

Push Bad Teaching Out of Your Brain

My mother's cakes and pies were so delicious that, in her younger days, friends urged her to open her own dessert shop. Unfortunately, Mom didn't have any daughters—only four boys—but she still recruited us to roll out the dough, faces covered in flour.

She would put the dough half way up the side of the pans, pop them in the oven, and then we'd watch the cakes and breads rise as their mouthwatering aromas wafted through the house.

The yeast that made Mom's bread rise is the same yeast that Jesus had in mind when he warned the disciples to guard themselves against the teaching (*didache*) of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Jesus said, *"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees"* (Matthew 16:6).

The Pharisees were like the legalists of today; the Sadducees like the cultural Christians of today.

Yeast, which means "bubble, boil, foam," is a fungus that, when worked into bread, converts fermentable sugars in the dough into carbon dioxide bubbles that form into gas pockets.

Here's the problem: Bad teaching is like *"a little yeast that works its way through the whole batch of dough"* (Galatians 5:9). The problem is that it gets stuck in our brains, like the gas pockets from yeast. That's why Jesus warned his disciples, then and now, that we need to guard against the yeast-like influence of any teaching, however microscopic, that distorts the gospel of Jesus.

Two Approaches, One Gospel

Charles Finney and Dwight L. Moody were two of the greatest evangelists and revivalists in American history, but their approaches could not have been more different.

Finney's eyes could bore a hole through any veneer of self-sufficiency or pride. He preached sin and repentance. In his own words, "My object was to bring them to renounce themselves and their all, and give themselves and all they possess to Christ." An estimated 500,000 people were converted by his preaching, when America's total population was only 23,000,000. That would be like 6,500,000 converts today.

Finney, a stern, sobering figure, said, "It is of great importance that the sinner should be made to feel his guilt, and not left to the impression that he is unfortunate. I think this is a very prevailing fault, particularly with printed books on the subject. They are calculated to make the sinner think more of his sorrows than of his sins, and feel that his state is rather unfortunate than criminal."

Finney was all about the sin of it!

D. L. Moody, no doubt influenced by Finney, started his career with much the same approach. During his first trip to England, he met a young preacher, Henry Moorhouse, who came to Chicago and preached in Moody's church while Moody was away on business.

When he returned home, Moody asked his wife how the young Englishman got along.

"They liked him very much," she said, and then Moody wanted to know, "Well, did you like him?"

"Yes, very much, although he preaches a little differently from you."

"How is that?" asked Moody.

"Well," said his wife, "he tells the worst of sinners that God

loves them.”

“Then he is wrong,” said Moody.

At that, his wife simply said she thought Moody would approve when he heard for himself. And that he did. That night the church was packed, everyone brought their Bibles, and Moorhouse went through the Bible proving God’s love.

Moody said, “I never knew up to that time that God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out; I could not keep back the tears. It was like news from a far country: I just drank it in... I used to preach that God was behind the sinner with a double-edged sword ready to hew him down. I have got done with that. I preach now that God is behind him with love, and he is running away from the God of love.”³

Moody’s career saw hundreds of thousands of converts, and millions more inspired in their walks with God.

So which is it? Are you a desperate sinner who needs to repent, dangling by a slender thread over the fires of hell? Or are you a much loved child running away from the love of Father who delights in you?

On a plain reading of the Bible, there is no doubt that both are true. And virtually every distortion of the “good news of the kingdom of God” is a corruption of the “both/and” of these two great ideas: sin and grace.

The Legalistic Approach

In my ministry, I regularly meet people crippled by legalistic upbringing. The “tells” are always the same. They’ve been pounded about sin, shamed for not obeying “the rules,” guilty for not performing, been made to feel they are an embarrassment to God, and convinced, “I am not worthy.”

It’s bad teaching, much like the yeast of the Pharisees—the

legalists of their day.

The error is: Sin without grace = legalism.

The Licentious Approach

I also regularly meet people crippled by licentious upbringing. The “tells” are just as revealing. They’ve been taught the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man—that man is basically good, life is a raw deal, “You’re really a good person,” and you “deserve” better.

This too is bad teaching, like the yeast of the Sadducees—the licentious of their day.

The error is: Grace without sin = license.

The Grace-Based Approach

The only really happy Christians I meet are the ones 1) convinced and “feel” that God delights in them and, 2) keenly aware that their hearts are, as Jeremiah said, “desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9).

This is good teaching: God’s grace for man’s sin.

The principle is: Grace for sin = liberty

So there you have it: legalism, license, and liberty.

What Does This Mean to You?

First, you will suffer if you buy into even a microscopic change to the teachings of Jesus. Guard yourself against the “yeast-like” influence of any teaching that distorts God’s love or man’s sin. Any teaching that short-shifts God’s amazing love is a “legalistic” corruption of the gospel, and will grind people down. Any teaching that leaves out sin will lead to the “licentiousness” that turns them into the lukewarm Christians that grieve Jesus.

You may be more wired to start with sin. Your approach might be characterized as, "Sin that needs grace." I get that—we need to repent. That works, but if that's you, be careful to always make the transition from sin to the solution—God's love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Moody was right about the power of God's love to draw us in.

You may be more wired to start with grace. Your approach might be characterized as, "Grace for sin." That works too, and if that's you, be careful not to make light of sin. Finney was right. We do need to help people understand that the problem the gospel solves is not merely that they are unfortunate, but sinners who need a Savior. That goes for long time Christians too. Everyday we need to humbly repent and renew ourselves in surrender to the Lordship of Jesus.

Second, if you have been "yeasted," find a church that preaches the "whole" gospel. And if you are prone to self-deprecation, consider a church more wired to start with God's love. But if you are prone to self-aggrandizement, consider a church more wired to start with man's sin.

Third, protect yourself by knowing what keeps you in right relationship with God and right relationship with others—whether church, small groups, private meditations, or lunch with a friend.

Protect yourself from the yeast of bad teaching. Don't let it get stuck in your brain. Guard against any teaching that distorts the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus.

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