

# On Courtesy and Candor

I know that “balance” is one of the most important things in life. But the suspicion has sneaked up on me that sometimes folks who plead for balance are just too lazy to figure out which side they are on. I am suspicious of the fellow who never hears any two people disagreeing but what he offers this sage opinion: “I think both of you are right. What we need is a balance between what each of you is saying.” This fellow, and those like him, apparently operate with a split-the-difference philosophy of judging ideas: the truth is always the “Golden Mean” between whatever alternatives have been presented. But is that always the way to get at the truth?

For example, I have in mind to say some things about “courtesy” and “candor” in discussing religious differences. I might merely repeat the axiom that we need both courtesy and candor, that “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) is what is right. But I am not going to do that. At least, not just that. Rather, I want to say that the balance between courtesy and candor tends to be upset (at least in our society) more by “excesses” of courtesy than those of candor. The reason why that is so has something to do with human nature, I think.

**Courtesy.** The desire to please and not to offend comes as standard equipment on most human beings. The need to be liked and accepted is basic enough that we naturally shrink from being discourteous. There are exceptions, of course. Some individuals seem to find that belligerence and rudeness come very naturally to them; but they are conspicuous exactly because they are exceptional. The majority of us are eager to please, and the pressure that puts on us to be tactful and mannerly is basically good.

There is not a thing in the world wrong with being gracious. It is instructive and refreshing to read about the Lord that “all bore witness to him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth” (Lk. 4:22). And Paul wrote, “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col. 4:6). Not a few of us could do with some lessons on how to be gracious even when that is what we are trying to be. While the impulse to say things in the right way may be instinctive, the “know how” may elude us if we do not work at acquiring it.

When we have the opportunity to discuss differences of understanding, whether with a non-Christian neighbor or a fellow member of the Lord’s body, we need to be conscious of how important it is to speak in a way that respects the dignity of the other person as a human being. And if we are honestly wanting to persuade him to our viewpoint, we need to use every skill we have ever learned in “seasoning” our speech to make it as palatable as possible. But, to repeat, most of us have a natural inclination to do that, even if we do not always execute the inclination very skillfully. For every time when we fail our religious neighbor in the matter of courtesy, there are many more times when we fail him in another way.

**Candor.** As a teacher, I must confess that I never cease to be astonished at how frequently people do not “get the point” of what is being taught. No doubt a part of the problem is that we sometimes assume more background understanding than our interlocutor actually has. We

get to the end of a discussion and find that our main point has not really registered because the other person did not know something initially that we assumed he did know.

Very often, though — and I am more convinced of this the more I deal with other people — our basic affirmations do not get across simply because we are not being as direct as we think we are. If our subjective feelings are the “instrument” by which we get a “reading” on how frank we are being, we often get a false reading because our feelings incline so much in the direction of not giving offense. As a general rule, if we intend other people to understand exactly what we are saying about the truths of the gospel we need to be more candid, rather than more courteous. It is not that courtesy does not matter. It is that courtesy will tend to take care of itself, while candor will not.

I do not find a person in the New Testament who strikes me as having any more direct a personality than Paul. Yet we find him being concerned that even he might pull back so much in deference to courtesy that the gospel would not be communicated clearly: “And (pray) for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel . . . that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:19,20).

Unless I have grossly misread my own experience, the great need of our day is for clarity in conversation about Jesus Christ. In an environment where discussion of substantive religious differences is socially stigmatized, the pull of courtesy away from candor is strong indeed. We may not always get the balance exactly right, but most of us would get it more nearly right if we said what we mean more candidly. To be sure, what some people call candor is nothing but malicious bullying — but who can deny that what we sometimes call courtesy is nothing but cowardice and compromise? When souls are at stake, failures of candor are eternally more costly than failures of courtesy, simply because the gospel must be understood to be obeyed. A man may not obey the truth if he does not like it; but he cannot obey it if he does not understand it!

Gary Henry