen sinners; in fact it condemns them to death. But the law itself is holy, just, and good, Paul says in Romans 6. And it was given for a good purpose, both to teach us about the righteousness of God and to remove any hope we might ever have of trying to save ourselves apart from God's grace. So grace and truth were crucial in the Old Testament, but they weren't the *dominant* features.

By contrast, grace and truth are the whole substance of the New Covenant. That's why it's a better covenant. The old Tabernacle contained the scrolls of *law*; the new Tabernacle is "**full of grace.**" The old Tabernacle was filled with types and

figures; the new Tabernacle is "full of . . . truth." Christ is superior to the law in every sense.

That, of course, is the heart of the gospel message. Whereas the law rebukes our sin and threatens us with eternal punishment, Christ paid the price of sin and offers the water of life freely. That means my salvation from sin is an expression of divine glory. God is glorified by making me a joint heir with Christ—even though what I really deserve is punishment forever in hell. God has expressed his glory through Christ in a way that washes every believer completely clean of all sin and guilt—and God's glory is magnified in the outworking of that redemptive work. If that's not reason enough for you to be passionately, zealously, and earnestly enthralled with the glory of God, you need to pray for a new heart.