CHRISTIAN TACTFULNESS

by

Matthew J. Lukowitz

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ABSTRACT
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It is not enough to simply say or do right things with a right heart. We should have at least that, but we must also pay careful attention to the proper place, time, and manner. Doing so will result in tactfulness. Not doing so will result in the church missing the mark in no less than the gospel of Jesus, the glory of God, and the joy of others.

We will miss the mark in regard to the good news of Christ because cookie-cutter approaches will simply not cut it. We will also miss the mark in regard to the glory of God because God is not glorified by tactless behavior. And we will miss the mark in regard to the joy of others because we will constantly be rubbing them the wrong way, burning bridges instead of building them. Missing the mark on these things, all Christians should agree, would certainly undermine our aim.

As Christians we are holy, but we ought not to be holy-rollers. As Christians, we take the high road, but we ought not to get on our high horse. And as Christians, we are aliens, but we ought not to be alienating.
To my wife, Brooke, for making my studies meaningful. To my daughters,

Anne and Sophia, for making my studies applicable. And to Grace

Community Church for making my studies possible.
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Clifford is the big red dog of children’s books. He was taken by his owner, Emily Elizabeth, and her neighbor in one adventure to do some good deeds.¹ The thought was that since he was so big he would be a big help to those in need. They came across a man raking leaves, and Clifford was able to put the leaves in the truck with ease. But when Clifford sneezed, the leaves blew all over. Later, they found an elderly lady’s kitten stuck in a tree. Clifford was able to bend the branch down to the earth so that the lady could grab it, but his paw slipped and the kitty went soaring. And on yet another occasion a man had a flat tire. So a hose was hooked up to the tire for Clifford to blow into. Clifford blew, but he ended up blowing out the tire. The day got so bad that Emily commented, “Nothing seemed to go right for us. All our good deeds were turning out wrong.”² She also added, “Clifford felt very sad. He had tried so hard to do the right things.”³

We can be like Clifford as Christians—able to help others, even meaning well, yet too often leaving things in more disrepair than when we began. Let me ask you: have you ever said or done something that you knew was right, which you even said or did with a right

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²Ibid., 19.
³Ibid., 23.
heart, and had it backfire? I trust you have. Why was that? It may have been because of a lack of tact. J. R. Miller wrote:

Many people with the very best motives and intentions, and with truly large capacity for doing good—almost utterly fail of usefulness and throw their lives away—because they lack this gift of tact. . . . The sad part of it all is that their motives are good, and their hearts full of benevolent desires. Their lives are failures because they lack the proper touch and do not know in what manner to do the things they resolve to do.4

You see, it is not enough to simply do the right thing with the right motive. It must also, as Aristotle so wisely pointed out, be done at the right time and in the right manner.5

Tactfulness is that which deals with the right timing and manner.6 Let me illustrate further.

A glass is meant for a beverage. A trash can is meant for trash. An electric socket is meant for a plug. And a screw is meant for a screwdriver. All of these are good things when used properly. But if we were to try to use the trash can for drinking or the screwdriver in the electric socket, what would be the result? The same thing that happens when we lack tact, the ability to put a good thing in its proper place—we at least leave a bad taste in someone’s mouth and at worst we become dangerous. Good things in wrong places can lead to bad results. Again, it is simply not enough to do or say right things with a right heart. We must also pay careful attention to the place, timing, and manner in which we say or do it. That is tactfulness.

4J. R. Miller, Thoughtfulness and Tact (1880); online article; available from http://jameslau88.com/thoughtfulness_and_tact.htm; Internet; accessed 20 March 2012.

5Aristotle is thought by many to have said, “Anybody can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.” See, for example, http://thinkexist.com/quotations/anyone_can_become_angry-that_is_easy-but_to-be/12809.html; Internet; accessed 20 March 2012.

6Miller further said, “It [fitness/tact] multiplies one's usefulness a hundredfold, a thousand-fold, to know how to speak the right word, or do the right thing—just at the right moment and in the right way” in Thoughtfulness and Tact (1880); online article; available from http://jameslau88.com/thoughtfulness_and_tact.htm; Internet; accessed 20 March 2012.
Where It All Began (for Me)

As I was reading commentary in preparation for a sermon, the author pointed me to his appendix where he had a brief article on this thing called “tactfulness.” The first words I read from William Hendriksen were these:

In the various textbooks on the biblical sciences this subject is generally neglected. Yet it is by no means of minor importance. Tactfulness is definitely a virtue. Though its presence, sometimes in a remarkable degree, among worldly people cannot be denied (cf. Luke 16:8), yet in its noblest form it is a product of special grace. Its parents are Love and Wisdom. It is that skill which, without any sacrifice of honesty or candor, enables a person to speak the right word at the right time, and to do the proper thing in any given situation. It is premeditated prudence, sanctified mother wit, consecrated savoir faire. The tactful person does not shirk his duty even when he is convinced that he must admonish or rebuke. But he has learned the art of doing this without being rude.7

After reading the article I felt as though a fire was lit in my belly, a seed was planted in my mind, and a baton was slapped into my hand. In its wake the fire spread, the plant grew, and the race was on. My original idea for my thesis was scrapped and I began envisioning what it would look like to write about tactfulness. The rest is history, but I certainly hope this work will do more than just give its author credit toward his degree—it needs to itself spark fires, plant seeds, and pass a baton.

This must happen because, as Hendriksen pointed out, this subject is generally neglected by Christians. That resonates with my own experience as I do not recall ever hearing a sermon, seeing a book, or reading an article dedicated to the subject. People I talk to are constantly having their interests piqued about tactfulness since they too have never heard it fleshed out and see the need for it. Moreover, one of my professors commented on a paper of mine, “Matt, I don’t think I’ve ever read a student paper on tact before, and I was looking forward to this, because I think the church needs to learn a lot about the subject.”

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do not know how many papers Dr. John Frame has read over the years, but I am guessing it has not been a few. All of this gives rise to the urgency of the need facing the church.

It is an urgent need because the absence of any virtue from our conversation suggests the presence of a vice, just as ignoring a plot of land will naturally yield weeds and not flowers or fruit. Without attention, weeds win. So if we have been ignoring this virtuous plot of land, we are going have our work cut out for us first of all in weeding out tactlessness, some of which may have grown thick and deep. (If you are anything like me, then there is a lot of weeding to be done.) And in its place we will need to sow seeds of tactfulness in order to bring forth the flowers and the fruit.

**What Is It Exactly?**

Christian tactfulness is, first of all, Christian. A Christian is one who sees the worth of Christ’s work on the cross, values of his victory over the grave, and relies on him for forgiveness and direction. And I, like Paul the Apostle, wish everyone were a Christian since everyone needs Jesus in order for everything to be okay between them and God. In fact, without Jesus we have no basis for building our lives. But with him, we have a concrete foundation and the means to move forward in the way of Christian tactfulness.

Christian tactfulness is, second of all, tactful. “Tactfulness” is a word formed from the root word “tact” which has to do with the ability to avoid giving offense (skill in situations in which other people’s feelings have to be considered) and discretion (an intuitive sense of what is right or appropriate). Our English word is tied to French and Latin words

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8See Acts 26:28-29.

9*Encarta World English Dictionary*, s.v. “tact.”
that have to do with the sense of touch.\textsuperscript{10} (In English we talk about being “in touch” with people—a good thought to keep in mind.) To “tact,” “-ful” is added which has to do with being full of or tending toward something,\textsuperscript{11} and also “-ness” which indicates a quality or state of being.\textsuperscript{12} So tactfulness is \textit{a quality where a person tends to be considerate of and appropriate toward other people}. And that necessarily involves giving careful thought to time, place, and manner.

Perhaps a similar word can conjure up the meaning a bit better. Here is an alphabet full of synonyms to help recognize what it means to be tactful. Being tactful has to do with being or doing what is appropriate, becoming, circumspect, discerning, empathetic, fitting, germane, honorable, jovial, kind, likeable, mannerly, necessary, opportune, proper, relevant, seasonable, thoughtful, understanding, viable, winsome, expedient, yielding, and zestful. It is a very versatile virtue indeed. In some circles it is called professionalism. Others call it a good bedside manner. And some even think of it as having a knack with or being in touch with people. Call it what you will, this is the realm of tactfulness.

Together, \textit{Christian tactfulness} contains a nice, healthy balance. On the one hand, it is tactfulness that must value what Christ values. So while it is considerate of other people’s feelings, it is primarily considerate of God’s glory and people’s salvation, which means that it will offend when necessary. Yet on the other hand it also advocates that as Christians we cannot simply excuse our poor behavior and trample others with truth. A commitment to Christian tactfulness, then, means we will not use Jesus to justify our poor behavior just as we will not use tactfulness as an excuse to be weak-kneed.

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., s.v. “-ful.”

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., s.v. “-ness.”
Christian tactfulness is the ability to avoid giving *needless* offense while saying or doing what needs to be said or done. It is the ability to maintain “winsomeness without compromise.”\[^{13}\] It is *situational sensibility*—the skill of appropriately acting, speaking, or responding in varying situations for the glory of God and joy of others without giving pat answers or cookie cutter responses. To help further identify Christian tactfulness, let’s take a look at its genealogy.

**The Heredity of Tact**

Hendriksen said (above) that tactfulness is born from two parents: Love and Wisdom. Miller nods in agreement, saying that “Christian tact is *wise* and *loving* thoughtfulness.”\[^{14}\] Wisdom, the father of tactfulness, is “choosing the best end and the best mean for attaining that end”\[^{15}\] according to Herman Bavinck. He adds to Aristotle in that he allows for the possibility of more than one *right* way. In light of that he advocates the *best* way. So, to put Aristotle and Bavinck together, wisdom is doing the best thing with the best motive at the best time and in the best manner. Again, tactfulness, the offspring of wisdom, would be the best timing and manner.

Love, on the other hand, is the mother of tact, which by definition is to be concerned for and considerate of other people—the very nature of tact. And love involves three important aspects: desire, duty, and deeds. *Desire* is important because if we do not have it our sense of duty and doing of deeds will become mechanical and lifeless. That will smell

\[^{13}\]Dr. John Frame, *Course outline for Christian Apologetics*, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, 2003, 32.


hypocritical to people as they sense our heart is really not in it. Duty is important because we do not always feel like being tactful. But we have an obligation to do so even when we do not feel like it. Finally, deeds are important to ensure that our love is not just something that we feel and know to be our obligation without ever lifting a finger. What good is a love that does nothing?

To speak of love or wisdom, then, is to also speak of tactfulness by extension. So if we wish to be tactful, let us aim at love and wisdom and we will get tactfulness thrown in. What is interesting is that we do talk a great deal about love and wisdom in the church, but in all of our talk why is it not leading to talk about tactfulness? Could this mean we are missing a vital element of these parent virtues and are not as familiar with the virtues of love and wisdom as we thought?

The Naught and Ought

While many wonderful truths have been heard within the church’s walls it seems that no more than a faint whisper can be heard about tactfulness. Ironically, God has never been silent about the matter. Tactfulness is a thread (among many others) masterfully woven throughout his word which demands our attention and will not excuse our ignorance. While not everyone agrees that the Bible is God’s word, for those so convinced there is no greater perspective than that of the Most High. It is there that we find a God who is tactful in all his ways. It is there that we hear him welcome us to be like him. And it is there that we find many who have exemplified tactfulness and have also called us to it. This work is an attempt to help people to see this thread for themselves and to move Christian tactfulness from the periphery to a place of prominence in the Christian life.
At the end of Clifford’s adventure in good deeds, after he had done much more harm than good (scattering leaves, splashing paint, launching a kitty, blowing up a tire, smashing windows, and dragging people by a rope), he was able to save a family from a house fire. He was so big that they climbed out from the second-story window onto his nose and ran down his back. Then Clifford put out the fire by dousing it with the water he had sucked up from the swimming pool in the backyard. The right place, right time, and right manner is what tactfulness is all about, and it leads to good things.
CHAPTER 2

TRINITARIAN TACTFULNESS

“Praise God from whom all blessings flow”
—Doxology—

Tactfulness, like every other virtue, can ultimately be traced back to God. And since our God is three Persons, we should expect that each One would have something specific to teach us about it. They do. To summarize, the Father is the source of tactfulness, a fountainhead from which the living water of tact springs. The Son is the reservoir of tactfulness, a storehouse made for collecting the unsearchable depths of living water. And the Spirit is the stream of tactfulness, a river that carries this living water to the people who need it. Here are sixteen examples of the Trinity’s tactfulness—what I will call the sweetest sixteen. As you might expect, we begin with the Father:

Look to the Farmer

Give ear and hear my voice, listen and hear my words. Does the farmer plow continually to plant seed? Does he continually turn and harrow the ground? Does he not level its surface and sow dill and scatter cummin and plant wheat in rows, barley in its place and rye within its area? For his God instructs and teaches him properly. For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is the cartwheel driven over cummin; but dill is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a club. Grain for bread is crushed, indeed, he does not continue to thresh it forever. Because the wheel of his cart and his horses eventually damage it, he does not thresh it longer.¹

Imagine driving past a farmer’s field and seeing the farmer tilling up the soil with his tractor—nothing strange about that. Then you notice the next day that he does the same thing. That is a bit peculiar, but you wonder if perhaps he wants to get the soil good and ready. Finally, you notice him carving the same soil every day for many days, even weeks and months, always plowing and never planting whether spring, summer, autumn, or winter. Just imagine that—how ridiculous! God asked his people if a farmer would ever do that. The obvious “No” is to teach the people that God, like the farmer, will not always and only do the same thing. He will not simply be monochromatic, but will work in many colorful ways. He is the source of timing, an integral aspect of tactfulness. So by his own admission the Father is the source of timing.

He is also the source of manner and placement. The farmer knows that there are variables for making different kinds of grains suitable for growing and eating. Different grains need different places to grow, and even need to be sown differently. And each also needs to be prepared appropriately come harvest. There are, so to speak, different strokes for different folks. The point is that God always does what is appropriate. He is always tactful, applying different things as the situations require. When we look at the farmer, we find the wisdom of timing, place, and manner, and therefore tactfulness. And this comes to him from the Father, its source.

In the Beginning

Adam and Eve had just plunged the entire human race into sin and death (no small blunder). Yet God did not come in the heat of the moment. He came in the cool of the day. He did not come running and screaming but walking and talking. He was punitive to be sure,

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2Gen. 3:1ff.
but he was also merciful. When I think of how I would have dealt with smart-alecky Adam and Eve, I would have come with guns blazing. (I have certainly gotten upset with my two-year-old for far less.) And so I am astounded by the poise, control, and tactfulness of God in dealing with sinful people. What a great example.

He also demonstrated tact in the beginning in dealing with Adam and Eve’s son Cain.³ God knew about his evil inclinations and decided to graciously warn him about them. He even asked him a reasonable question to try to show him the wrong intentions of his heart. And even after Cain did the deed, God provided a sign of protection for him from any who would seek revenge. Now, if you caught wind of someone’s bad intentions, would you care enough to plead with them or would you simply drop the hammer? Would you go to them or just tell others? Would you ask leading questions for their benefit or simply write them off? And if they did the deed, could you stomach the idea of graciously providing them with protection? The Father could. And did.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and Joseph)

The Father was so tactful in dealing with Abraham that he was able to teach the worth of God’s desire over man’s in the request to sacrifice his son.⁴ So tactful was he in dealing with Isaac that he taught him how to persist in prayer by taking twenty years to answer his request for a child.⁵ So tactful was he in dealing with Jacob that during their wrestling match he got him to confess the truth of his name with a similar question Jacob had

³Gen. 4:1ff.
⁴Gen. 22.
lied about before.\textsuperscript{6} And so tactful was he with Joseph that he was able to humble the pride of his youth all the while getting him into a position to save lives.\textsuperscript{7} It takes great tact to probe someone’s allegiance, test someone’s patience, confront someone’s deception, and handle someone’s pride. The Father surely had it.

\textbf{The Exodus}

The plagues the Father sent upon the Egyptians were each appropriated to specific false gods they worshiped.\textsuperscript{8} How fitting. When he led his people out of Egypt he did so not by way of the nearby Philistines so that they would not lose heart.\textsuperscript{9} How thoughtful. That way would have been quicker, but quicker is not always better since had the people seen war they would have high-tailed it out of there. Finally, when they entered the Promised Land, the Father wisely did not let them drive out all of the inhabitants right away, but little by little.\textsuperscript{10} How germane. Ever feel like God takes too long? He has his reasons. And he has no qualms taking his time sometimes—neither should we. It is part of tactfulness.

\textbf{Those Snot-nosed Kids}\textsuperscript{11}

Is there a more touching story than that of the father who embraced his greedy, despicable, sleazy son when he decided to return home after coming to his senses? What is

\textsuperscript{6}When Jacob was younger, he was essentially asked by his earthly father, “What is your name?” He lied (Gen 27:18-19). Now he is asked by his heavenly Father what his name is and he says his name is “Supplanter,” which is one who trips up another. It was a way of owning up (see Gen 32:27).

\textsuperscript{7}Gen. 37-50.

\textsuperscript{8}Thomas Rogers, \textit{The Panorama of the Old Testament} (Newburgh, IN: Trinity Press, 2000), 37.

\textsuperscript{9}Exod. 13:17.

\textsuperscript{10}Exod. 23:29.

\textsuperscript{11}A parable better known as “The Prodigal Son” found in Luke 15.
more, he was even tactful toward his other son who had become so bitter about things. The father pled with him, spoke kindly to him, still offered him the inheritance, even reasoned with him and invited him to the party. Is there any better picture of our heavenly Father who receives us after our rebellion has chewed us up and spit us out and who still pursues us in spite of our stubborn rebellion when we think we are doing so well?

What more shall I say? Time will fail me if I speak of the Father’s tactfulness in dealing with kings and kingdoms, priests and prophets, sinners and saints, judges and jokers, shepherds and sheep, men and women, children and seniors. The Father is utterly tactful. And as the saying goes, “Like Father like Son.”

The Reservoir

The Father, by his own admission, is the source of tact. Jesus, according to God’s word, is the reservoir of tact—*In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

Two things. First, knowing that Jesus knows everything means we can simply be honest when we do not have the answer and point people to him, the one who does. This alone should promote a great deal of tact. Second, since wisdom breeds tact, and all wisdom is hidden in Christ, all tact then must also be hidden in Christ. He is the storehouse of it. This is good news for us who lack. Our Jesus possesses every gold coin of tact and we are welcome to enrich ourselves in him. This reminds me of Scrooge McDuck who would dive into his treasure house, swim around, and enjoy his riches. We get to do something similar with Jesus. Then, unlike old Uncle Scrooge, we get to fill our pockets and enrich those around us.

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\(^{12}\text{Col. 2:3.}\)
Turning Lemons into Lemonade

John the Baptist was thrown into prison, and it apparently got to him at some point.\(^\text{13}\) He had told people before to behold Jesus as the Lamb of God. Now he was wondering if Jesus was the Lamb of God. His afflictions had given rise to doubts, and those doubts were broadcast by his disciples before Jesus and the crowds. Doubt is epidemic, so Jesus must nip it in the bud, but he must also be careful not to let John cook his own goose and unravel the ministry he had accomplished. We seem to have a catch-22 here. How will Jesus handle it? John’s sour unbelief needed to be addressed, but his faith also needed to be encouraged. And the crowd needed to be debriefed. Jesus has a lot to juggle here.

Jesus did correct John, but he did so in such a way as to restore John’s happiness, not just to tell him off. He sent the messengers back to John with further evidence to bolster his faith and joy. So by that point John had been tactfully dealt with, but his dirty laundry had still been aired out in front of all the people. How would Jesus handle that? He did so first by waiting for John’s disciples to be out of earshot. Once far enough away, he then turned to the crowd, and out came high accolades for John. So highly did he praise him in fact that he said there was not one greater than him born among women.

Stepping back, can you see how wise Jesus was? He was able to tactfully withstand his brother’s error publicly, but was also tactful enough to praise him publicly. But the latter he did behind John’s back, so as not to encourage John in disbelieving. (Erring people do not need to hear how good they are—the need to be corrected.) I just wonder how many of us could do likewise, rebuking to the face and praising behind the back rather than the other way around?

\(^{13}\)Luke 7:18ff.
Requiring Relevance

Jesus told his disciples to be relevant. When some religious people were put out by a lack of fasting from Jesus’ disciples, they badmouthed Jesus through his disciples. Jesus responded with a slough of ridiculous scenarios—of weddings, wardrobes, and wine—to show them how absurd they were being. He said that no one goes around moping at a wedding since it is inappropriate. While Jesus was around it was wedding time, not funeral time. Additionally, no one wrecks brand new clothing to patch up the old. How crazy is that? The new and the old would both be unusable. Finally, new wine belongs in new wineskins, not in old or they will bust and the wine will be wasted. His point is that disciples need to be relevant to the times, and relevance is tactfulness.

While it is important that his disciples be relevant, it is also important that their relevance be balanced. He spoke of this balance on a different occasion when he advocated both the timely and the timeless. I take this balance to mean that disciples should not be strictly archaic or hip. The imbalance of one of these without the other will lead to one of those two extremes. Being simply timeless and archaic will not allow disciples to connect with the people of their day. Being simply timely and hip will not allow disciples to keep hold of an essentially unchanging message. Disciples must be relevant, but also balanced if they are to be tactful.

Calling for Considerateness

Jesus is famous for teaching people to love their neighbor as they would themselves. Do you see that he is commanding us to be considerate of other people’s feelings, to be

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tactful? This means that each of us has a front and center example as to how to love others—we really only need to look in the mirror. The way to be more tactful is to ask myself, “How would I like to be treated in this instance?” Disciples need to put themselves in the other person’s sandals. That will be a good start as to how to treat others in any given situation and be considerate of their feelings so that we can fulfill this second great command.

Go and Be Tactful

When Jesus told disciples to be shrewd like serpents, he was telling them to be tactful. It is shrewdness qualified with the innocence of the dove to be sure, but shrewdness nonetheless. According to Hendriksen:

The serpent is here viewed as the very embodiment of intellectual acumen or shrewdness (Gen. 3:1). The cautiousness and wariness of serpents had become proverbial. The keenness here recommended as a human quality involves insight into the nature of one’s surroundings, both personal and material, circumspection, sanctified common sense, wisdom to do the right thing at the right time and place and in the right manner, a serious attempt always to discover the best means to achieve the highest goal, an earnest and honest search for an answer to such questions as: “How will this word or this action of mine look ‘in the end’?” “How will it affect my own future, that of my neighbor, God’s glory?” “Is this the best way to handle the problem or is there a better way?”

If we are committed to the shrewdness of the serpent along with the innocence of the dove, we will be very tactful indeed, always thoughtful of what is best in any given situation. This shows that we cannot simply rely on pat phrases or cookie-cutter responses. We must be on our toes and ready to think things through at every turn. Jesus himself was tactful at every turn, with nothing to regret in anything he said or did. Ever. Let’s be honest. We are nowhere near like him. However, we would do well to strive be like him so that at least we will have the less to regret later.

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If the Father is the source from where the living water of tact springs, and the Son the reservoir where its depths are stored, then I would say the Spirit is the stream that reaches out to and touches people where they live. Whatever the Father and Son do always seems to be through the agent of the Holy Spirit, and the imparting tact should be no different. He is the stream that waters the earth. And those whom he waters he makes to sprout, grow, and bear good fruit. This is great news for you and I who happen to be just too tactless.

**Seven Streams**

Seven attributes of the Holy Spirit are listed by Isaiah, each of which, it can be argued, deal with tactfulness:

> The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.\(^\text{17}\)

First, being of Yahweh means that whatever was said of the Father can also be said of the Spirit. Moreover, since Jesus is essentially Yahweh,\(^\text{18}\) whatever was said of the Son can also be said of the Spirit.\(^\text{19}\) Therefore the Spirit himself is plump full of tactfulness, just as the Father and Son—no more, no less. Second, being wise means he breeds tact since wisdom is the father of tact. Third and fourth, having knowledge and understanding means he has to know what is best for any given moment and the best manner in which to do it. Fifth, as a counselor he can teach situational sensibility to us who are not so good at it. Sixth, the attribute of the fear of the Lord is that which sanctifies tactfulness, making it “Christian.”

\(^{17}\)Isa. 11:2 (emphasis added).

\(^{18}\)See Mark 1:3 or Heb 1:10.

\(^{19}\)Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 27.
And seventh, that he is a Spirit of strength means he has the ability to help us to cultivate winsomeness in our dealings with others.

### Specific Tasks

The Spirit’s tactfulness is seen in how he appropriately equips people for certain tasks. He suited Bezalel, Oholiab, and others with the needed know-how and skill to craft, design, engrave, cut, carve, embroider, and be inventive for the tasks at hand. It was the Spirit that must have given Hiram the wisdom, understanding, and skill for bronze work in the temple. And it was the Spirit who came upon many to do great things. He even made unbelieving Balaam to pronounce a blessing upon the Israelites and will give believers fitting words to speak when they need them. He has the ability, you see, to help us to meet a moment’s need.

### Within the Godhead

A great example of the Spirit’s tact is found in Colossians. It reveals his genuine humility, a humility which I know I could use more of myself. In a word, *he humbly relegates himself to the background in the letter*. Now, we know that all Scripture was penned at the Holy Spirit’s behest, so when Paul paused to write to the Colossians it was

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20 Exod. 31:1-11; 35:30-35.

211 Kings 7:14; 2 Chr 2:1-11.

22The Spirit came upon Moses and others in Num 11; Joshua in Num 27:18; several judges including Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson; and several prophets and the Apostles (see Acts 2; 5:15; 19:12).

23Num. 24:2.


because the Spirit moved or inspired him to do so. The words then that were recorded can be said to be his words.\textsuperscript{26}

What is so noteworthy about what the Spirit wrote in Colossians is that he mentioned himself only once in the entire letter. In letters like Galatians and Ephesians he mentioned himself several times, but not in this one. Why is that? I agree with the opinion that he did so in order to realign the Colossian focus which had gotten off of Christ. When Jesus is out of focus, the doctrine of the Spirit has no context. His role is to glorify the Son,\textsuperscript{27} and so he will take himself out of the limelight if that is not happening in order to ensure that this gets reestablished. He knew that for the Colossians, given their wandering into mystical, spiritual errors, he would be an unhelpful doctrine to focus on. So he hid himself away almost completely in order to call the church back to Christ-centeredness. How germane this was to the moment’s need. How appropriate. How fitting. How tactful. We have to wonder if we would be willing to take a backseat if the occasion were to require it. If God the Spirit did, how much more ought we?

\textbf{Living with Us}

Another way the Holy Spirit displays his tactfulness is within the Church. We needed saving, and what did he do? He saved us. We were dirty and he washed us. We were dead and he raised us. We were enslaved and he freed us. How becoming. Now he strengthens us when weak, helps us when needy, comforts us when hurting, sympathizes with us when struggling, assures us when doubting, guides us when lost, fills us when empty, renews us when disenchanted, and revives us when deteriorating. How thoughtful. He even

\textsuperscript{26}The words were Paul’s words too, but my point here is to highlight the Spirit’s authorship.

\textsuperscript{27}John 16:14.
continues to live with us despite our sinning, to pray for us despite all of our struggles, and to equip us despite all of our shortcomings. How touching.

One man said to me how thankful he was for the Spirit’s tactfulness in dealing with our sins, that he does not throw them all in our face at once but seems to reveal them in small doses so as not to completely overwhelm us. I agree. Furthermore, I am grateful for how he gifts the church. He does so in such diverse ways that we will all, like body parts, fit together, benefit from each other, and come together to be something more significant than the individual parts. He has just the right touch with each of us as well as with the whole of us. Tactfulness is simply a mark of his that is all over the life of the church. It is there that he displays it. But, it must be added, he is also the one who conveys it.

**The Fruit of Tactfulness**

The Holy Spirit is not only interested in being tactful. He wants us to be tactful too, and can make us be so. Sufficient enough to prove this point will be the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Galatians:

> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.\(^{28}\)

There was once a man who wanted to serve as my mentor and had me over to his home for lunch. He was trying to make the setting as natural as possible, so he proceeded to work on fixing some electronic equipment while we chatted about things. So there we were, just two guys fixing something and talking. Fine. Then came the wrench. “So, Matt,” he asked me, “do you have the fruit of the Spirit in your life?” Awkward. How do I answer that? If I say “Yes” then I am struggling with humility and if I say “No” then my salvation

\(^{28}\)Gal. 5:23.
comes into question. I felt trapped. He might as well have asked, “So, Matt, have you stopped beating your wife yet?”

The problem with the question was not that it did not deal with something good and important. Nor was it from evil motives. What was so bad was the lack of tact. And what is funny (now as I think of it) is that his question lacked the fruit of the Spirit because it lacked tact. We all need the Spirit’s help to avoid making people feel like they are in a Southwest Airlines commercial where the question posed is, “Wanna get away?” The Spirit’s fruitfulness in each of these nine qualities will cause us to cultivate tactfulness in our lives. A lack of this fruit, however, will open up the door to an infestation of tactlessness.

Think about it. Love is enthusiastically concerned with another’s wellbeing. Without it, we become enthusiastically consumed with ourselves and could not care less about others. Joy has to do with a pleasant disposition. Without it we act like Atlas, thinking we hold the world’s weight on our own shoulders, so we get cranky with people and are not pleasant to be around. Peace has to do with harmony with others. Without it we become pot stirrers, needing our fix of unnecessary drama which will alienate rather than ameliorate.

Patience is the ability to boil long without boiling over. Without it we are hot heads, easily blowing our top and successfully burning bridges with others rather than building them. Kindness is what it means to be benevolent, courteous, and pleasant to other people. Without it we rather become harsh, abrasive, and bitter. Goodness is a quality that means helpful, agreeable, or honorable. It is what made the Good Samaritan, well, good. Without it we will become callous to the needs of others, whatever those might be.

Faithfulness has to do with honesty and loyalty, which involves telling the truth and having a healthy consistency about us. Without it we give way to flattery and inconsistency.
Flattery is dangerous because it has a pretense of tactfulness. It tries to make another feel good but it comes with an aroma of phoniness which stinks to most people. I also think most people are turned off by those who are up and down all of the time, without a general even keel. *Gentleness* involves trusting in God’s sovereign goodness even during injustices. Without it we become self-assertive and rude. There seems to be nothing more natural than snapping back at those who do us wrong, but gentleness is a supernatural quality to keep us from doing so. *Self-control*, finally, is the ability to take our selves in hand, and be masters of our own domain, and is of great importance in dealing with so many remaining rogue desires that we are spring-loaded with. Without it we become impulsive, letting poor words and actions fly.

The Spirit can weed out our tactless ways and cause the fruit of tactfulness to blossom. That is what he does. According to Calvin, it is the Holy Spirit who “will guide us by wisdom and prudence, that we may do nothing contrary to our duty, or beyond our calling, nothing, in short, but what is prudent and seasonable.”

**All Three**

The most famous place where we find all Three Persons of the Trinity is in the Great Commission. There Jesus told his disciples to baptize in the name of each. Baptism just happens to be another evidence of the Trinity’s tactfulness. Think about it. Thankfully, God

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did not just give us good news in word only. He also has given us visual aids. Baptism is one such visual aid. People learn not just by hearing but also by seeing. Pictures help us to understand the words we hear. How thoughtful of God to give this sign to his people, that when they see a person being washed with water they see the gospel afresh in that there is a cleansing of sin that our Triune God has provided.

It has been shown that our God is the source, reservoir, and stream of the virtue of tact. So he is the one who can help us to be more tactful since he has plenty to spare and very much wants to share. Looking at this from another angle, we may note that wherever we find tact among people, each instance is a case of borrowed capital—wherever we see it modeled by people we can ultimately trace it back to God. In light of all this, it is good to praise him from whom all blessings flow.
“Prudence is the product of religion and an ornament to religion.”
- *Matthew Henry*

Tactfulness is the offspring of wisdom. So if we desire to be more tactful, we will need to get wisdom since tact naturally flows from it like orange juice from an orange. And where better is there to go for wisdom than the wisest man to ever live? This chapter contains sixteen tactful things from the life of Solomon, or *Solomon’s sixteen*.

Tact can be found in Proverbs listed under its aliases “prudence” and “discretion.” The Hebrew word for the former has to do with shrewdness, craftiness, and sensibility while the one for the latter has to do with witiness, carefulness, and discernment. Our English words “prudent” and “discreet” are defined as follows:

1. having good sense: having good sense in dealing with practical matters; 2. carefully considering consequences: using good judgment to consider consequences and to act accordingly; 3. careful in managing resources: careful in managing resources so as to provide for the future.

1. careful to avoid offending people: careful to avoid embarrassing or upsetting others; 2. good at keeping secrets: careful not to speak about anything that should be secret or confidential; 3. circumspectly subtle and careful: subtle and circumspect, ensuring that no undue attention is attracted; 4. modest: modest, and not ostentatious or flashy.

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2Ibid., s.v. “discretion.”
3*Encarta World English Dictionary*, s.v. “prudent.”
4*Encarta World English Dictionary*, “discreet.”
Tactful Thoughts

Having identified its aliases, one thing we are taught is that it is tactful to hide what we know. Solomon wrote, “A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.” Now, he does not mean to promote ignorance or lying, but to keep us from parading our smarts. Matthew Henry commented:

He that is wise does not affect to proclaim his wisdom, and it is his honour that he does not. He communicates his knowledge when it may turn to the edification of others, but he conceals it when the showing of it would only tend to his own commendation. Knowing men, if they be prudent men, will carefully avoid every thing that savours of ostentation, and not take all occasions to show their learning and reading, but only to use it for good purposes, and then let their own works praise them.

Lord Chesterfield agreed,

Wear your learning, like your watch, in a private pocket, and do not pull it out and strike it merely to show you have one. If you are asked what o'clock it is, tell it, but do not proclaim it hourly and unasked, like the watchman.

This last quote reminds me of the admiral in Mary Poppins who on the hour fired a canon that shook entire houses, sending everything into disarray. People who toot their own horn do just that—they bring unnecessary annoyance into the lives of others. We should not flaunt our knowledge. To do so is to be a know-it-all and no one likes to be around the know-it-all (except, maybe, the know-it-all). So by all means grow in knowledge but be sure

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5 Prov. 12:23.
6 See Prov. 13:16; 14:8, 15, 18; 18:15.
not to parade all that you learn. The New Living Translations captures this the best by saying
“Wise people don’t make a show of their knowledge.”\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Tactful Words}

At times, according to Proverbs, the tactful thing to do is to hold our tongue.\textsuperscript{11} And when we do speak we are told it should be with gentleness, healthfulness, seasonableness, sweetness, and timeliness.\textsuperscript{12} In other words, tactful words are those which take into account the best timing, place, and manner. A man I know mentioned how he was hesitant to speak softly to others for fear of flattery. After hearing God speak through these verses, he changed his mind and regretted his past demeanor. I think that can be a common misconception, thinking we have to be harsh or forceful to get things done. But according to Proverbs, soft words can break bones!\textsuperscript{13} Now that is getting things done.

My wife once commented how I do not speak to her as I do to other people, that my tone with them is much kinder. So I decided to be sterner with everyone else. I am kidding, of course, but I did need to eat some crow and work on my tone at home. Home is the place where I can let my hair down, but I still need to be aware of the manner in which I speak to the ones I love most. And I have to admit it is still a work in progress.

That was a word or two on the \textit{manner} of our speech, but \textit{timing} is also important. Having the ability of good timing is a beautiful and invaluable thing according to Solomon, like expensive jewelry. It evokes happiness and delight in other people. Is that not something you want to be like, a person that makes others happy? Timing will help you to

\textsuperscript{11}See Prov. 17:28; cf. 13:3; 15:28.
\textsuperscript{12}See respectively Prov. 15:1, 4, 23; 16:21-24; 25:11-12.
\textsuperscript{13}Prov. 25:15.
do that. I realize our timing can sometimes be so bad that we cannot even tell a joke right.

But wisdom and tact will help us to improve.

Tactful Deeds

One way we can be tactful in what we do is by concealing dishonor and overlooking a transgression since love covers all law-breaking. This is the ability to ignore insulting things and choose our battles carefully. Spurgeon called it having a blind eye and a deaf ear, which in his estimation were the best eye and ear he had. Trying to right every wrong is impossible for us and will unquestionably burn us out and burn bridges with others. But where love overflows, offenses are often overlooked and quickly forgotten. Love, the mother tact, deals with people in tact and kindness despite the knowledge of flaws. This is a big part of what promotes healthy unity among people, especially in a body of believers.

While it is always helpful to have illustrations that show us how to do a thing, it is equally helpful (sometimes even more so) to see its antithesis so we know what to stay away from. Proverbs does both. The following five negative illustrations can also help us to see what we should avoid at all costs. Take these as the Bible’s way of saying, “Don’t be that guy.”

The Embellished Pig

A beautiful woman without tact is compared to a pig with jewelry. Douglas Wilson calls it the equivalent of lipstick on a camel. The point of the proverb is not that

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16Prov. 11:22.
17Douglas Wilson, Reforming Marriage (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1995), 58.
physical beauty is bad. Not at all. In fact, the Bible is replete with compliments for beautiful women—it is pro-beauty.\textsuperscript{18} The point is that all the physical beauty in the world cannot make up for the ugliness of tactlessness. Tactfulness is just that important. Without it we are piggish, despite other qualities we may have. So be as beautiful as you can, but more importantly adorn yourself with tact, so that you will not be an embellished pig.

**The Rash Committer**

The rash committer\textsuperscript{19} is one who declares something good before they know it to really be so. This is the case of leaping before looking and putting one’s foot in their mouth. I once heard a man make an announcement after someone received the Lord with a litany of things about their salvation and the church’s obligation. It was but days and the person decided that the Christian thing was not for them. It seemed foolish to me at the time—even more so now. Solomon, like Jesus, would have us carefully count the cost so as not to end up looking dopey,\textsuperscript{20} having to eat our words. It is true that there are two sides to a story, so we need to be sure to peek around the corner.

**The Pesky Neighbor**

The pesky neighbor\textsuperscript{21} is one who does not care about what others think, only about what she wants. This kind of person is insensitive and does not pick up on the vibes others are sending. But tactfulness requires we be sensitive to the feelings of others and not be

\textsuperscript{18}Gen. 12:11, 14; 29:17; Deut. 21:11; 2 Sam. 11:2; 14:27; Esther 1:11; 2:7; Job 42:15; Song of Sol. 6:4.

\textsuperscript{19}Prov. 20:25.


\textsuperscript{21}Prov.. 25:17.
bugging them. The only way to know if you are being pesky is to read people’s body language. The only way not to know if you are being pesky is to not give a hoot. Please give a hoot, give people the space they need, and pay attention to their nonverbals.

The Insensitive Singer

Tactless people sing happy songs to troubled hearts, and it is very irritating. It is like taking off warm clothing on a cold day or adding vinegar to soda. As I write this, it is below zero outside. If you took off my coat, I would probably react with a few choice words for you. That is the same kind of violent reaction you would get when adding vinegar to soda. Did you ever make volcanoes erupt as a kid with vinegar and baking soda? That is the idea. Being insensitive and irritating will push people from bad to worse. Rather, we need to rejoice with the rejoicing, weep with the weeping, and always strive to meet the moment’s need. This requires tact.

The Boisterous Friend

Finally, the boisterous friend rounds out our tactless lineup. This person is apparently a morning person. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, there is a reason why early bird gets the worm. But if we do not realize that there are others out there who are not at all like us, we are bound to be tactless, constantly clashing with others. We put up with behavior like this in children because they are still learning. Sometimes when my two-year-old daughter talks to others they have no clue what she is talking about. I know what she means because I know how she thinks. But the problem is that she thinks that they think

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22Prov. 25:20.

23Prov. 27:14.
like she does. It is kind of cute. But when adults do it, it is not cute. It is annoying. And those interested only in how they roll will not be tactful. It is not all about you, so find ways to get in touch with others rather than simply doing as you please.

Proverbs is like getting wisdom concentrate, packing quite a punch in small doses. And it has taught us directly what tactfulness is and is not. Ecclesiastes helps us to be further tactful by giving us a healthy view of life that takes into account all of the joys and sorrows that people experience. It is so raw and revealing in regard to the heavy drudgery of the human condition, yet it is still able in the midst of it all to prescribe pleasure. Solomon continues in this book to add needed tools to our toolbox of tactfulness.

Everything Appointed

There is a place for everything—*there is a time for every event under heaven.* And everything has its place—*He has made everything appropriate in its time.* From womb to tomb, God is the one who regulates the good and the bad. Not us. Ray Stedman wrote:

> If we were given the right to choose, we would have no unpleasantness at all in life. But that would ruin us. God knows that people who are protected from everything invariably end up impossible to live with; they are selfish, cruel, vicious, shallow, unprincipled. God sends these things in order that we might learn.

Now, if God is in control of the extremes, it stands to reason that he is also in charge of everything in between, including the mundane. If God ordains the big things in life, then surely he also ordains the average, ordinary, everyday monotony of life as well. Regarding this, Stedman also wrote, “It is the continual recognition of the hand of God in ordinary

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24Eccles. 3:1.
25Eccles. 3:11.
events that fills the springs of enjoyment and gives lasting pleasure.” So God is the creator of seasonableness, having appointed a place for everything.

He is also the creator of fittingness, having appointed everything to belong in its proper place. According to the Preacher, “God has made everything beautiful for its own time.” This is easy to swallow when we are talking about pleasant things in life, but is not so easy when we talk about the not-so-pleasant. But according to Scripture, even wicked people and circumstances have a place in the plan of God. Believing that God is at the helm of this curse-riddled world, and not us, ought to be a comforting thing and have a direct bearing on our tactfulness toward others.

It should be equally comforting to know that he also ordains the mundane: those average, ordinary, everyday seasons we often feel ourselves muddling through. Perhaps you are struggling to trust God with your circumstances, or think that some things just randomly do happen. Or perhaps you are trying to be the captain of your own ship, the master of your own fate, and indeed too big for your britches. Would we not be more tactful if we really truly trusted God who regulates our every season of life? Think of it, we are often tactless when we are suffering or struggling, justifying our rude behavior by the hurts we feel. Things would change if we really got a hold of this.

**Eternity Implanted**

That eternity has been put in our hearts by God means we naturally long for something eternal and even naturally have an understanding of the concept of eternity. As to

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27Ibid., 55.

28Eccles. 3:11 (NLT, emphasis added).

29See Prov. 16:4.
the natural longing, listen to some precious lines others have written that ought to resonate with each of us:

   Thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in Thee.  

   Our Heavenly Father has provided many delightful inns for us along our journey, but He takes great care to see that we do not mistake any of them for home.

   I've been feeling kind of restless. I've been feeling out of place. I can hear a distant singing, a song that I can't write, but it echoes in what I'm always trying to say. There's a feeling I can't capture. It's always just a prayer away. I want to know the ending, things hoped for but not seen, but I guess that's the point in hoping anyway . . . I'm confined by my senses to really know what you are like. You are more than I can fathom, more than I can guess, and more than I can see with human sight. But I have felt you with my spirit. I have felt you fill this room. This is just an invitation, a sample of the whole, and I cannot wait to be going home.

The reason we are restless is because each of us longs to be a part of something more than what we have been a part of all our life—we simply sense that we were made for more.

As to the natural knowledge people have, just look around at things in our culture to see how prevalent it is. There is a store called “Forever 21,” a fragrance called “Eternity,” an automobile called “Infiniti,” a movie called “Limitless,” and a slogan that urges people, “Unlimit Yourself.” And I thought of those in about five minutes. Eternity is a concept built into the warp and woof of human beings, and it causes them to long for it. Knowing that God has implanted eternity in each person’s heart can make us more tactful with others by simply because it shows we are not so different from the next person. Let’s build on that.


31C. S. Lewis, recorded in Ray Stedman’s Is This All There Is To Life? Answers from Ecclesiastes, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1999), 51.

Mystery Surrounding

Though we all have eternity in our hearts, we still will not figure out all that God is up to. Though there is a longing for and a level of understanding of the eternal, there will also remain a great deal of mystery. John Calvin has well stated, “The finite cannot grasp the infinite.”33 As with eternity, we can look around and see that mystery too remains a staple of the world in which we live.

Despite all of our medical advancements, we have not cured illness and death. Despite all of our prosperity, we have not cured poverty. Despite all of our policies, we have not cured lawlessness. Despite all of our love, we have not cured hatred. Despite all of our power, we have not cured evil. Despite all of our knowledge, we persist in unresolved problems. Despite our maximum efforts, we cannot solve all mysteries, like why good men suffer, evil men prosper, what the future holds, and the like. Therefore, we must be honest that we are surrounded with a great deal of mystery. Indeed, it is what we are to marvel at and praise God for.34 Of course, we must not be lazy then, but while we seek hard after the Infinite we must be content all the while to have God be well beyond us still, so that we do not have a god of our own making.

Acknowledging that mystery surrounds will make us more tactful because we do not have to pretend to have all of the answers. Know-it-alls are not tactful people, but humbly honest people are. Eternity and mystery will help make us more tactful because they both give us a kind of common ground with others, especially unbelievers. It is true that we

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34See Rom. 11:33-36.
evaluate these concepts differently, but as believers we can use this common ground to build bridges with those who are familiar with these concepts, feelings, and longings as well.

**Pursuing Pleasure**

The prescription of pleasure and enjoyment is part of the chorus of Ecclesiastes. According to Dennis Prager, happiness is a “serious problem” and a “moral obligation.” He is right in line with Solomon on this in requiring that we be happy people. And happy people are tactful people since their company is enjoyed by others. They are like people who shower and wear deodorant even if they do not feel like it—simply more refreshing to be around. Happiness is like that. It is refreshing and pleasing to people. Unhappy people, on the other hand, are not tactful people and are not the kind of people others like to be around. So if you want to be more tactful, learn the art of enjoying your life.

I think people often miss that fact that God wants us to be happy. More often they think God wants them to feel guilty. But God is very much for our joy. He has spoken and acted so that we would be glad, pleased, and satisfied. He even wants us to enjoy food, alcohol, and sex, things often associated with the prescribed pleasure. Do you remember when God had Aaron stand before the people? He did so to have him bless them, not curse. Just think of it: “May the Lord curse you and cast you away. May the Lord make his face stormy and cloudy toward you and be harsh toward you. May the Lord frown upon you and give you unrest.” No. God wants us to be happy. And as such we will be more tactful.

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Gaining Goodness

Enjoyment is a big part of our responsibility, and so is goodness. We ought to pursue happiness and we must also do what is fair, seasonable, beautiful, fitting, pleasant, agreeable, excellent, or beneficial,\(^ {37} \) to name a few. (Yet again, sounds like tact.) Solomon also adds a needed balance in that will help us to do good without being a do-gooder:

Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them. Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.\(^ {38} \)

In a nutshell, what he means here is that we should be wise and pursue the right things in life all the while being honest that we are not perfectly wise and doing right. The balance, then, to hold onto is to not be excessively righteous, which is to be self-righteous, and to not use our imperfection to justify imperfect behavior, which is to be an excuse-maker (or blame-shifter). To be self-righteous is to be pretentious—a wise guy and not a wise man. People like that obviously cannot be tactful since they stink to everybody, as do those who are constantly making excuses. Rid yourself of these two extremes in which your pride can take you, and fresh buds of tact will sprout.

Duties & Delights

According to the Preacher, we ought to be tactful in our \textit{duties}:

He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure.

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\(^ {38} \)Eccles. 7:16-20.
If the ruler’s temper rises against you, do not abandon your position, because composure allays great offenses.³⁹

We are born into a world of authority structures. They exist because they were created by God and are governed by him for the good of our societies. It is crucial that we recognize this and become compliant people. Without this general disposition, our unrest in being controlled and desire to be a controller will spawn countless tactless ways. In fact, even when we are under fire and heavy pressure from those over us, we should not lose our composure but keep it. This is difficult for Americans because we are so full of our individual rights that we easily forget our duty to be respectful citizens of the powers that be. And unfortunately, when we feed our individual rights with steroids, the result is more and more tactless behavior. Do not misunderstand me here. I love my country and the individual liberties we possess. But we need to beware of an unhealthy imbalance that breeds tactlessness in our society. This will help us do just that.

This can also help us as we converse with other people in general. Sometimes I meet with people who swear like sailors. If I winced at every vulgarity or obscenity there would be no carrying on of the conversation. But I have learned to a degree to not let that rattle me. Some people even try to rattle me, I think, since they know I am a pastor. But I try to love them by putting up with a lot of their offenses because I remember how someone put up with me in all of my offensive behavior. It was that winsome attitude that drew me to him when I had questions about God. And that ultimately led me to Christ. So by all means, keep your composure. The result can be wonderful.

We should be tactful in our duties, but also with our delights:

For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man’s trouble is heavy upon him.

³⁹Eccles. 8:4 and 10:5, respectively.
Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness.\(^{40}\)

Solomon is more of an example here than anything. As he closes the book, he tells us that he sought delightful words to use in order to draw people together to hear the wisdom he had to share.\(^{41}\) Here is something insightful. It is not enough just to communicate truth accurately. We must also try to find words that will resonate with people to effect delight in their hearts. The only way we will do this is if we care enough about other people to communicate for their happiness.

**Solomon’s Propriety**

The beauty of the Song of Songs is that it is written with the beautiful balance of clarity and propriety.\(^{42}\) According to Douglas Wilson:

> The Song of Solomon is an erotic love poem. . . . This erotica is not graphic, or obscene, but it is clearly and unambiguously sexual. Put another way, the Bible contains literary passages, which we may read, in which another couple is engaged in passionate lovemaking. Nevertheless we are only invited to observe through a veil. . . . It would be inappropriate to invade the bedchamber of two individuals as individuals; what we have in the Song is a paradigmatic couple, setting and example which may be lawfully studied and observed—and imitated.\(^{43}\)

This teaches us how we too can be tactful in regard to hot button issues like sex, bringing forth biblical clarity and propriety. Otherwise, if we do not, we will tend to become too reactionary like the stiff prude who vilifies sex, or too loose like the insensitive libertine who is only interested in flaunting their liberty or making other people squirm.

\(^{40}\)Eccles. 8:6 and 10:17, respectively.

\(^{41}\)See Eccles. 12:10.


\(^{43}\)Ibid., 104-105.
Solomon’s Perceptivity

The most legendary instance of Solomon’s wisdom was when he threatened to divide a child before two mothers claiming ownership. Even *Seinfeld* borrowed it for an episode. Kramer and Elaine were fighting over the rightful owner of a bicycle. Newman said to split the bike in two and give half to each. Elaine thought that was a good idea while Kramer told Elaine to just take it since he could not stand to see the bike rent in two. Newman awarded the bike to Kramer, who said, “Sweet justice. Newman, you are wise.”

The beauty of Solomon’s tactfulness is two-fold here. First, the sheer shrewdness of his proposed solution is absolutely brilliant. It makes us stand in awe of how simple and smart he was to discern such a situation as that. Second, and this is often missed, is that he radiated humility. Just think of it, we are not dealing simply with two moms who would be more endearing, but two hookers who are more appalling. A king could have written them off as immoral beasts not deserving the time of the court. But he did not do that. Rather, he gave justice. Be inspired by Solomon, pray for even a fraction of his perceptivity, and be willing to associate with the lowly if you wish to be more tactful.

Wisdom breeds tact. Spend some time with Solomon and you will find yourself giving birth to more of it. It is true that Solomon did not possess all of the stock of tact in the Old era, but he certainly held quit a bit of it. May we sit at his feet, soak it up, and wring out tactfulness in the days ahead.

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441 Ki. 3.

45*Seinfeld*, “The Seven,” Episode 123 (aired February 1, 1996).

46Sixteen examples from the Old era, which I call the *sweet sixteen*, are these: 1) Joseph’s tenderness (Gen. 50:21); 2) Elders’ winsomeness (2 Chron. 10:7); 3) Amos’s punch line (Amos 1-2); 4) A nameless prophet’s Shrewdness (1 Kings 20:35-43); 5) Aaron’s restraint (Lev. 10:1-7); 6) Samuel’s advice (1 Sam. 10:7); 7) The sons of Issachar (1 Chron. 12:32); 8) Ezra’s refusal (Ezra 8:22; cf. Neh. 2:7); 9) Momentous Mordecai (Esther 4:13-14); 10) Abigail’s aptness (1 Kings 25); 11) Joab’s counsel (2 Sam 19:1-7); 12) Rahab’s ruse
CHAPTER 4

PAUL’S WINSOMENESS

“Tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy”

—Sir Isaac Newton—

Charles Swindoll wrote a brief, down-to-earth article contrasting tactfulness and tactlessness. He praised the former’s presence while he regretted the latter’s:

Wisely labeled "the saving virtue," tact graces life like fragrance graces a rose. One whiff erases any memory of the thorns. It's remarkable how peaceful and pleasant tact can make us. Its major goal is avoiding unnecessary offense, and that alone ought to make us crave it. Its basic function is a keen sense of what to say or do in order to maintain the truth and good relationships, and that alone ought to make us cultivate it. Tact is incessantly appropriate, invariably attractive, incurably appealing, but rare . . . oh, is it rare!

Remember the teacher who lacked tact? Each morning you wondered if that was the day you'd be singled out and embarrassed by some public put-down. Remember the boss who lacked tact? You never knew if he ever understood you or considered you to be a valuable person. And who could forget that tactless physician? You weren't a human being; you were Case Number thirty-six.

But the classic example of tactless humanity, I'm ashamed to declare, is the abrasive Christian (so-called) who feels it his or her calling to fight for the truth with little or no regard for the other fella's feelings. Of course, this is supposedly done in the name of the Lord—"to do anything less would be compromise and counterfeit."

This person's favorite modus operandi is either to overlook or openly demean others. Unfortunately, some preachers are the greatest offenders. They seem to delight in developing a devastating pulpit that scourges rather than encourages, that blasts rather than builds.47

Paul the Apostle was outstanding in the way of tact. He was not perfect, as was our Lord Jesus, but he was exemplary, wafting a tactful fragrance. Unfortunately, he stands in

(Josh. 2); 13) The germane Gittith (Ps. 8); 14) Jael’s nail (Judg. 4); 15) A fitting feast (Neh. 8:9-12); and 16) Jacob’s blessing (Gen. 49:28).

too stark a contrast to a certain tactlessness that lamentably lives and breathes within the
church. Too many “abrasive Christians” are running around messing things up in the church
and beyond, the consequence of which is that Jesus ends up stinking to people, and not for
the right reason.\textsuperscript{48} Paul has much to teach us in regard to tactfulness in his dealings with as
well as his writings to others.

Diversity in Dealings

In considering the panorama of Paul’s interactions with people, we cannot help but
come away with admiration for his versatility. He was not a one-trick pony. He did as the
occasion required, did what was fitting, and had about him a keen situational sensibility.
“All things to all men”\textsuperscript{49} was a motto of his ministry, and that is exactly what he was able to
achieve. In so doing, he was able to win and be winsome to many. Here are eight examples.

Consideration of a Jailer

During one of his incarcerations for his faith, Paul was singing songs and praying to
God with others in earshot of all the rest, including the jailer. At about midnight, there was
an earthquake that shook the shackles free. Everyone was free to go. In light of this, the
jailer was about to kill himself for he knew his life was forfeit if the prisoners escaped. And
in light of that, Paul spearheaded something very touching. He was able to keep all of the
prisoners together and even to persuade them to go back to jail so the jailer would not suffer
that fate. Paul cared more for the jailer’s life than his own comfort. And he was even able to
persuade convicted felons to do the same—he undoubtedly had a knack with people. How

\textsuperscript{48} As in the sense of 2 Cor. 2:16.

\textsuperscript{49} 1 Cor. 9:22.
about you? Could you do the same and sacrifice your own comfort for the well-being of another. It might just save their life.

Carefulness with Artemis

While in Ephesus, Paul never spoke evil of Artemis—that is, he did not personally attack her. Matthew Henry comments as to why this is so important:

Those that preach against idolatrous churches have truth on their side . . . but let them not be robbers of those churches . . ., nor blasphemers of those worships; with meekness instructing, not with passion and foul language reproaching, those that oppose themselves; for God’s truth, as it needs not man’s lie, so it needs not man’s intemperate heat.50

You see, the goal is not to level Artemis but to exalt Christ. Artemis may fall as a consequence, but it cannot be at the expense of Christ not being exalted or another false god will simply be raised where the other was razed. We need to be careful that our truth-tilling is not done out of malice but goodwill, that we do not seek to trample with the truth but rather be as tactful as possible in our telling of it.

Publicly and Privately

Paul’s ministry ranged from speaking in public to teaching house to house.51 This means he was able to spread the gospel collectively to groups of people as well as individually. In this we learn how different contexts demand different approaches. We need to be sure we are not giving public speeches to individuals nor preaching to an individual when a crowd is present. The former will seem like a soap box and cause people not to want to be around us. And the latter will be destructive. I have heard horror stories of pastors using pulpits to preach against the actions, words, or beliefs of certain individuals in the


church with whom they disagree over matters that are not so clear. Singling people out from the coward’s castle is highly inappropriate and does far more damage than good.

To Jews and Greeks

Not only did he vary his approach in teaching publicly versus privately, but Paul also varied his approach in how he addressed Jews versus Greeks.52 We have some obvious examples of this. One is in the fact that circumcision was an essential matter in one context where it was a harmful matter in another.53 Or take his sermon style in the synagogue versus his sermon style at Athens.54 The approach to the same gospel is very different in each case as he takes his audience into account. In the synagogue he relied heavily on the God revealed in the Old Testament, but in Athens he relied heavily on the God of nature. Same God, different approaches. Both sermons had Bible, but only one quoted Bible passages. And Jesus was not even mentioned by name at Athens. Paul was a man who did not think it was his Christian duty to stick to a script. A cookie-cutter approach simply will not cut it. It absolutely matters that we are getting our message across to our audience, a thing that tactfulness will help us with.

In Word and Substance

It has been said that talk is cheap because anyone can mouth great things but not everyone can do great things. Paul did not just talk the talk, he walked the walk.55 He put his money where his mouth is and adorned his ministry with good works, which is imperative

53See Acts 16:3 vs. Gal. 2:3; see also Acts 21:21 and 1 Cor. 7:18-19.
55See Acts 20:35 and 1 Thess. 2:9.
of all of us. We all know how tactless people are who are all talk. But those who roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty give evidence that is consistent with what they say. Let’s be sure we are doing that for the sake of the kingdom or we will keep people at bay who need to enter in.

Cleverness at Trial

With an ability to foresee the consequences of his words, Paul spoke up at his trial and said he was on trial for the doctrine of the resurrection. This was very true and very clever of him. It rubbed salt in an old wound that existed between the Pharisees and Sadducees, taking the scrutiny off of Paul and getting it on much more important matters. Jesus told us to be shrewd as serpents, and Paul is a good example of that, showing us how we too need to be on our toes if we are going to do critical things at critical times.

Inspiration amidst Danger

Paul was able to inspire an entire crew of people during hopeless circumstances. Unlike others, he was able to do so without sacrificing honesty, truth, and candor. (I say this because many “inspirational” things can tend to lack these.) He did not sugarcoat anything or give them any of the fluff, but still was able to lift their spirits. And this he did even after he had told them not to sail since this disaster would happen. But he was not like those people who get stuck on themselves and cannot get beyond “I told you so.”

Gloria Naylor and T. H. White touched on this, saying, “Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go and allow

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56 Acts 27.
57 See vv. 21, 30-32.
58 See vv. 22-26, 33-37.
people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over,"\textsuperscript{59} and, "The most difficult thing in the world is to know how to do a thing and silently watch someone else do it wrong."\textsuperscript{60} So can we get over ourselves, even when we are (or were) right, in order to encourage others? This is not easy, but we will need to do it if we wish to be tactful.

Sensibility with Saints

It was fitting for Paul to give thanks for other Christians, to give milk to some and solids to others, to exercise his liberty to benefit and never harm other people, and to be present with a collection if the occasion were to require it.\textsuperscript{61} These are a few more examples of how tactful he was with other believers in different contexts, and we would do well to do the same.

What an example Paul is for us of adaptation and winsomeness without compromise. The man who was so firm in his doctrine could also be so flexible in how he brought it to the world. According to Hendriksen, "It is probably not an exaggeration to say that one of the reasons for Paul’s almost unbelievable success as a missionary was his tact in dealing with men."\textsuperscript{62} Would we not be more winsome and successful as well if we were more tactful? That the Apostle was tactful in his dealings with people has been shown. He was also tactful in his writings.

\textsuperscript{59}Gloria Naylor, \textit{Encarta World English Dictionary}, s.v. “Naylor, Gloria.”

\textsuperscript{60}T. H. White quote; available from http://wisdomcommons.org/wisbits/3528-the-most-difficult-thing-in; Internet; accessed 28 March 2012.

\textsuperscript{61}See 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Cor. 3:2; 16:4; 8:13, respectively.

Empathy in Epistles

Paul both expressed tact in how he wrote and expected tact in what he wrote. Some say that tact and truth cannot go together, that they are like oil and water. One saying defines tact as “Not saying true stuff.” Now while tact does not share every truth, it nonetheless speaks truth. This is important to avoid flattery, which would be tact without truth (and therefore not true tact). Paul would never do that, but nevertheless had an uncanny ability to call a spade a spade, something many have come to admire him for. He would reprimand when it was required, addressing the tensions at Rome, the desertion at Galatia, the immorality at Corinth, the mysticism at Colossae, the despair at Thessalonica, the false teachers at Ephesus, and the disorganization at Crete. He was certainly no stranger to telling it like it is.

However, he would never do so until he laid the groundwork of love. Love always balanced his truth and vice versa. Paul always expressed his love to people in his letters. Look at any one and you will find a typical pattern of praise, encouragement, thanksgiving, and unifying before you will ever hear a reprimand for poor behavior. Even in Galatians where he wants to get down to business he does not leave this out, though its terseness cannot be denied. He always reminds his readers of context of love and trust first, building bridges that will be able to withstand hard truths that also need to be expressed. But he was careful to reach out and draw people close in friendship first.

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63 See, for example http://www.craftster.org/blog/?p=3771; Internet; accessed 28 March 2012.

64 See 1 Thess. 2:5.

65 More on Paul’s truthfulness, even crudeness and confrontation, will be addressed later in the chapter “A Time for Toughness.”
When I opened with Swindoll’s article on tact, I purposely left out the ending to place it here. He concluded:

No facts need be subtracted when tact is added, by the way. Years ago, I used to sell shoes. My seasoned employer, with a twinkle in his eye, instructed me never to say, "Lady, your foot is too big for this shoe!" I was taught to say, instead, "I'm sorry, but this shoe is just a little too small for your foot." Both statements expressed the facts, but one was insulting while the other was tactful.

It didn't shrink her foot, but it did save her face . . . and that's what tact is all about.66 Swindoll sounds a lot like Abraham Lincoln, who said, “The sharpness of a refusal or the edge of a rebuke may be blunted by an appropriate story so as to save wounded feelings and yet serve the purpose.”67 And moreover, he sounds a lot like Paul, who ever expressed tactfulness in his writings.

Paul not only expressed tactfulness, but also expected tactfulness from those to whom he wrote. He expected: the Romans to be sensitive to their siblings and courteous to their culture, the Corinthians to “promote what is appropriate” and to not be rude, indecent, or tactless, the Galatians to have a spirit of gentleness, the Ephesians to speak according to a moment’s need, the Philippians to let their gentle spirit be known to all men, the Colossians to have wise conduct in dealing with outsiders and to have salty speech, the Thessalonians to mind their own business and behave properly toward outsiders, Timothy to appropriately deal with different people, Titus to adorn his doctrine with appropriate behavior as well as to be unmacho, gentle and considerate, and Philemon to do the appropriate thing with

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Onesimus. Each one of these is worthy of a more in-depth look. But suffice it to glance at Paul’s expectations of the Romans.

Sibling Sensitivity

First, he would have the Romans be sensitive to their siblings. Romans 15:7 is vital to tactfulness among Christians: Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ has accepted us to the glory of God. It is found in the letter’s longest sub-section likely because it dealt with one of the largest problems in the Roman church—Christians dumping on other Christians over matters of liberty and conscience. Unfortunately, this problem still persists today so this verse has much to teach us as well. It requires that we have a welcoming spirit toward one another (“accepting” has to do with granting another access to our heart), and our example is no less than that of Christ, who granted us access even when we were helpless, ungodly, sinners, and enemies.68 So how much more then should we welcome those who are now helpful, godly, saints, and family?

This welcoming spirit was first mentioned in Rom 14:1 where Paul wrote about the different kinds of people in the church (strong & weak) with different opinions on issues (diets & days). And Jesus is pleased with each side! So you see, opposing viewpoints can and ought to exist in matters of conscience. Some say, “Black.” Others say, “White.” Together they make gray. Just look around and you will see that we still disagree in the church today about whether or not (or when) to celebrate certain holidays such as Halloween, Christmas, Easter, birthdays, and even the Lord’s Day. We disagree about food, drink, alcohol, tobacco, and fasting. We disagree about which books are okay to read, which movies are okay to watch, which music is okay to listen to, which dances are okay to

68Rom 5:6-11.
perform, or even if these things are okay at all. We disagree about what is acceptable to wear. We disagree about which education is best for our kids, be it public, private, home school, or what have you.

We disagree about politics, whether we should be Republican, Democrat, Independent, Libertarian, or none of the above. We disagree about how to spend money. (If every dollar we spent were public record, I would be willing to bet that each of us would have problems with everyone else’s spending.) We disagree about our worship services—music style, Bible translations, the kind of bread used for Communion, modes of baptism, and so on. And we disagree about many knotty theological issues like the end times. Has the hair on the back of your neck stood up yet? You have opinions on these matters, and others disagree with you. Diversity exists under the Lordship of Jesus. And since it comes with his approval, despising ought not.

Paul says that both the strong and weak are prone to being judgmental and closing their heart to their brother or sister, so he puts forth a question of caution to the one who despises: “Who do you think you are? Are all Christians answerable to you as Lord of heaven and earth?” We need to beware of a critical, fault-finding, and unwelcoming spirit toward those who differ from us in ethnicity, status, denomination, calling, gifting, personality, opinions, and behavior. Do you struggle with an unwelcoming spirit toward others in the faith? My guess is you do. I know I do. We need to ever fight against this tendency for the good of the church. In this way will we fight against the unwelcoming spirit, maintain a welcoming spirit, and be tactful toward the body of Christ in all of its wonderful diversity. Keep an open heart toward those with whom you disagree and healing streams of tact will flow in the church.
Paul also expected that the Romans would show courtesy to their culture. He wrote: “Respect what is right in the sight of all men.”

Does he mean that we are to live out this respect before a watching world and be apparent or have a respect for what is right according to their standards and get their approval? The former is certainly biblical, but (perhaps surprisingly) so is the latter. So in some sense we should seek the approval of our community and culture, having regard for what it thinks is good. Having a healthy view of culture should shed further light on this.

Culture has religious roots. God commanded it right away in the beginning and even reiterated it for a fallen world. Culture then is what results from people exercising lordship. And the kicker is that the unbelieving still do reflect God’s goodness in culture. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that even shortly after the Fall, farming, or agriculture was progressing even through the sin-ridden Cain. Later in the chapter, construction workers, musicians, and blacksmiths all progressed even among the godless. Beyond these, we also get glimpses of good cultural skills among the ungodly such as: the cooking of Esau, the education of Egypt, the carpentry of the Sidonians, the kingship of Nebuchadnezzar, the livelihood of Nineveh, the military prowess of the Chaldeans, the shrewdness of a manager, the prudence of a scribe, the common sense of a town clerk, the neighborliness of a

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69Rom. 12:17.

70See Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12.

71See 2 Cor. 8:21; 1 Cor. 10:31-33; 1 Sam. 2:26; Pr 3:4; Luke 2:52; Rom. 14:18.

Samaritan, and the piety of the Athenians,\textsuperscript{73} just to name a few. Since God’s goodness is reflected in culture, we must acknowledge this overlap—this is the key to being able to affirm what is good in our culture’s view and obey this command from Paul.

Respect, carefulness, and consideration are what we need in regard to what our culture views as right and good. And that word “right” is so broad it covers untold areas of our culture, dealing with things that are not only considered good and right but proper, fitting, better, honorable, honest, fine, beautiful, precious, and so on. So please, think it through. We will be more tactful as the church when we are careful and considerate of our culture. We will be tactless if we simply write it off and pigeonhole it, losing our winsomeness for the gospel of Christ in so doing. So participate in culture, seek to better it, and be considerate of what it considers to be good, without compromise, but also without excuse.

Undoubtedly, Paul was a tactful man, exemplified on several different occasions. He also wrote with tactfulness and expected the same kind of lifestyle from his readers. He obviously took notes from his Lord. Unfortunately, too many who boast of Paul and Jesus and their teachings are too easily devoid of such a quality that happened to also accompany them. Harry Ironside was grieved by this and wrote:

F. W. Grant has well said, “Our Lord had no stereotyped method of dealing with souls.” He took up each case on its merits. He did not talk to the woman at the well in the same way he addressed Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews. He proved the depths of each heart and ministered according to the need. Jesus’ devoted follower, the apostle Paul…was ever exercised in regard to the same thing. He was “made all things to all men if by any means he might save some.”…How different in all this was both the Master and the servant to many who today seem to pride themselves on their outspokenness and indifference to the views and opinions of others.

Is it any wonder that men turn from them in disgust and refuse to listen to what seems to them but the dogmatic utterances of self-centered egotists…\textsuperscript{73}See, respectively, Gen. 4:1; Gen. 27:4; Acts 7:22; 1 Kings 5:6; Dan. 2:37-38; Jon. 4:11; Hab. 1:8; Luke 16:8; Mark 12:34; Acts 19:35-41; Luke 10:30-37; and Acts 17:22.
much divine wisdom is needed, and how close must the servant keep to the Master Himself in order that he may know how to answer every man.74

We do not wish for people to turn from us in disgust as the church. To do that, we must be considerate of others and their feelings and not simply in ourselves and what we wish to say, even if that is the greatest message in the world. We have the greatest message in the world, and it needs to be applied in the best possible way. Paul has much to teach us regarding that. Other people in the New Testament have exemplified tact as well,75 but Paul seems to be the cream of the crop. May we as the church be more like the kind of people that Paul, and Jesus, would have us to be. Versatile. Sensible. Courteous. Tactful.


75Sixteen examples from the New era, which I call the *sweeter sixteen*, are these: 1) Joseph’s consideration (Matt. 1:19); 2) Elizabeth’s seclusion (Luke 1:24); 3) John the Baptist’s deference (John 3:22-30); 4) John the Apostle’s compassion (John 19:27); 5) A Centurion’s request (Luke 7); 6) A Canaanite’s ingenuity (Matt. 15); 7) Gamaliel’s prescription (Acts 5:33-39); 8) The Twelve’s thoughtfulness (Acts 6:1ff); 9) Stephen’s stalwartness (Acts 6-7); 10) Philip’s timeliness (Acts 8:26-39); 11) Peter’s explanation (Acts 11:1-18); 12) The Council’s counsel (Acts 15); 13) Lydia’s initiative (Acts 16); 14) Berean nobility (Acts 17). 15) A town clerk’s caution (Acts 19:35-41); 16) Macedonian generosity (2 Cor. 8:2).
“Social tact is making your company feel at home, even though you wish they were.”

—Anonymous—

There are verses in the Bible that for some reason or another seem to rise to the top and become very well known among Christians. In fact, many Christians probably have committed verses like John 3:16, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 8:28 to memory and would be able to recite them if asked. My hunch is that there is another verse in this list:

But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.¹

This verse has singlehandedly spearheaded the field of study known as apologetics. The word “apologetics” comes from the Greek word “apologia” (translated “defense” above) which means a speech in defense or a reasoned statement or argument.² Literally, it is our English word “apology,” which can be both helpful and misleading. It can be helpful because an apology in our vernacular normally involves some type of reason or defense for our behavior. But it can also be a bit misleading because in English, an apology also involves sorrow, or being sorry, which is not part of the Greek.

Volumes have actually been written on the subject of apologetics, and it would be surprising not to find this verse front and center in any one of them. In these volumes, many

¹1 Pet. 3:15 (emphasis added).

apologetic methods have been developed (classical, evidential, cumulative case, presuppositional, or reformed epistemology), but my fear is that the apologetic manner is too often neglected. At the end of 1 Peter 3:15 there are five little words with so much to say. Can you recall what they are? Let me reiterate—yet with gentleness and respect. We need to be sure these do not become the forgotten five.

Yet With

The first two words in this little clause get us off to a good start. “Yet” seems to imply that the way people normally defend something is by asserting themselves (as opposed to gentleness and respectfulness). Is that not true? When we are called to defend ourselves with argument, do we not tend to get personal and even harsh at times with those opponents of ours? Is it not easy to lose gentleness and respect very quickly? But that is not to be the way of the Christian. Instead of getting snippy, we rather ought to keep a different attitude and demeanor.

The word “with” adds to the clause in that we need to have what follows in our apologetics or we will have missed the boat. If our apologetic lacks gentleness and respect, we essentially do not have the Bible’s apologetic. We therefore need to be sure we are not caught without these two qualities—to do so would be the equivalent of getting caught with our pants down. Gentleness and reverence, you see, is what equates tactfulness according to Peter, and must be part of our apologetics.

I once knew a man who thought it was his Christian duty to be purely combative. He was armed with truth, and was so eager to give a defense that he could meet someone new and in just a few seconds it seemed he would find an area of doctrinal disagreement. He

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3Steven B. Cowan, Five Views on Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).
was like the people that John Piper spoke of who become obsessed with spotting doctrinal error: “They’re like dogs that are trained so completely to sniff out drugs at the airport, that even when they’re off duty they greet everybody that way. It doesn’t make for a very welcoming atmosphere.”

One time during a worship service he gave a twenty plus minute announcement (!) for a small group wherein he pretty much targeted every contrary opinion held. (He probably only stopped there because of the look of dread on my face, as you might imagine.) The icing on the cake was that he referred to himself in cyber world as the “Calvinist Gadfly,” priding himself on being annoying. I have wondered why God ever brought him into my life, and if for no other reason I think it may be to show me just one example of sheer tactlessness and therefore what not to be like—an apologetic devoid of gentleness and respect.

It is certainly a sad state of affairs when an apology needs to be made on behalf of an apologist. Granted none of us is perfect, but listen: it is incongruous for any who want to display an accurate defense for Jesus to not also want to display the appropriate demeanor of Jesus. If we seek to have our “T”s crossed and “I”s dotted as far as orthodoxy is concerned, but lack even a shred of tact, we can be essentially be worthless. That is the dilemma. We may have all of our ducks in a row as far as a defense for Jesus goes, and even have a good heart, but if we are not discerning as to the appropriate time or manner, then we may not effectively communicate Christ for a lack of tact. Having gentleness and respect will help

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5 I am thinking of verses like 1 Cor. 8:1 and 13:2 here that speak to the importance of love, which as you know by now is a parent of tact.
ensure we are communicating the demeanor of Jesus while we seek to give a defense for him. This is what will help the reader and its writer to not be sorry apologists for Jesus’ sake.

**Gentleness**

Peter used the term “gentleness” a few times in his first letter. It is the Greek word *prautes*, which has to do with meekness or mildness. According to James Strong:

> Meekness toward God is that disposition of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting. In the OT, the meek are those wholly relying on God rather than their own strength to defend them against injustice. Thus, meekness toward evil people means knowing God is permitting the injuries they inflict, that He is using them to purify His elect, and that He will deliver His elect in His time. (Is. 41:17, Lu. 18:1-8) Gentleness or meekness is the opposite to self-assertiveness and self-interest. It stems from trust in God’s goodness and control over the situation.⁶

John Calvin, referring to gentleness, further said, “Unless our minds are endued with meekness, contentions will immediately break forth. And meekness is set in opposition to pride and vain ostentation, and also to excessive zeal.”⁷ To this John Frame adds, “Gentleness is the way of love and peacemaking, a trait quite opposed to the contentious spirit. In circles like my own that emphasize a militant orthodoxy (rightly, in my view), gentleness is the most neglected of the biblical virtues. Is it possible to be militant and gentle at the same time? Of course. Let the Lord Jesus himself and his apostles show us the way.” So gentleness is a disposition that will keep us on an even keel and quell contentions around us.

Now, for Peter to call for gentleness in this context is very radical indeed. Remember, Peter is not writing to a seminary or a Sunday school. He is writing to those who reside as outcasts, driven from their homes, and who are undergoing a heated ordeal of

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persecution simply because they obey Jesus Christ. If they were at all like me, the first thing they would want to do when their rights get trampled is retaliate. And if I choose for whatever reason not to give into retaliation, I am still not out of the woods. What about becoming bitter towards them? Restraining these impulses is difficult, and doing so is what is called longsuffering or patience. But Peter is calling for gentleness, which involves but goes beyond patience because it requires a response that is mild-mannered. So meekness is not weakness—it involves great strength. This should help to keep us from thinking that being gentle is somehow equivalent to being namby-pamby.

In addition, Peter used this term (the adjective praus) one other time in his letter when he called wives to adorn themselves with a gentle spirit. Gentle behavior is what is valuable to God and is what an obedient wife must model if she wishes to win her disobedient husband. So we see that gentleness is a winsome quality. If gentleness is so winsome that wives can win over their unruly husbands, and likewise can win over those who were breathing down the necks of those to whom Peter was writing, it can also be winsome in our day. These definitions, comments, and uses are all helpful in understanding what Peter is requiring, but I think we still have more to learn of gentleness by looking at what the Son and Spirit have to teach us.

Jesus referred to himself as “gentle.” A prophet called Jesus gentle. And Paul admittedly learned this quality from Jesus. Paul even implicitly told the Philippians to model this gentleness in telling them how Jesus emptied and humbled himself, not

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9See Matt. 11:29, Matt. 21:5, and 2 Cor. 10:1 respectively.
demanding his own rights in self-assertiveness. And like Paul, Peter also marked this quality in Jesus to move his readers to act like him, writing:

   For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

Jesus not only was not self-assertive, but he trusted his Heavenly Father throughout each and every injustice that was done to him. That, according to Strong, is gentleness. And moreover he appeals to our joy in telling us that those who have this quality will be happy. I am not sure about you, but from where I sit disgruntled defenders of the faith are not very effective in advancing the message of Jesus. But those who have a happy disposition due to their gentleness certainly do, even if their theology still needs some wrinkles to be ironed out. Jesus can help us out a lot with gentleness. So can the Holy Spirit.

If we want to have the capability of gentleness, we need the Holy Spirit, since as we have already seen, it is his fruit. And since it is his fruit, he reasonably tells those in whom he resides to be fruitful, putting it on display and into practice. He implores us to have it toward one another in the body of Christ. He tells us that we were chosen specifically for this quality. He tells us that we need it in order to properly correct opposition and if we

10Phil. 2:7-8.
12Matt. 5:5.
13Gal. 5:23.
14Eph. 4:2.
15Col. 3:12.
really want to be wise and understanding. It is a very important virtue in many different contexts. No less in apologetics.

Therefore gentleness is a quality of our Lord, is the effective working of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, and is the winsome manner in which we are commanded to give our defense and hope to others, even those who are most egregious. Just imagine for a moment being the inflictor of suffering and having a response of gentleness given back to you. Would that not be impressive? Would you not want to know what makes that person tick? Or imagine the outcome of such a people who are humble and mild-mannered, not arrogant and spit fiery, amidst tense circumstances and stressful situations. Those who are calm during the storm and who can keep their cool when the heat is turned up, are they not winsome? So how might we go forward, contending for the faith, but doing so in a spirit of gentleness even in the harshest of circumstances that we may face? We need gentleness when it comes to defending our faith. And we also need reverence.

Reverence

“Reverence” is the second word of our focus clause, which in the Greek is phobos. Our English equivalent is “fear” or “phobia.” We have dozens of terms that include the word “phobia.” From monophobia, the fear of being alone, to agoraphobia, the fear too many people, people have fears of just about everything. So just what kind of fear does Peter mean for his readers to come away with here? As we read through his letter, he alludes to a couple that he may have in mind here. Theophobia, or the fear of God, is the first.

Peter’s first mention of “fear” in relation to our heavenly Father has to do with his bringing all of our life’s conduct into judgment. 17 Now, fear of God for the Christian is different than that of the unbeliever, for the Christian does not need to fear God’s wrath, 18 but the latter most definitely should. 19 This is probably why we get a translation of “reverence” since we are still to have a kind of fear of God since he is still high and holy and will bring our lives into his perfect light. And in so doing, we can still suffer loss by having the worthless aspects of our lives burned away. 20

In two other places in the letter phobos shows up in relation to God. In 2:17 believers are specifically told to “fear God” and in 3:14 (the verse just prior to our apologetic verse) we read that they are not to fear the intimidation of unjust tormentors. Furthermore, if we go back to Isaiah 8:12, where this line is quoted, we will find that the Yahweh went on to say in the next verse that his people were not only to not fear men but were to fear him, the Commander of the heavenly host. Can we conclude then that the fear of God is all that Peter had in mind? Well, not exactly, for there is also another use.

Peter also in his letter told servants to subject themselves to their masters with all phobos, even to those who are unreasonable. 21 Slaves with bad masters were still to display a kind of fear toward them. We already noted that there is an unhealthy fear of men, but here we see that there is a healthy kind, which is likely why it is translated “respect.” There may be unjust men in places of authority, but they are still to be shown proper respect for the

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17 1 Pet. 1:17.
18 Rom. 8:1; 1 John 4:18.
19 John 3:36.
20 1 Cor. 3:15.
21 1 Pet. 2:18.
positions they hold. And doing what is proper is doing what is tactful. Again how radical this is that Christians were not only to be gentle, but respectful in light of the ungodly authorities who condemned them for their faith in Jesus.

So when Peter writes that we should have phobos in our apologetics, is it a fear toward God or toward people? Or could it be both? I like how John Frame frames this:

Those translations which use the term “fear” perhaps intend it to be taken as the fear of God (the NASB says “reverence”), or at least the apologist’s perception of the spiritual dangers of the situation. “Respect” would mean treating the unbeliever as what he is—a person created in the image of God. It would mean not talking down to him, but listening to him—not belittling him, but taking seriously his questions and ideas.”

I think the answer is clear that both are needed in our apologetics, for I do not believe we can be said to appropriately fear men without a proper fear to God, and neither can we be said to fear God with no regard for men who are made in his image. May we come forward with both of these, taking each to heart and putting them into practice, which will surely adorn the account of our hope in the Lord Jesus.

If we are honest, we have not always displayed gentleness and reverence in communicating our faith to others. I have certainly had my fair share of tactless moment. But it is imperative that we recognize our tactlessness and repent of it. In the area of apologetics, we should be aware that it is so easy to be needlessly offensive and defensive, especially since we carry an offensive message and are to be ready to give a defense for it. But we must remember that the message of the cross is about the greatness and glory of Christ, especially in his humiliation, and the not-so-greatness of ourselves. How mad it is then to take the message of the cross in a self-exalting way. We ought to never be defensive due to our insecurities or offensive due to our intentions which stem from selfishness.

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O how we need to heed this crucial clause! It is imperative that we be ready, always ready to answer those who will hurl questions at us regarding our faith and hope in our Lord Jesus. But it is just as imperative that we do so with all gentleness, reverence, and respect so that we may be winsome and effective for the kingdom. Without this tact, we will likely be mainly ineffective. But those who desire to display an accurate defense for Jesus must also desire to display the appropriate demeanor of Jesus. As far as apologetics goes, whatever your method might be, by all means please be sure that it is tactful in its manner. That may be just the thing that God uses to bring others to Christ even if your apology itself is not quite up to snuff.
CHAPTER 6
A TIME FOR TOUGHNESS

“Wisdom is knowing when to speak your mind and when to mind your speech.”
—Evangel—

In the film “Romancing the Stone,” Joan Wilder is going on and on about what it means to be a real man in order to shame Jack Colton. She mentions how a good man would have some kind of manners toward a lady, unlike the rugged Jack who has seemed inconsiderate to her from the get-go. In the middle of her tirade, a deadly snake begins to sneak up behind her. She could not see it—but Jack could. By this point he had already begun to slowly unsheathe his machete. Joan is so caught up in her litany that unbeknownst to her, he swings the machete over her shoulder to behead the snake, giving her time to scream only at the last second when she saw the knife coming at her. When she realized Jack missed her, she also realized that he just saved her life.

Spurgeon tells a similar story of a famous painter of St. Paul’s cathedral who kept inching back on his platform admiring his work. He inched so far that one more and he would have plummeted to his death on the floor far beneath him. A workman noticed him nearing the edge. But instead of shouting at him, which would have done him in, he instead splattered paint on the masterpiece, which caused the painter to rush forward in absolute disgust at the workman. But, as he came to learn, it was the very thing that saved his life.¹

The last thing I want in considering tactfulness is for people to be paralyzed by thinking their goal is to always find niceties or pleasantries to say and do. While we ought to be considerate of other people’s feelings, we ought not to be held captive by them. Sometimes the right timing is right now, without delay. Sometimes the right manner is what appears to be tactlessness. Sometimes the machete has to come out, or a ruinous splotch of paint. (Sometimes we have to rain on someone’s parade.) There is a time when toughness is appropriate and therefore tactful. And this can come in the form of sarcasm, mockery, deception, bluntness, vulgarity, and the like. Here are the sweet & sour sixteen. They are sweet because the applications are appropriate. But they are also sour because the situations are anything but ideal.

The Father’s Wrestling

Imagine facing off with God as your opponent. This would be like that famous picture of a pipsqueak trying to push a sumo wrestler. The Psalmist touched on this:

> With the kind You show Yourself kind; With the blameless You show Yourself blameless; With the pure You show Yourself pure, And with the crooked You show Yourself astute.²

Notice the parallelism. Those who show the virtues of the Father’s character will find themselves in harmony with him. Then there is that last clause. Two different words are used, but they are synonymous. Essentially, David is telling us that those who are contrary to God will find God to also be contrary to them. Different words show that God’s contrariness is not of the same kind as that of people—his is according to what is good and right. Going toe to toe with the Almighty by living contrary to him is not very wise and will bring about his tough love. He will be astute, shrewd, and tactful, but tough nonetheless.

²Ps. 18:25-26.
The Son’s Poignancy

You cannot read Jesus too far before you get to something hard to swallow. There might be none as intense as him in words and deeds. Flipping over the tables of business people in frustration certainly sent a loud and clear message. On other occasions he looked at people with anger, told people they would be better off dead, suggested some pluck out eyes and cut off hands, refused to perform miracles, called people childish, challenged disciples with hard sayings like hating family, asked if they wanted to go away like the rest, and even called one “Satan.” He also rained down blows of woe on the turbo religious. In rapid fire succession he would label them nit-pickers, morons, assassins, kleptomaniacs, swellheads, blind Seeing Eye dogs, religious play actors, blockades to heaven, exiles to hell, campaigners of a double hell, rotting, stinking corpses, devilish, and residents of a fool’s paradise. ³ Tell us what you really think, Jesus. Yikes.

He was particularly odious to pious people who thought very highly of themselves because he poked serious fun at them. A camel through the eye of a needle is funny. So is straining out gnats and swallowing camels, which is kind of like caring about getting chapped lips but not cancer. Highlighting the fact that they tithed their spice rack was no slouch, and neither was the way Jesus portrayed them giving, praying, and fasting—finding ever so many ways to say, “Look at me!” Finally, there was the hilarity of someone nitpicking at another’s speck of sawdust in their eye when they had a stud in their own. Jesus could indeed be very funny, very fiery, and very poignant in how he spoke to certain people.

³See Matt. 23.
The Spirit’s Command

The Holy Spirit is credited with authoring Scripture, so any tough love could be said to be his. I will just pick one. In Jude, he said there are times when we need to snatch others because of the imminent danger of fire. Think of that. When a building is on fire, do we worry about bruising someone when they are in danger of burning? Of course not. They need to be snatched quickly and even violently. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and that there are times when it is no time to mince words, or actions.

Jeremiah’s Half-Truth

Jeremiah was commanded by the king to only give half of the story to the officials when they asked why he had been with the king. And he obliged, essentially telling a half-truth. What are we to make of this? I can hear some saying, “Well, a half-truth is a lie, and all deception is wrong, so he sinned. There is forgiveness, but he should not have done it.” Is that the case? Well, no. There are times when God’s enemies ought to be deceived.

There are other examples of half-truths in Scripture. Take the Midwives’ masquerade. They said they could not destroy the boys as Pharaoh ordered because the mothers were too vigorous. But Moses tells us it was because they feared God. At best, if the vigor thing was true, it was only a half-truth. And God even favored the midwives for acting so shrewdly. Or take Samuel’s cover story. He did not want to go to Bethlehem to anoint a new king for fear Saul would kill him. After talking to God about this, God told him to say only that he was going to sacrifice and not mention the other juicy details. Again, at

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4Jude 23.

5Jer. 28:24-28.
best a half-truth. And that one came from God’s own lips. So while half-truths can be deceptively wrong, they can also be deceptively right, depending on the situation.

**The Magi’s Disobedience**

A Christmastime favorite is the story of the wise men from the east following a star to come and worship the recently born King of the Jews. When they journey through Jerusalem, they ask around if anyone knows where he is. King Herod caught wind of all this and summoned the Magi to himself along with the other Jewish leaders. They agreed that Bethlehem was the place, and Herod sent them with strict orders to return and give an account when they discovered where and who the Messiah was. The Magi seem to have had no problem with this request.

But after they gave their gifts to honor the King, they were told in a dream not to return to the king but to go home a different route. And they did just that. This shows us that at times we ought to disobey people, even those in authority, when God clearly tells us something different. Like Peter and John said, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.” ⁶ There are fitting occasions for civil disobedience.

**A Fool’s Dessert**

According to Proverbs, fools should be dealt with strictly. We are warned not to get caught up in their games but to find a way to deal with them in rather pointed ways. ⁷ To do so, we need to first see how repulsive and laughable they are. We are told that they are

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⁶Acts 4:19.

⁷Prov. 26:3-5.
repulsive, like dogs returning to their vomit.  They set their sights on money bags and right when they pounce to catch them, they fly away.  They also laze to the point that they do not even have the strength to pull their hand out of the chips to stuff their face anymore.  And they end up getting caught like Wile E. Coyote.  He would always set traps for the Roadrunner who would glide right on through them.  Then he would test the trap himself and sure enough the hammer would fall.  Funny.

Again, we must be careful and strict with fools.  But we must also remember the deal with the fool—it is you and me.  Proverbs has a way of making us wince and laugh at fools to deal strictly with us.  We should be able to wince and laugh at ourselves because in all honesty we have played the fool too many times.  And if we play the part of the fool, we will get the fool’s dessert, which is why we have all eaten our own stinking vomit and done laughably absurd things.  Repentant people can wince and laugh at themselves, but proud people cannot.  And we will be more tactful as recovering fools than we will be as the pretentious who think that their own farts do not stink.

Elijah’s Sarcasm

Some think that tactfulness is for those who lack sarcasm.  I disagree.  The Bible uses sarcasm, and Elijah is a good example.  All of the false prophets had been begging Baal

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8Prov. 26:11; cf. 2 Pet. 2:22.
9See Ps. 2:4.
10Prov. 23:5.
11Prov. 26:15.
12Prov. 26:27.
13For example: http://www.cafepress.com/worldsfair.187732631; Internet; accessed 20 March 2012.
to answer their prayers by fire. But for hours he had been silent. Since Baal was not answering, Elijah decided to have some fun with it. He teased them by suggesting that perhaps he is so deep in thought so that he cannot answer them. Or perhaps he was on vacation or is sleeping so soundly that he could not hear. This was Elijah’s way of saying that Baal seemed “out to lunch.” Elijah even suggested that Baal might be on the pot and so unable meet the demands while he relieved himself. What? Did the Bible use bathroom humor? Yes. This meeting was, to be sure, no laughing matter. But sometimes people can be so foolish and silly that they need someone to point it out to them. Elijah gladly accepted the role, and there may be times when we will need to as well.

I had an instance where I used sarcasm effectively, I think. I had just heard a sermon that mainly dealt with keeping the phrase “Merry Christmas” alive. The preacher was appalled that people would say the likes of “Happy Holidays” to butt out Jesus from Christmastime. I was equally appalled, but at his point. Is this really a battle worth fighting? So I waited in line to shake his hand after service and said to him, “Happy Holidays!” He did not even get it at first, but then paused for a moment and laughed a bit uncomfortably. He likely half laughed because I was only half joking. It was sarcastic, but I made my point, which seemed fitting at the time.

Isaiah’s Satire

Isaiah used satire to poke fun at people who worshiped idols. The image he gave was that of a guy taking a log and using half of it to bake bread and the other half to make a god to worship. I am not sure how you can tell which end should be used for what, but apparently there are some really talented people who can. The image is to be funny so that people will look at this person and say, “How stupid.” And in saying that they should realize
that they are doing that very thing. Sometimes a straw man has to be set up so that people will knock it down and realize that they did so to themselves. Amos set one up.\textsuperscript{14} Nathan set one up.\textsuperscript{15} Jesus set one up.\textsuperscript{16} So did others. There is a folly in worshiping the things we make with our own hands. And when we take ourselves too seriously our religion becomes merely a reflection of ourselves and not of God. It takes satire sometimes to see this.

\textbf{Moses’ Intensity}

Moses could get pretty upset. This could be a great deficit,\textsuperscript{17} but it could also be an asset. As things escalated with Pharaoh, Moses went out from him at one point in hot anger. What is so interesting about this is that he did not treat the sovereignty of God mechanically. Think of it. God already told him in no uncertain terms that he was going to harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he would not let the people go. So Moses could have said at this point, after Pharaoh refused to let the people go for the tenth time, “Well, that is what I figured. God said it. Oh well. Que sera sera.” But in getting so upset he shows that he cares more about Pharaoh and the people of Egypt than Pharaoh did. He knew that because of Pharaoh’s stubborn heart children were going to die. And it moved him. It is not okay to become mechanical and unfeeling in light of God’s sovereignty.

On another occasion Moses came down from the great mountain after meeting with God and discussing matters of holiness. Ironically, the people did something unholy in making themselves a god to worship since Moses was gone so long. When Moses came to the camp and saw the scene, he got very upset. Eventually he made a cocktail, making the

\textsuperscript{14}Amos set up a kind of punch line for the people of Israel in his day.

\textsuperscript{15}Nathan’s parable in 1 Sam.12 is well-known for this as he confronted King David.

\textsuperscript{16}See Matt. 21:41.

\textsuperscript{17}As in when he killed a man (Exod. 2:12) and when he struck the rock (Num. 20:8-13).
people drink their charred god mixed with water, which was the adult version of getting their mouths washed out with soap. Yuck. Yet creatively appropriate.

Nehemiah’s Fisticuffs

Fighting, cursing, striking, and hair pulling all sound more fit for the Ultimate Fighting Challenge than for the church, but these are exactly what we find Nehemiah engaged in. (Ironically, the UFC does not allow hair pulling.) When Ezra had received similar news to that of Nehemiah, he pulled out his own hair,18 but Nehemiah went for that of the guilty parties.19 What are we to make of this? Well, apparently it resulted in a needed purification and was a good thing, something that met the moment’s need. There may be times where this kind of harshness is needed, but by all means, be sure it is one of those moments or you will have a lot to be sorry for in retrospect.

Job’s Ferocity

Job recounted to his friends that he broke the jaws of wicked people and stole the prey from between their teeth.20 The picture is that of Job taking an innocent animal from the teeth of a predator by sheer ferocity, smashing its jaw and saving the victim. While he probably did not break a person’s jaw (like Nehemiah may have), he still nonetheless must have been very fierce with those who tried to take advantage of the less fortunate. Times like these are not for wearing kid gloves. They are times where the gloves need to come off.

18Ezra 9:3.
19Neh. 13:25.
20Job 29:17.
Amos’ Fieriness

Amos could be fiery. He called the women of Israel “cows.” I would say that being called a cow is a fairly universal insult, and he did not mince words with such as these. Sarcasm also seemed to be in his repertoire as he told the people to go and sin it up. Imagine getting to the point where a prophet has to tell you to just keep on doing the bad stuff you are so good at. How deep in it must you be at that point? Finally, he could make people aware of the sword that hung over their head by a hair, warning those who were grossly lazy. They were at home on the couch playing video games when they should have been looking for a job. People in a state like this need to be shaken up, and someone to shake them up.

Isaiah’s Vulgarity

The intensity is building as we go through these sweet and sour examples, and when we look to Isaiah we find the use of vulgar language. To be vulgar typically has to do with reference to bodily functions. Vulgarity, as I am sure we are aware, is largely inappropriate. Bodily functions often are the root of many dirty jokes and language. But vulgarity is not always inappropriate. Isaiah used it when he spoke of the people trying to get right with God on their own. This is such a nasty thing that he has to find something nasty to equate it with. So he says that it is like filthy rags.

You probably did not wince at “filthy rags” because that is a sterilized translation. Bloody tampons are most likely what Isaiah had in mind here. Ever seen those? Ever smelt

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21 Amos 4:1.
22 Amos 4:4.
23 Amos 6:1ff.
24 Isa. 64:6.
those? There you go. When you try to make things okay with God in your own strength that
is what God sees and smells. Get that picture in your head and never forget it. We either
have stinking, bloody tampons or a sweet-smelling Savior who bled for us. Not both. Our
good works are good for nothing. And for those you know who are trying to do it, you might
have to get graphic with them to show them what God really thinks.

**Ezekiel’s Obscenity**

Obscenity is similar to vulgarity but is also distinguishable. It has to do with that
which is done away from the public eye. It literally means “off-stage,” referring to
something that would not be done during a play. So to be obscene is to take what is normally
done in private out into the public sphere. Sex is a good example of this: it is for private and
not public. This, like vulgarity, is largely inappropriate and continues to escalate in
American culture as people try to outdo one another in who can be more obscene. But there
are times when it is appropriate, as Ezekiel demonstrates.

He said something obscene which, again, you will not see this in our sanitized
translations. But as Douglas Wilson points out, obscenity is to be used in order to point out
the real obscenity that is going on.\(^{25}\) So Ezekiel did, essentially describing Israel as a woman
so hot for her neighbor that she spreads her legs open wide at him because he has a large
penis like a donkey (we might say “hung like a horse”), ejaculates like a horse, and used to
squeeze her nipples and play with her boobs when she was younger.\(^{26}\) Obscene? Yes.
Inappropriate? No. Sometimes we need the unsanitized version to make our point in order
to reveal the true obscenity.

\(^{25}\)Douglas Wilson, *Fidelity* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999), 15.

\(^{26}\)Ibid., 17.
Paul’s Crudeness

In a couple of places Paul could be rather crude in his use of language. One of those places was in his letter to the Galatians. The circumcisers were wreaking havoc in this church by telling people they had to be circumcised to be saved. Some of them were buying into it. Paul was not happy to say the least. So he strung about seven references to circumcision together to address these folks. The final one, the coup de gras, was his wish that in their circumcising they would cut the whole thing off—castration.27 As a male I say, “Ouch.” Point taken—this is serious stuff.

On another occasion he used a word in Greek that is somewhere between “crap” and the “S”-word.28 I realize this gets taken by some people to justify the use of what we call “swear words.” And I think we should have those conversations regarding language. And I admit that on some occasions there seems to be no better word. But let’s be careful. This does not justify a potty mouth. But let’s also not forget that there is a time for some graphic language in dealing with serious matters.

Paul’s Confrontations

Lastly, we look at the confrontations that Paul found himself in. He could certainly pack quite a punch when needed. He name-dropped for one, calling out Euodia and Syntyche, Phygelus and Hermogenes, Hymenaeus and Philetus, and Demas and Alexander for certain things. Paul also faced off with Peter on one occasion, confronting his aloofness to the Gentiles. He used to dine with the swine but then withdrew for the Jew. This

27Gal. 5:12.

hypocrisy could not be stomached by Paul and he would not stand idly by. Beyond this, do you remember another occasion when Paul handed someone over to Satan? That is not a subtle point he is making.

And how could we cover the litany of things that he addressed. He confronted those who had dirty minds and those who had minds of metal. He confronted those who told old wives’ tales and those who taught doctrines of demons. He confronted home wreckers and ship wreckers. He confronted those who hunted witches, who quarreled over words, and who mooched off of the church. He would not be silent, but he also would not molly coddle.

There is a time for toughness, as seen in a variety of examples that show a variety of ways we may have to go about tough love in our day like others did in theirs. But I want to end with a note of caution. We must be sure to exercise carefulness. I say that because it is too easy to get a hold of stuff like this and think we can go use any kind of language we wish or be as harsh as we want, all with God’s approval. Not so. John Frame commented on this:

> In my view, strong language is appropriate against people (1) who claim to have some religious teaching authority, and (2) are proclaiming false doctrine on serious matters, leading believers astray, or are dishonoring orthodox doctrine by ungodly lives, and (3) have ignored clear and graciously expressed warnings that their conduct displeased God. The Protestant Reformers used similarly strong language (which can usually be justified on these principles).

> Most of those today who are seeking to emulate the biblical and Reformation writers in this respect are overdoing it, in my opinion. They should learn to give at least equal attention to peacemaking.⁹

> There is a time for toughness, but be sure you are reading the situation correctly. If there is a fire, then by all means snatch those who are inside. But be sure the fire is real and not of your own making. Fires, to be sure, are pretty few and far between. Should they come, though, we should not be paralyzed but motivated to action, ready to pull out the machete or splatter some paint.

CHAPTER 7

SENSIBILITY IN HISTORY

“It is tact that is golden, not silence.”
—Samuel Butler—

The thing that speaks the loudest in regard to Christian tactfulness in the history of the church is its silence. Silence is olden. It is hard enough to find traces of tact, let alone anything dedicated to it in the church’s history. Is treatment given to it anywhere in the great councils and confessions of the church? In Aquinas’ Summa Theologica? In any of John Calvin’s institutes of the Christian religion? In the systematic theologies of Charles Hodge or Louis Berkhof? In the works of Benjamin Warfield or Jonathan Edwards? In any of the charming sermons preached by Charles Spurgeon? Perhaps this is the root of our problem today since we too are virtually silent on the matter.

In fact, it would appear that tactlessness is more readily available than tactfulness. One theologian spoke of the Council of Ephesus in the fifth century saying, “Nowhere is Christianity less attractive.”1 The council boiled down to a divide between Nestorius and Cyril on the nature of Christ. Phase one of the council involved Nestorius arriving first with 16 bishops and one armed guard. His companion, John, had 42 other bishops scheduled to come, but they were late in arriving. Meanwhile, Cyril showed up with 50 bishops (including that of Ephesus) and a companion named Mymnon who himself had 52 more

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1Frank A. James, Course outline for History of Christianity I, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, 2003, 34.
bishops. Without full Nestorian support, Cyril began the council, deposing and
anathematizing Nestorious ad infinitum. This concluded the first phase.

The second phase involved John and the 42 showing up. They deposed Cyril and
blasted them as heretics. This brought about a third phase where Cyril met again and both he
and Nestorious (and company) began to write the emperor to sling mud at the other. The
emperor arrested them all and allowed only eight from each side to state their case before
him. After the dust settled in favor of Cyril, supporters of Cyril, not content with the victory,
felt the need to persecute Nestorious. And even after Nestorious had died they found his
grave and threw rocks at it.

Unfortunately, the history of the church is riddled with such things. There have
been wars, crusades, schisms, and denominationalism through and through.² Luther became
a bitter man in his old age as he faded into the background. “This exile from the public
scene,” wrote Roland Bainton, “chafed him the more because the conflicts and the labors of
the dramatic years had impaired his health and made him prematurely an irascible old man,
petulant, peevish, unrestrained, and at times positively coarse.”³ Also in his day one of his
contemporaries wrote a book against a common opponent titled, “Against the Dumb Ass and
Stupid Little Dr. Eck.”⁴ Further, when immersion came onto the scene again, it did not do so
without a fight. John of Liden was one who suffered having his flesh pulled out piece by

²John M. Frame gives a good history of schism and denominationalism in his work Evangelical
Reunion (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991); available from http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_

³Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (New York: the Penguin Group, 1995),
292.

⁴Frank A. James, Course outline for History of Christianity II, Reformed Theological Seminary,
piece with a hot pliers before he was permanently immersed, like so many others had been as well.⁵

So has the church been utterly devoid of tactfulness? We do not need to go that far. Often times it is the bad press that gets the most press. And there are examples of tact, like in the case of Saint Augustine being more sympathetic to the lapsed Christians of his day.⁶ Lapsed Christians were those who buckled under the pressure of persecution against their faith. They either sacrificed to the emperor as a god, receiving a certificate that proved their allegiance, or bought a certificate on the black market to avoid having to sacrifice while giving the appearance that they had. When the storms of persecution passed, there was talk about what should be done about all of this by those who stood their ground and refused to sacrifice or compromise.

Donatus, and previously Cyprian, had been very strict and harsh with these lapsed Christians, setting up interviews with each one to scrutinize their level of sorrow. Those who bought certificates could be allowed back in if they had a sufficient level of sorrow. Those who sacrificed also needed the appropriate remorse, but even in light of that would only be allowed back in on their death bed.⁷ But Augustine was more understanding, and so more tactful it would appear. And it could be further argued that many councils, creeds, and speeches like Luther’s “Here I stand” speech were fitting and therefore tactful in their day. But again, it must be noted that despite these examples, pro and con, there is virtual silence on the treatment of tactfulness (including its aliases).

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⁵Ibid., 45-46.

⁶Frank A. James, Course outline for History of Christianity I, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, 2003, 42.

⁷Ibid., 19.
In all of my searching, I have only been able to find one article on Christian tactfulness that is more than 100 years old. It was written by J. R. Miller in 1880, who I have already quoted early on in this work. And it happens to be a gem. He criticized those who pooh-poohed tactfulness in his day:

There are some who regard 'tact' as insincerity or hypocrisy. They boast of their own honesty, which never tries to disguise a dislike for a person, which bluntly criticizes another's faults even at the price of his friendship. They believe in truth---in all its bare ruggedness, no matter how much pain it may give; and condemn all that thoughtful tact which regards human feelings and tries to speak the truth in such a way that it may not wound and estrange.

They love to speak the 'woe' against those of whom all men speak well, and that other saying of our Lord's---that he had not come to send peace---but a sword. Their favorite prophet is Elijah, and they refer often to the biblical condemnation of certain who prophesied smooth things! They mistake bluntness for sincerity. In the name of candor---they employ sarcasm, and sharp and bitter attack on people. When others are grieved or hurt or insulted, they answer, "I am a blunt man; I say what I mean, and you must excuse me!"

Frankness is to be honored---but this is not frankness; it is impertinence, cruel unkindness, the outbreak of bad nature in him who speaks; which, instead of doing good, works only harm.8

He then went on to address those who might think to use Jesus as a sanction for their rude behavior, using those woes as a justification:

I think we must read them in the light of his tears over the city of his love, which had rejected him, pulsing and tremulous with divine and sorrowing tenderness.

His whole life tells of most considerate thoughtfulness. He had a wondrous reverence for human life. Every scrap of humanity was sacred and precious in his eyes. He bore himself always in the attitude of tenderest regard for everyone. How could it be otherwise, since he saw in everyone a lost being, whom by love he might win and rescue; or whom by a harsh word, he might drive forever beyond hope? He never spoke brusquely, or made truth cruel. He saw in every man and woman enough of sadness to soften the very tones of his speech and to produce feelings of ineffable tenderness in him. He moved about striving to impart to everyone, some comfort or help.9

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9Ibid.
Quite simply, Miller called tact the “art of doing things.”\(^{10}\) It affords pastors, educators, and families the ability to calm storms in their relationships and get more good accomplished than they otherwise would. Tact will also, he argues, provide a key to unlock every heart in leading people to Christ. It is not a lack of brains or talent in the church that keep people from coming to Christ; it is a lack of tact.

And once people come to Christ, they need tact to continue to get along. It has been said that the number of days in the history of the human race that have seen no war have been very few. And it seems that as the church we have mirrored this. We desperately need in our day the sweet reasonableness that Paul spoke of to the Philippians in their day, which Cromwell picked up on in his day, and which Harry Ironside expanded on in his:

> What a lovely trait is this sweet reasonableness in a Christian! It is the very opposite to that unyielding, harshly dogmatic, self-determined spirit that so often dominates in place of the meekness and gentleness of Christ. “I beseech you, my brethren,” wrote Cromwell to the warring theologians of his day, “remember that it is possible you may be wrong.” How apt we are to forget this when engaged in discussions as to either doctrines, methods of service, or church principles!

This does not mean that one need be lacking in intensity of conviction or assurance as to the correctness of doctrines, principles, or practices which one believes he has learned from the word of God. But it does imply a kindly consideration for the judgment of others, who may be equally sincere and equally devoted—and, possibly, even more enlightened. Nothing is ever lost by recognizing this and remembering that we all know in part.\(^{11}\)

Christians ought to be the most winsome people in the world. We ought to be great bridge builders. We ought to be in touch with all kinds of people. We ought to be tactful. But too often, as in the history of the church, this subject does not make a peep in all of our talk. So let us get to talking about it: over coffee, in Bible studies, from pulpits, at the dinner table, when we lie down, when we wake up, so on and so forth. And once we get to talking

\(^{10}\)Ibid.

about it, the church can in turn have an impact on the countless other spheres that need it just as badly. You see, it is more than just churches that need this. Families need this. Co-workers need this. Teammates need this. Schools need this. Politicians need this. Communities need this. You need this. I need this. Therefore, may we be silent no longer. And may we never think that as aliens we therefore have a right to be alienating.
EPILOGUE

God is tactful in all his ways
Others too had it in their days
So excuses aside, let’s get a knack for this
And pave a way for Christian tactfulness
BIBLIOGRAPHY


