

No More Candy-coated Gospel

For too long, the church has been feeding believers a SUGAR-SWEET MESSAGE that tastes good but has NO SUBSTANCE. Let's get back to preaching the cross of Christ.

I believe we are living in the greatest days of church history. Yet these are also proving to be the most dangerous times-and a large number of believers are not equipped to face them. Why? Because the church is falling down on its job. The word coming from the pulpits is weakening, rather than empowering, God's people.

Have you ever heard the phrase "eye candy"? It's a popular term that describes what is attractive and pleasant to the sight. Lots of lights. Lots of spectacle. Lots of fun. Appealing to the eyes.

I've got a term that describes the trend of teaching that is flowing freely from pulpits all over America. I call it "ear candy." The messages cause the hearers to feel good and want more, but they don't challenge them or cause them to grow. I liken the truths that have become the main course of our spiritual diets to sugary sweets-tantalizing, but trivial.

In New Testament times, the apostle Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy, warning him to do the things that will avoid the trend we are now seeing in the church:

"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:1-5, NKJV).

The original Greek word translated fables here means “fiction” or “nonsense.”

Paul issued the same type of warning to a group of believers in Corinth. False doctrine was slipping into this first century church, threatening to weaken its spiritual foundation. Can you hear the cry of the apostle as he cautions the new believers against this subtle satanic spirit?

“For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

“For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted-you may well put up with it!” (2 Cor. 11:2-4.)

The deception Paul warned about is rampant today in America and all over the world, and I’m concerned for the family of God. People who need desperately to hear about the shed blood of Jesus and how God loves them and has a plan for their lives must first wade through piles of garbage and mucky polluted rivers before hearing just a morsel of truth! I am reminded of the prophet Amos when he bellowed out these words, “’They

shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but shall not find it'" (Amos 8:12).

Speak the Truth

We've all heard the adage that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. That may be true.

But today, in the spiritual sense, there is no medicine. The doctors of the Word, the clergy, are afraid to prescribe the medicine that was made available from heaven's pharmacy 2,000 years ago. They see the disease but are afraid to properly treat it for fear of offending.

From God's perspective, the diagnosis and treatment have always been clear: Sin is the disease. The blood of Christ is the cure. Repentance is God's method for putting the two together.

That's not a sweet message. For Jesus it was a bitter cup.

1. It wasn't sweet when the crown of thorns was pressed upon His head and blood spilled into His eyes.
2. It wasn't sweet when they took a whip of leather holding pieces of glass or stone and shredded His back like a farmer would plow a field.
3. It wasn't sweet when they blindfolded Him, slapped His face and mocked His deity.
4. It wasn't sweet when they placed a beam on His raw, exposed shoulders and forced Him to carry His own cross.
5. It wasn't sweet when He fell under the load.
6. It wasn't sweet when they laid His body on the beams and pierced His hands and feet.

7. It wasn't sweet when the cross dropped in the hole and ripped even further the flesh that had just been pierced.
8. It wasn't sweet when He lifted His voice and said: "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."
9. It wasn't sweet when He pierced the heavens with these words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

I'm speaking of the gospel story-the penetrating truth of what Jesus Christ had to endure so that we could be adopted into His family. Now, 2,000 years after His brutal death, we find pastors glossing over and sugarcoating this message in order to avoid offending society's delicate palates with the bitter truth.

Jesus was never motivated by how His message would be received. In fact, He reduced His congregation to just a faithful few after preaching a full-course meal on sacrifice. His command to "eat My flesh and drink My blood" transformed His cheerleaders into cowards. They walked away.

He didn't chase after them. He didn't change His message to cheer them up. When they sought sweet words, He didn't give them tasty, sugary morsels. They needed truth.

We all know the dangers of a physical diet containing too many sweets: diabetes, obesity, heart disease, hyperactivity, anxiety, depression. We should equally recognize the debilitating dangers of having our spiritual stomachs filled with junk-food jargon. Nevertheless, the enemy of our souls has entered into the pulpits of America in our day and is serving up a diet void of any nutritional value-and we are consuming it.

The devastating results of slipping away from proclaiming

fundamental, doctrinal truths are already evident in our society. It is essential that we teach the whole counsel of God.

We must all feel the responsibility. We must carry the burden. We must share in the load if we are to successfully carry out our part of the Great Commission.

“But what about the good stuff,” you may be asking- “like the fact that God wants us to prosper and be in health?” Of course these spiritual benefits are in the Word.

But those are the rewards of being saved. First, people must get saved! And after conversion, they must experience change. This life-altering gospel is summed up in the staunch words of Jesus, “‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’” (Matt. 16:24).

I believe one of the many reasons ministers in churches have become popular is simply because they’ve lost the sting of the story. It’s as if everyone is lured to this gigantic, honey-laden beehive, with no fear of being stung.

Why? There are no warrior bees watching the hive. It’s all sugar. Just scoop some in your hand and slop it down.

The “sound” doctrine Paul referred to is healthful, wholesome doctrine. He was not talking about sugar. He was talking about what encourages and contributes to the health of the soul.

Paul said the time would come when some would not endure, or put up with, it. That time is now! Churches today are filled

with people who seek instruction that is more in line with their lifestyles, their wishes and their desires than with the good of their own souls.

I'm watching Pentecostal churches all over America slip into this abyss. Pastors who were at one time filled with the Holy Ghost-who spoke in tongues and prayed for the sick-now won't permit the Spirit of God to move.

No more manifestations of the Spirit. No more encouraging prophecy. No more crying after God. Instead, they serve up silly sermonettes to Christianettes in bassinets.

Why? Because they don't want their people to leave. They water down the message to keep them coming back.

They defend their feel-good messages by claiming, "Oh, the money won't come in if you offend the givers." "The coffers won't fill up unless you speak words they want to hear." "The tithers will leave if you confront their sin. They want to be stroked, not stricken. They want to be pacified. They won't put up with the whole counsel of God."

What ridiculous rhetoric! What rubbish! Since when are pastors supposed to allow the people in the pews to dictate what they preach in the pulpit?

Serving a Healthy Meal

If we want to be relevant, if we want to be effective, we must preach the cross, the blood, repentance and sacrifice. We must preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Whatever happened to these words of Paul that echo through the corridors of time? "Woe is me if I don't preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). And how about, "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2)?

When Paul spoke of lusts, he was referring to anything people set their hearts on outside of Christ. Such people seek teaching that will gratify their carnal desires. They want leaders to deal gently with their evil ways.

"It's not really sin. All I did was make a mistake. I just slipped up a little bit." "Don't tell me to repent." "Don't make me come to an altar." "Just gimme some sugar, Pastor, gimme some sugar."

Today's junk-filled jargon, all in the name of Jesus, reminds me of the trouble in Isaiah's day when the people said: "Do not prophesy to us right things; speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us" (Is. 30:10).

Paul said, "They have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers" (2 Tim. 4:3). The people are going after these teachers and bringing them together. They're gathering all the prophets, the teachers and the lukewarm pastors together. They're reading the same materials and agreeing with one another. Why? Because they want a message that's not offensive.

What is happening? We're allowing the people to decide what to eat for their spiritual dinner. Rather than toiling to prepare

some fresh bread from heaven and offering them a clean, cool cup of water from God's fountain, we are letting their desires determine the meals we serve.

What parent would allow their children to decide the evening's menu? Their plates would be full of cookies, cake and candy!

I believe the devil's favorite time of the week here in America is Sunday morning. I don't think he minds seeing people go to church. In fact, I think he wants to get as many people to church as possible because he knows they'll hear a sugar-coated, lukewarm, "relevant" message.

They'll go to a 50-minute service in which the sermon is barely 20 minutes long. They have a "religious itch," and the pastor will scratch it by saying: "You're fine. Everything's wonderful. Everything's OK." Then they'll walk out feeling good about themselves. All the while they're living in sin and thinking nothing of it.

The people are never confronted. Never challenged with a heart-to-heart, riveting message spoken in love that can change their lives. Rather, they receive some hollow message on how to cope, when 90 percent of their problems come from their sinful lifestyles.

As Christians, we have "turned aside to fables."

We believe God wants us to live lives of popularity rather than suffer any kind of persecution. We believe God wants us to live lives of luxury rather than lives of sacrifice.

We shouldn't worry about being holy, holy, holy. God wants us to be happy, happy, happy.

What nonsense! The central message of the cross has been traded for a soothing massage by the clergy!

John Wesley, George Whitefield and Charles Finney never preached soupy, self-centered, society-pleasing sermons. Their words challenged people to live a life of no compromise that included acknowledging and repenting of sin and receiving God's forgiveness.

We need to get back to offering this type of fare. There are hungry souls both inside and outside the church who need a fresh, cutting word from the heart of God. Let's stop giving them a soft, sweet substitute. No more sugar. It's time to start a detox program!

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