

Are You Trapped by the Deadly Deception of the Half Gospel?

Deep in my heart there is a stirring—not just a stirring that resembles a late-night craving for ice cream or the feelings of boyish infatuation with a high school crush, but a true “depths of my soul” type of stirring. This stirring is for the church of the living God to rise up and take her rightful place.

This stirring is nothing new in the hearts of those focused on the bidding of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Jeremiah felt that stirring when he said: “I never joined the people in their merry feasts. I sat alone because your hand was upon me. I was filled with indignation at their sins” (Jer. 15:17, emphasis added). The prophets of old looked at the state of Israel (picture of the modern church) and grieved over the glory that could have been if only they had embraced their God with the same passion they embraced the idolatry of their day.

I look at the state of the church and feel the same stirring in my heart for the return of God’s glory to His bride, the church. When will we see our nation shaken by a fresh move of God’s precious Spirit? When will the culture around us be forced to recognize a holiness that is truly “otherworldly”? When will we come to a place of desperation for God’s outpouring that makes us willing to abandon our own plans and dreams to fall prostrate before an awesome God and cry out for His divine intervention?

As I meditated on these questions, the Holy Spirit quickened within my heart something so simple that it literally shocked me. He said, “If the true Gospel were preached and lived with boldness, then My power would be seen as tangibly as it was seen in the book of Acts.” Wow! I was then taken to Acts 4:29–30, where the apostles and early church prayed, “And now,

O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word" (v. 29). Through this passage, the Holy Spirit revealed several important things to me that would become the basis for this book.

The first thing that is obvious from this passage is that threats against the real Gospel are inevitable. In the New Testament, Jesus clearly warned that because He was hated, His followers inevitably would be hated too. Persecution and resistance have been the hallmark of Christianity from the beginning, going all the way back to Herod's attempt to kill the newborn Jesus, to the cross of Calvary, to the terrible persecutions of the Roman Empire, and all the way forward to modern-day martyrdom that continues at unprecedented rates all over the globe. It was in response to such threats and persecution that the early church prayed for boldness. Perhaps if we began to preach the real Gospel in all its fullness, we too would be forced to cry out for boldness. Perhaps if we weren't so comfortable with our walled bastions of seclusion or "pitter-patter" messages that placate the spiritually complacent, we would be forced to cry out for a fresh outpouring of God's Spirit.

Second, boldness is a function of the unction. What I mean by that is simply that boldness is not a conjuring up of some sort of fleshly hype but a release of something within. It is an internal combustion in the spirit man that releases unusual courage and clarity. This can be seen clearly when Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 and preached the Gospel with great boldness, even while sealing his imminent doom. He had such clarity of purpose that he physically saw the Lord Jesus giving him a standing ovation from the throne room.

When we lack boldness, it is because we lack intimacy with the Holy Spirit. As we go about our duties and maintain our busy lives and ministries, there is often a deep neglect in our relationship with the Holy Spirit. Peter, however, was not too busy to go on the rooftop to pray at lunchtime and thus had a

vision that changed the course of the church. Thank God for that time of prayer and rest! Without it, the Gentile church would not exist. We need to get back to the place of true fellowship with the Holy Spirit and His daily revelation of the Word so that we can walk in this supernatural boldness to preach the Gospel in all its fullness.

Finally, notice that in verse 30 of Acts 4, we see the mention of healing power and miraculous signs and wonders. The convincing proof that we are not preaching the Gospel fully is the lack of healing power and miraculous signs that follow the preaching of our modern gospel. If this gospel were the real Gospel, then it would be followed by evidence of God's power by way of healings and miracles. Because of our thirst for influence and lack of hunger for true righteousness, we have handicapped the church from its greatest evangelism weapon—the supernatural.

WHAT IS THE HALFGOSPEL?

Bear with me for a moment as I outline for you what I describe as the "halfGospel." I capitalize Gospel here because it still has remnants of the real Gospel and still produces fruit of some measure. Please do not get the idea that I am against everybody or everything. This is not an attempt to throw out all the amazing things that are taking place but to readjust our thinking to be more effective in our pursuit of saving souls and building the kingdom of God.

It is not that we are preaching a false message as much as we are holding back critical elements that give the Gospel power and punch. We have embraced the idea of motivational speaking in an attempt to always be "life-giving," but we have abandoned the convicting power of the Gospel. Inspiration without conviction will lead to carnal and unbelieving churchgoers who never turn from sin and always need affirmation of their true standing with God. This sort of

gospel has produced a movement of false grace in order to soothe everyone's guilty conscience; however, if the convicting work of the Holy Spirit were allowed to go forth in full measure, people would turn from their grievous ways and feel the true liberty of Christ that comes only from walking in His holiness and staying free from the world. As 2 Cor. 3:17 reminds us, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (NKJV).

Conviction comes effortlessly as we highlight the full counsel of God as revealed in the entire Word of God and hold back no portion of the Holy Bible in order to appease people. Nonetheless, we have seen a shift in recent years from preaching the Bible and expounding its eternal virtues to presenting interesting topics to spark the curiosity of man and backing them up with a favorable scripture. This sort of topical preaching has grown our churches but has utterly failed to mature the body of Christ. In a day where churches soar to grander heights of attendance than ever imagined, our anemic message has produced giant nurseries where people are never weaned from the milk of the Word—and the leaders actually want it that way. God forbid that church members actually grow up in Christ and start doing something other than warming a pew!

HALF-STRENGTH

The halfGospel is not only an incomplete message, but it is also a message diluted in strength and handicapped from its true life-changing power. The popular theology of our day instructs leaders who really want to grow that preaching anything controversial or confrontational is completely taboo. After all, we wouldn't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable, would we? Heaven forbid! John the Baptist's call to repentance and the message of Jesus to give all to the poor and follow Him are considered not relevant in today's world and thus are not preached or even mentioned.

Jesus said, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (Matt. 11:6, ESV). Nevertheless, we continue to hear promises of blessing without any warning of offense against Christ. Prominent red-letter statements in the Bible like "Fall on the rock and be broken, or it will fall on you and crush you" (Matt. 21:44, paraphrased) are laughable when put in the context of the watered-down theology served weekly at many of our "model" churches.

We must be very wary when parts of the Word of God are deemed irrelevant or not relatable to today. Some have declared the Old Testament outdated and weird, while others have dared to declare Jesus' words as "under the law" and not really what we should be preaching today. Not only is such intellectual and theological dismissal of any portion of God's infallible Word dangerous, but it will also lead to weak and impotent sheep whose only desire is to feed on the portions of Scripture that appeal to their intellects or can be twisted to justify the workings of their flesh.

Let us go back now to the topic of conviction and put it in the light of a gospel that is half-strength. Somehow we have managed to create an atmosphere of preaching that not only assumes everyone present is a believer but also affirms all present as being right with God and having no need to do anything in order to pursue repentance and holiness. While it is true that God's grace is undeserved and no works are needed to receive it, faith is required (Eph. 2:8); and faith without action is dead (James 2:17).

There was a time when we would not serve communion in a church without first warning of the grave repercussion of eating and drinking unworthily of the Lord's Body and Blood. This was immediately followed with an altar call for salvation and recommitment. Now we see trendy times of communion that fit neatly within the context of our run sheet. Believers and unbelievers alike are given extra encouragement that they indeed are worthy to receive the Body and Blood, when in fact

many are not. To affirm the righteousness (or right standing) of everyone in a room of more than 10 people you intimately know to be believers is to risk reinforcing many in a state of being unsaved, in sin or backslidden. All of this, in the name of making people feel welcome and comfortable, is why the Gospel has been stripped of its potency to radically change lives.

HALF-COST

Unfortunately, we have become expert salesmen at presenting the Gospel. We have deemed it necessary to build in extra incentive in order to get people to accept and believe in the product we are selling. For the sake of nickels and noses, we have propagated a “halfGospel” that is no longer built on sacrifice and suffering but boasts immediate prosperity and earthly enrichment. This goes against the very core of what Jesus, the apostles, and the early church stood for in their application of the true Gospel message.

When we sell the Gospel at a discounted cost, we get people in the church who want to pay little or no price. We must be faithful to warn of the hardships, persecutions, alienation, and other forms of sacrifice and suffering that come with taking up your cross and following Jesus. In Luke 14:28, Jesus said, “Don’t begin until you count the cost.” But in fear that we might not gain a new member or might cause someone to reject the Lord, we have repackaged the Gospel and sold it at a discounted rate.

HALF-IN, HALF-OUT

The final element I will highlight in diagnosing the issue of the halfGospel is the level of commitment required to pursue true holiness. In the modern church today, there is more talk of grace than ever before. Grace is an amazing thing, but it must be balanced with truth. Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32 NIV). In

John 17:17, Jesus also prayed, "Make them holy by Your truth; teach them your word, which is truth" (emphasis added).

Wow! This shows us that very simply put, righteousness comes by God's amazing grace, but holiness, the pursuit of being like God, comes only through the revelatory truth of God's Word. God's Word gives us the standards that help us get free and stay free from the snares of the enemy. If these standards are not articulated, however, then freedom does not come and people are inevitably caught up by the "snares of the fowler" and dragged back into the bondage of sin that once held them captive.

A huge misconception and popularly taught message today is that people will be changed by the grace of God if they just hang around long enough. While there is merit to being in God's presence and change happening in our lives, the real roots of pride, perversion and greed will never be uprooted without the full measure of God's truth being proclaimed and applied.

The definitive issue that illustrates this point best is that of homosexuality. This abominable sin is aggressively asserting itself into every aspect of culture and, sadly, even in the church. Because of the prevailing winds of opinion, not only have many church leaders chosen not to address this important issue, but they have also become extremely leery of anyone who would take on this topic or even mention it from the pulpit. How can we expect to defeat this horrible bondage that has wrapped its icy tentacles around so many of this generation if we refuse to address it head-on?

The halfGospel always finds ways to excuse and justify lack of conviction. It would even paint those who lovingly point out the awful deceptions of the enemy as being hateful, legalistic or out of touch. Oh, that God would raise up men and women who would once again preach the full Gospel of righteousness through repentance and holiness through consistent application

of God's Word!

ACTION STEPS

Now that we have clearly outlined the problem of a halfGospel, here are some action steps that we can take to ensure the full Gospel is preached:

- Seek God, not man's approval—for any true minister of the Gospel, the priority must always be to hear the heart of God and not the applause of man.
- Diligently study God's Word—while books and resources are helpful at times, we must get back to the original DNA of the Gospel as outlined in God's Word, not as interpreted by man.
- Rely on God's Spirit, not personal gift or intellect—the early apostles relied completely on the Holy Spirit to speak and work through them for the saving of the lost. We must return to this pattern in order to see New Testament results!

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