

## How Do We Come Across?

Practically every day of Jesus' ministry found him either opposed by or opposing error and sin. We read of conflicts with the Pharisees in Matthew 12 and 23. And, in Matthew 16 Jesus even found Himself in conflict with his disciples. Jesus taught His followers to expect trouble, opposition, and controversy. It has been said that *in all of the history of our Lord Jesus Christ, we never find him out of controversy*. There is no doubt that Jesus powerfully and honorably stood against error, and in doing so He exposed the false teachings and hypocrisy of His day.

The New Testament writers were not afraid to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Paul wrote about how he was *set for the defense of the gospel*, Philippians 1:16. Acts tells us of how he spoke *boldly and reasoned from the scriptures*. Jude boldly warned believers to stand up against religious error. He made it perfectly clear of our need to engage in whatever controversy the forces of the devil make necessary. Christians should *contend earnestly for the faith*, Jude 3. There is an unmistakable concept presented in the gospel: Christians have the responsibility to stand for truth and defend God's ways against those who are willing to compromise.

While there is a clear need to stand for God's way of doing things, Paul also wrote: *Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person*, Colossians 4:5-6. When communicating the fact of religious error to those who are outside of the body of Christ, or to those who are new Christians, how do we come across? What is the perception we leave? We must exercise caution with the words we speak, lest a few careless words slam shut the doors of opportunity to teach. Sometimes we can leave the impression that our religious friends in denominations are less than smart, insincere, and at best, willfully deceptive. And with an overwhelming majority of cases, that **is simply not the case**. While I'm sure we know that, is this always the impression that comes across? We need to be on guard lest our bible classes or sermons denigrate into little more than discussions of *us verses them* and of our disbelief of *how anyone could believe the bible that way*. While our intention is noble, in that we wish to objectively contrast denominational doctrine with Christ's, we must not make the conversation *personal*. And things can go that way in a hurry. I like Guy N Wood's writing. He once said, *an alleged defense of the truth at the expense of a sincere heart and peaceful disposition is illogical and irrational. It is absurd to attempt to do right by doing wrong. Men have made themselves murderers on the pretense of doing God's will*. Remember Paul didn't make his argument personal, he *reasoned from the scriptures*, Acts 17:2.

Some are governed by the mentality that having the truth somehow excuses them from using tact and godliness in the way they speak of others. However, Christians are to be governed by the principles found in Colossians 3:12: *put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience*. While the truth may be on the side of the New Testament Christian, truth does not excuse him to judge motives, doubt sincerity, and treat issues with brute force that should be handled in love. When speaking about denominational doctrine or other religious errors propagated by those outside of Christ, God's kind of person will make sure God is glorified by the way truth is shared with others.

Accomplishing this takes wisdom. Christians need to pray for wisdom, James 1:5. In James 3:17 the writer describes how those with wisdom conduct themselves: *the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy*. This is the effect New Testament Christianity is to have upon our heart and life, and it will be revealed by the way we speak! We have been created to have this kind of disposition. Wisdom understands that gentleness is not always to be equated with weakness. Wisdom knows that we must speak the truth in love, Ephesians 4:15. Place yourself in the shoes of an average guest from the community who visits bible classes and services. What would you think of the conversations that take place in some bible classes? Are there impressions cast that would cause a person to come away thinking of those in Christ's Church as being arrogant and condescending?

While speaking the truth in love, some will be offended by an objective effort to contrast truth with error. And when truth is explained in the spirit of Christ, we make no apology. God calls everyone to treat His word honestly and soberly, 1 Thessalonians 2:13. Some persons are in no way interested in truth or making correction. These have closed their hearts and they will answer to God for that. But let us be aware of how we come across and always keep the words of Jesus near our hearts: *In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets*, Matthew 7:12.

