

Paul
David
Tripp



reactivity

How the Gospel
Transforms Our
Actions & Reactions

“The gospel of Jesus Christ is meant not only to deliver our souls to heaven but also to transform our behavior on earth. And, deeper still, it is meant to transform our desires, our attitudes, and our instincts. It is even meant to transform our reactions and responses to those who oppose us, disagree with us, or sin against us. In this timely book, Paul Tripp calls us to react to the chaos around us in a distinctly Christian way that counters the toxicity that exists deep within our hearts and deep within our culture. If we would heed his call, the world would be blessed, the church would be strengthened, and the Savior would be glorified.”

Tim Challies, author, *Seasons of Sorrow: The Pain of Loss and the Comfort of God*

“*Reactivity* offers a rich gospel perspective for navigating relationships with Christlikeness. The practical applications paint a hopeful picture of what could be if we let God’s word transform us. A must-read for anyone engaging with others online!”

Ruth Chou Simons, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author; artist; Founder, GraceLaced Co.

“In this helpful and timely volume, Paul provides us with a much-needed blueprint for the use of technology that not only avoids sin but also advances truth, beauty, goodness, and love in an otherwise hostile space. I can’t recommend *Reactivity* highly enough.”

Scott Sauls, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church; author, *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *Beautiful People Don’t Just Happen*

“Every day we find ourselves walking through a minefield of online rage. But now our friend Paul Tripp helps us turn from that ‘culture of toxic reactivity’ toward a community of life-giving response to Jesus. What could be more attractive—or urgently needed?”

Ray Ortlund, President, Renewal Ministries

“Paul David Tripp says that logging off Twitter won’t get you away from angry reactivity. The polarizing way we communicate has seeped from social media into our families, our communities, and our churches. With wisdom and grace, Tripp lays a path from frustrated reactivity to gospel-centered communication. While this book would benefit anyone, I’d especially recommend it to any Christian leader on social media.”

Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, Senior Writer and Faith-and-Work Editor, The Gospel Coalition

“We communicate as much through our thumbs as with our lips, and with that come both unprecedented opportunities and dangers. Paul Tripp guides us with profound wisdom and insight. It’s hard to think of anyone who wouldn’t benefit greatly from reading this.”

Sam Allberry, pastor; author, *What God Has to Say about Our Bodies*

“In an age of harried and often thoughtless engagement through social media, Paul Tripp offers us a gospel pause. He gets the reader to stop and reflect on a Christian’s witness through our social platforms. I am so grateful for this resource and pray that the Lord would use it to foster wisdom for Christians to be salt and light in this world of unwise reactivity.”

John Perritt, author; Director of Resources, Reformed Youth Ministries; host, *The Local Youth Worker* podcast

“Paul David Tripp offers not only an accurate and sobering diagnosis of our day, but also a hope-filled treatment plan so that we might get better. Tripp rightly addresses the church—the rage is not just out there, it’s in here too. And he rightly reminds us of the gospel. By the end of the book I felt a renewed peace in our good and sovereign God, as well as a renewed drive to honor the Lord online, in person, and in my own heart.”

Jen Oshman, author, *Enough about Me* and *Cultural Counterfeits*

reactivity

Other Books by Paul David Tripp

A Quest for More: Living for Something Bigger Than You

Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide for Parenting Teens (Resources for Changing Lives)

Awe: Why It Matters for Everything We Think, Say, and Do

Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad

Come, Let Us Adore Him: A Daily Advent Devotional

Do You Believe?: 12 Historic Doctrines to Change Your Everyday Life

Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry

Forever: Why You Can't Live without It

Grief: Finding Hope Again

How People Change (with Timothy S. Lane)

Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change (Resources for Changing Lives)

Journey to the Cross: A 40-Day Lenten Devotional

Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church

Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God

Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make

My Heart Cries Out: Gospel Meditations for Everyday Life

New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional

Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family

Redeeming Money: How God Reveals and Reorients Our Hearts

Sex in a Broken World: How Christ Redeems What Sin Distorts

Shelter in the Time of Storm: Meditations on God and Trouble

Suffering: Eternity Makes a Difference (Resources for Changing Lives)

Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense

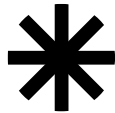
Teens and Sex: How Should We Teach Them? (Resources for Changing Lives)

War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles (Resources for Changing Lives)

Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy

reactivity

How the Gospel Transforms
Our Actions and Reactions



Paul David Tripp

Reactivity: How the Gospel Transforms Our Actions and Reactions

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*To the best ministry team ever. You are dedicated, faithful,
and smarter than me. I am blessed that God sent you my way
and that I get to walk this ministry journey with you.*

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Introduction

I AM NOT A TRAINED cultural critic or a digital media analyst, but I deeply believe that it is always helpful to look at whatever we are facing within ourselves, inside the Christian community, and in the surrounding culture through the lens of Scripture and the particular lens of the gospel. It is this discipline that has guided every book I have written. With each book I am asking the question “What would this thing look like if I were to view it from the vantage point of the gospel?” For most people the gospel is a means of past justification and future destination. Gloriously, the gospel is both of these things, but it also provides for us, right here, right now, a way of seeing, a means of interpreting, a guide to understanding, and a way of living. The truths of the gospel, its comfort, and its call give us a brand-new way of understanding and dealing with everything in our lives. The gospel is the gracious gift of the one who promised to give us everything we need not just for eternal life but also for godliness, that is, a God-honoring life between the time he takes us as his own and the time we go home to be with him.

It is important to remember that your Bible is comprehensive and not exhaustive. It does not tell you everything about everything. If your Bible were exhaustive, you'd have to transport it in

five 18-wheelers to church on Sunday. There are many things the Bible is not a source of information for. But your Bible is comprehensive; while not telling you everything about everything, it gives you a lens through which to look at everything. It is with this understanding that I have written this book. I am giving you everything you need to understand our present culture, particularly our social media culture. The purpose of this book is to look at the culture of toxic reactivity, which seems to touch all of us daily, through the lens of the gospel. When we look at the dominant themes in our culture this way, we find understanding, clarity, calling, new direction, and hope. I have spent my life unpacking the glory, beauty, and depth of the gospel. This is the lane that God has called me to, and I plan on staying in that lane until I'm on the other side.

We live in the boisterous noise of a confusing world of thousands of voices. In the din of the noise, it's hard to hear yourself think. And with the power of digital media, it is nearly impossible to escape the cacophony and have enough quiet to meditate and evaluate. We carry a little device in our pockets or in our purses that connects us to thousands of opinions on thousands of topics every single day. Self-appointed influencers tell us how we should think and how we should react. No topic, no matter how small or how deeply significant, is left untouched. It seems as if everybody has something to say about everything. This creates confusion, and confusion is not a healthy or safe state of being.

We desperately need something in our lives that can cut through the noise of all the opinions, help us to think correctly, and respond appropriately to the things that we are now facing and will face down the road. I love how God speaks of his own truth in Proverbs 1:

To know wisdom and instruction,
 to understand words of insight,
 to receive instruction in wise dealing,
 in righteousness, justice, and equity;
 to give prudence to the simple,
 knowledge and discretion to the youth—
 Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
 and the one who understands obtain guidance,
 to understand a proverb and a saying,
 the words of the wise and their riddles.
 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
 fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:2–7)

Let me unpack what God says his truth is and what it is meant to do for us. First, God wants us to know that his truth is *practical* at a real-life level. It is meant to impact and shape your everyday living (“instruction in wise dealing,” “the one who understands obtains guidance”). He wants you to know that his truth sets a *moral framework* by which you can evaluate anything (“instruction in . . . righteousness, justice, and equity”). He wants you to know that his truth *meets the needs of everyone* (“prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—Let the wise hear and increasing in learning”). And he wants you to know that his word helps you to *understand mysteries* you would not otherwise understand (“to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles”). This is what a biblical/gospel lens is meant to do for you as you grapple with the issues that press in on you every day.

This book is not a wide-ranging scientific or sociological examination of this current cultural moment, but it will ask us to put on

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our gospel glasses and take a look at the character and tone of the conversations that are taking place among us in person and, in a more focused way, on the media sites that we participate in daily. My hope is that looking at *what* we are saying to one another and *how* we are saying it through the lens of the gospel will not just inform us but will also convict and transform us, so as a gospel community we will stand above the toxicity that seems to be everywhere around us and shine as a city on a hill in a sadly darkened world.

1

Reactivity

I POSTED MY FIRST TWEET in February of 2009. I had been watching the rise of the internet and then the rise of what we now call social media. As I watched, it became clear to me that the way the human community connected and communicated was about to go through a seismic period of change. I thought that these new, internet-based media could be powerful tools for the gospel of Jesus Christ. I determined that I would post nothing but the gospel (except for my fun personal Instagram page). Over thirteen thousand tweets later, I still get up each morning, sit in the family room of our loft, and tweet three gospel thoughts. I will do this as long as I am able because, without leaving my chair, I can touch people all around the world with the gorgeous truths of the person and work of Jesus Christ and I can help them connect those truths to their daily living. Literally millions and millions of people have been touched by the gospel from my chair in that little room in Philadelphia. What stunningly powerful tools have been placed in our hands!

But there's a problem with tools. The hammer that can be used to build a house can also be used to smash a window in a

robbery. The screwdriver that can be used to assemble something useful can be used to stab someone in a fit of anger. So it is with social media. Twitter today is not the Twitter of 2009. I am again and again shocked at the darkness that now lives there. Much of that darkness is in the way that people communicate with one another behind the protective cover of a remote screen and keyboard. I never post anything but the gospel and its call for our daily living, but I have had the ugliest responses, often slandering my beliefs, character, and motives. I have been told that I am a Marxist, that I have forsaken the gospel, and even that I am no longer a Christian.

Often it is evident in the disrespectful things that people have posted about me that people have not read the full post. They have reacted to a title or an opening line. It's a hair-trigger response that has become all too normal. Because it is a quick reaction, the communication is accusatory, unloving, and ungodly, and the content is largely unhelpful. I try my best to live as a humble student of the things of God. I don't think I am beyond the need for correction. I know that I have many things yet to learn. I deeply believe in the essential sanctifying ministry of the body of Christ. I believe that my faith, and the theology that delineates it, is a community project. I think loving correction is a grace. But the communication of disgust helps no one. Disrespectful responses seldom contribute to good things in the life of the receiver. These kinds of reactionary responses not only dishonor the receiver; they dishonor God. How can your heart not break when you read the ugly, dismissive, disrespectful, and accusatory responses to posts of wise and godly men and women?

The Twitter that I saw as a wonderfully powerful tool for gospel good is now talked about as a cesspool, a dark and abusive place.

There's even new lingo to capture that darkness. A person who attacks good, well-meaning people with abusive responses is known on social media as a "troll." And sadly, there are a whole lot of trolls out there. This reactionary darkness is so great that my friends in ministry often feel the need to take a Twitter break, that is, to separate themselves for a time from the darkness. Reactions without wisdom, reactions not shaped by love, reactions devoid of respect, reactions not tempered by honest self-examination, reactions that are more judgmental than corrective, reactions fueled by pride not humility, and reactions driven more by emotion than thoughtful reflection never produce anything godly and good.

But sadly, the culture of reactivity is not limited to social media. Consider our present political culture. It seems as though the days of thoughtful, respectful civil discourse are gone. The cooperative spirit, fueled by dignity and respect, that is necessary for politics and government to work seems either dead or taking its last gasps. Political figures seem better at yelling invectives at one another than they are at engaging in dignified and productive debate. The 2016 Republican nomination process alone should have left all of us shocked and saddened. The reactive ugliness on stage after stage was an embarrassment to the democracy we say we hold dear. While Democrats and Republicans call one another names, it is very hard for the work they are supposed to be doing on behalf of the citizens they represent to get done. If character really does matter in politics and government, then the prevalence of this ugly reactivity should grieve and concern us.

But the thing that has initiated the writing of this book is the presence of this reactivity culture in another essential domain. Sadly, this disruptive and dysfunctional culture of communication has infected and stained the church of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was

in his final moment of tender instruction of his disciples, words meant to prepare them for a life of faith after his ascension, he said this: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Let these words sink in. Jesus is saying that the mark of a disciple, the core indication that you have been visited, rescued, and transformed by grace, is not your theological prowess, your quick wit, your ability to win an argument, the success of your ministry, the number of your followers, your skill at getting clicks, how well you can put a person in his place, or the force of your communication. No, it’s this one thing: love.

Love of others is not natural for us. Because of the selfism of sin, humble people-helping and God-honoring love is always the result of divine intervention. As John says, the reason we have any ability whatsoever to love one another is because we have first been loved by God (1 John 4:19). John even goes so far as to say this: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7–8).

Since God *is* love, everyone who knows God and is walking in communion with him should have a life that is characterized by love. Stop for a moment, put this book down, get out your Bible, and read 1 John 4. John’s argument for the motivational centrality of love in the life of each one of God’s children could not be stronger. Do you carry this central mark of discipleship? Is everything you say shaped by it? Is every reaction you make tempered by it? Is it the character quality you are known for? Do you make your point known, but at the expense of love? Do you react without taking the time necessary to have that reaction shaped by love? Does a quick-witted putdown motivate you more than a humble,

patient, gentle, and loving response? Many of us are reacting in a way that falls way below the standard set for us in 1 John 4.

So many of the dark reactions on Twitter that I wrote about earlier were sadly from a Christian to another Christian. Daily I read responses by Christians to posts that are devoid of love—harsh, harmful, self-aggrandizing daggers, sent with little regard for the damage they do to the writer, the reader, and the reputation of the people of God. But I want to emphasize again that this lack of love is not just part of social media culture; we see this lack of love in the everyday reactions in the body of Christ.

I regularly mentor fourteen young men in ministry, with whom I meet individually. I think this may be the most important work I am doing right now. Each time I walk to meet with one of my guys, I am filled with a sense of the honor of what I am doing. That I have been chosen by God to do this work and that I have anything at all to offer these men argues for the power of God's intervening and transforming grace. In my conversations with these wonderful men, I have heard story after story of the ugly and disrespectful responses they have received from people they have endeavored to love and serve. But what has most shocked, concerned, and saddened me is that many of those unloving reactions came by way of a text, written in the middle of the pastor's sermon. Think about this. The person wasn't even willing to have his response tempered by the rest of the sermon. The writer didn't take time to consider what it would be like for the pastor to see the text not long after pouring his heart out in preaching.

Pastor after pastor has talked to me about dreading Monday morning emails, where all too often their motives, theology, or character is questioned because of one thing they said in a sermon, one announcement that was made, one conversation in the aisle,

or some other thing that he did or did not do during or after a Sunday gathering. One pastor said to me, “Monday is the hardest day for me, not just because Sunday is emotionally and physically exhausting, but because of the emails and texts I get from the people that I love and serve.” Whenever I hear a pastor say this, playing in the background are the words of Jesus, “By this shall all people know that you are my disciples.” Of course, every pastor is a person in the middle of his own sanctification and is less than perfect. Of course, every pastor at some point will say and do wrong things. Of course, every young pastor has areas in his heart, communication, character, and conduct where he needs to mature. Of course, every pastor is a member of the body of Christ and, like everyone else, needs its ministry in order to grow. But there is still no place for dark, reactionary, disrespectful, judgmental, and harm-producing responses to him and his ministry.

I am afraid this reactionary culture also lives in our homes, where often our responses to one another are more shaped by stirred-up emotions than by humble, forgiving, and patient love. In our homes, flashes of irritation, anger, hurt, and impatience propel way more of our responses to one another than we are willing to admit. Let’s be honest: it’s not unusual for the communication between husbands and wives to be reactive rather than constructive. These responses lack biblical thoughtfulness, they’re formed more by emotion than contemplation, and they provide more heat than light. The same is true with parenting. It is so easy as parents to react emotionally in ways that are unhelpful and surely don’t advance the crucial work of heart transformation that our children need.

Here is the concern of this book. Reactivity is not new; you can trace it back to the garden of Eden. What is new is that this way of responding has become more and more normalized. I am afraid

that we have gotten used to what Twitter and other social media sites have become. We have often passively accepted the denigration of our political discourse. Pastors have gotten used to the shots they regularly take as congregation members react to them and their ministry work. Much of our family talk would create a lot of embarrassment for us if played in public. We cannot, *we must not*, normalize a reactivity culture that is more of a culture of harm than a culture of grace. I need you and you need me, but if we keep slugging one another, sooner or later we're going to quit talking. This devolution of communication and its impact on relationships, which the Bible tells us are essential to God's ongoing work of rescue and transformation, are not okay.

By the power of God's amazing grace, we can do better. So, I want to begin by naming things in our responses to one another that we cannot allow to be normalized, and then for the rest of the book I want to propose a better way. In many ways, what I am going to propose is not new because it has its roots in the ancient wisdom of the word of God and its central theme, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Don't Normalize What God Would Call Abnormal

God has made it clear that the norm for his children should be love. It is the thing that the listening and watching world should know us for. We should be recognized not only for the purity of our theology but also for the consistency of our love. This love is the new commandment that Jesus left with his disciples in his final days with them: "that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). The standard for our responses to one another is not just some standard of cultural niceness or human love. The standard is nothing less than

the generous, sacrificial, pure, forgiving, and faithful love that God has so graciously showered down on us in the person of his Son.

Now, I will speak for myself here: this kind of love is not natural for me. If I am going to live out what God has chosen to be the norm for his children, then I need to start by confessing how utterly foreign this kind of love is for me and cry out for his rescuing and transforming grace. You see, I don't so much need to be delivered from the people around me who seem hard to love and be transported to some community populated by easier-to-love people. No, I need to be rescued from me, because until our Lord returns I will continue to be a flawed person, living near and relating to flawed people in a fallen world. In the world that I have just described, God's norm is only ever the result of the powerful operation of his grace.

So, because of the clarity of his call to love and his promise to us of empowering grace, there are things that we cannot allow to be normalized in our everyday responses to one another.

1. The normalization of emotionally driven responses. In our middle-of-our-sanctification imperfection, we will be hit powerfully with compelling and motivating emotions. Sometimes it will be hurt, sometimes fear, sometimes irritation, sometimes anger. If you go where those emotions lead you, you will do and say things that you should not do or say. So, if you want to live out the kind of responses God has called you to, you have to be good at saying no. I don't mean a cancel culture "no" to other people. What I mean here is saying no to yourself. Saying no to where that spontaneous anger is leading you, no to where fear may lead you, and no to the hurt that often makes you want to inflict hurt on others. How can you do this? God knew that between the "already" and the "not yet" your struggle with remaining sin would be so great that he did more

than just promise you forgiveness. God got inside of you by his Spirit. The Spirit that lives inside of you blesses you with the power to say no to where raging emotions may lead you and to turn and go in another, more restrained and loving direction. What would otherwise be impossible for you is made possible by the Spirit's presence and power, and that is a very good and encouraging thing.

2. *The normalization of anger-driven responses.* Although I talked about anger above, I want to give it added attention. It doesn't take very careful observation to conclude that we are living in an angry culture. Outrage of some kind, directed at someone who has created some offense somehow and needs to pay in some way, greets us every day. The level of hair-trigger intolerance of even minor foibles, errors, or offenses should concern us all. We are mad, and we are about to let you know it. Be very careful of what you post or say, because there are a lot of angry readers and listeners out there who are ready to respond with vengeance.

As I have reflected on the angry state of things, the words of James have come back to me again and again: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:19–20). May we be those who are known for being ready to listen, slow to speak, and not given to quick angry reactions.

3. *The normalization of disrespectful responses.* The level of cruelty, dismissiveness, and downright mockery that lives on Twitter (and other social media sites) within the Christian community is breathtaking and disheartening. Being theologically correct does not give you the license to be mean. Defending a biblical truth doesn't make it okay to mock the person you disagree with. Standing for what you are convinced is right does not give you permission to

question the thinking and integrity of the person who has taken another position. Theology, properly understood and lived, will never produce meanness, misogyny, disrespect, mockery, or cruelty of any kind, ever. It produces just the opposite.

Listen to the words of Paul, who says that if the truth you say you believe and understand doesn't result in love, then maybe you don't understand it as well as you think you do: "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions" (1 Tim. 1:5–7).

What straightforward and convicting words. May we pray for grace to always hold truth and love together, never willing to abandon one for the sake of the other.

4. *The normalization of self-righteous responses.* Humility radically changes the way you respond to the sin, weakness, failure, immaturity, error, or opposition of others. If you admit how wrong you are capable of being, how you too can be thoughtless, how prideful you can be, and how patience is still a struggle for you, then it's much harder to go on the attack. And if you know more, understand more deeply, and have arrived at positions that are more biblically right, you have gotten there only by means of the intervention of divine grace.

Humility makes it hard to be quick to criticize, dismiss, or judge others because you know you're numbered among them. It is easy to judge people with the law that you are convinced you keep. It's easy to quickly react judgmentally to wrong when you are convinced you are almost always right. It's all too easy to see others as weaker and lesser, when they haven't lived up to the standard that defines

how I think I am living. It's easy to refuse to listen when I have judged another person as having little to offer to someone like me. Self-righteousness turns the human community into a toxic and dangerous place to be, where outrage and judgment are just around the corner and where honesty is dangerous and opinions come at a cost. A spirit of personal always-rightism will never produce patient, humble, loving responses to others. The truth is that none of us has anything of value that we didn't receive and, if we received it, we should neither boast because we have it nor mistreat the person who seems to be without it (see 1 Cor. 4:7).

5. *The normalization of vengeful responses.* A quick scan of Twitter responses reveals that it is not unusual for responses not just to debate, rebuke, or confront, but to harm. A person who is hurt by a post responds in a way that is calculated to hurt in return, to damage a person's reputation, or even to attempt to end someone's career. Here's what we need to remember: vengeful anger is always the result of some person trying to do God's job. There is only one judge of the heart. There is only one who is able to mete out perfectly holy and just judgment. Consider the powerful and practical words of the apostle Paul, in a passage that seems like it was written for today's reactive culture:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:17–21)

How humbling it is to admit that we still have moments when we are tempted to do what God alone is able to do, that is, to deal out the judgment that we believe another person so much needs. So, the exhortation here is always needed, always timely. Paul's directives are clear and, if they were heeded, would transform our culture of reactivity. Never repay evil for evil, ever. Always overcome evil with good. Leave vengeance to the Lord. When Paul says, "Leave it to the wrath of God," he's saying, "Get out of God's way and let him do what he alone is able to do." Human anger that is weaponized by vengeance and unleashed by self-righteousness never produces anything good. Evil in the face of evil only multiples the evil. Only good in the face of evil will produce a harvest of good things.

6. *The normalization of individualism.* Disrespectful, dismissive, vengeful, mocking, motive-judging, and condemning reactions never produce healthy, loving, vulnerable, honest, reconciled, and unified community where confession, repentance, and forgiveness are encouraged. This is the kind of community God carefully designed for us to live in. By his wise plan, it is not good for us to live alone. We are born with the need for relationships. Each of our lives is a community project. So we must always respond to one another with the humble recognition that we need one another. This means responding in ways that strengthen our community, deepen our bonds, and stimulate candid, loving communication.

The "drive-by-shooting" reactions to something that you disagree with or that has disturbed you in some way is individualism run amok. It's an "I don't need you, here's what I think of you, and I don't care what this does to our relationship" way of responding. If you keep slugging me when I speak, I am going to quit speaking to you. If you are a believer, the life that God has planned for you is entirely relational. That is why Jesus prayed that we would

be one as the Trinity is one. This is why Paul says we should do everything we can to preserve the unity of the body of Christ. This is why we are directed to forgive as God has forgiven us. This is why we are called to speak the truth, but to speak it in love. We are not little human islands; no, by God's design we are connected in mutually dependent community. Denial of our foundational relational design allows a culture of reactivity to chip away at our trust in one another and the community of interdependency that is essential for us all.

7. *The normalization of the love of controversy.* It needs to be noted that there is an important difference between the love of theological purity and intellectual integrity and the love of controversy. Our culture of reactivity is a culture on a hunt for controversy. It is propelled by the thrill of the hunt and that scintillating moment when you draw your word weapon, take aim, and pull the verbal trigger. It's enjoying watching how many bullets it takes before the person drops. The love of controversy sadly views other human beings not as your community but as your prey. And what gives you joy is not the messy process of love but the thrill of having captured your quarry again.

A love for truth that doesn't produce a life of love is a love for something else masquerading as a love for truth. Theology that doesn't produce a life of love is bad theology. Holding your insights in a way that produces a lifestyle that loves the fight more than the thing that is worth fighting for keeps you from using truth in the way it was meant to be used. We will all find ourselves in moments of controversy, but it's the love of it that never produces anything good.

8. *The normalization of tribalism.* It is always easier to react to a group that you're not part of. No one holds a sign in a protest that

says “My tribe is the problem.” The goal of our communication should not be preserving the power of our tribe but creating an intertribe culture of respect, relationship, mutual dependency, and learning. God works to do in us and through us something that is not natural for us. He works to break down the barriers that separate us from one another. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). God is not working to destroy the distinctions of ethnicity and gender, which he created, give him glory, and propel the work he means to do in us, but by grace he is working to transform the way we think about and respond to those distinctions. By the Creator’s design, we don’t just need people who are like us; we desperately need people who are unlike us. The community that God is working to create is not tribal; it is universal, gathering all the tribes together as one.

Our culture of reactivity is a culture of tribalism. The message we communicate is, “I don’t respect you because I don’t respect your tribe, so I will respond to you in ways that I would never think of responding to someone in my tribe.” This means I live in a tribal culture of groupthink and group do, never benefiting from the challenging and potentially transforming insights from someone from another tribe. We are too divided, separated into racial, political, theological, ethnic, economic, gender, age, and class groups. We build walls not bridges. We yell over the wall at one another, but we don’t stop to listen, consider, and learn. We make uninformed assumptions that turn potential helpers into enemies while thinking we know best and, because we do, we don’t need “them.” We even react against our own when we think they are building bridges and not shoring up our walls. Tribalism produces endless war and leaves lots of casualties but never

produces the community that is essential if we are ever going to grow to be what God intended us to be and together live as he created us to live.



As I came to the end of this chapter, conviction set in. Conviction is a good thing and should not be resisted. It is God giving eyes to see and opening hearts to receive. Conviction is our heavenly Father drawing us close and keeping us near. It is important for me to confess that the things which I have said we cannot allow to be normalized still tempt me and at times are sadly too natural for me. I am sure you could confess the same. I wish I could say that all of my written and verbal responses to others are patient, loving, respectful, and thoughtful. I wish I could say that I always speak the truth in love. I wish I could say that all of my responses are devoid of harmful anger. I wish I could say that there is never a moment when I'd rather be right than loving. I wish I could say that nothing I have written in this chapter addresses me, but I can't.

I write as a man in need of grace and as one who is thankful that God's grace doesn't just forgive; it empowers. And it doesn't just empower; it transforms. It is the presence and power of this grace that is the hope and foundation of this book. By grace we are not left to our antisocial instincts, to our tribalistic pride, or to the fact that vengeance is often more attractive to us than forgiveness. We are not left to ourselves. The grace God offers us is not a onetime gift. No, he lavishly gives us grace upon grace upon grace. May we together confess that we too are tempted to participate in this culture of reactivity and, as we confess, let us run to the only one who can help us, because he alone has the power to transform the thoughts, desires, motives, and choices of our hearts.