

The Main Danger of the 'Hyper-Grace' Message: Error Through Overemphasis

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German pastor and theologian, was asked in 1943 how it was possible for the church to sit back and let Hitler and the Nazis seize absolute power. Bonhoeffer's reply: *"It was the teaching of cheap grace."*

His firm answer fits the modern day and can greatly aid the Church in narrowing the broad way of destruction, which similar winds of doctrine are paving today. Apparently what he was saying was that the teaching of cheap grace resulted in passivity within the church that greatly diminished human responsibility, and allowed the enemy to move in.

What can the Western Church learn from this?

Isn't it interesting that now in our day there are winds of doctrine blowing again which are producing this same type of passive and irresponsible behavior?

With courage and conviction I must tell you that if a certain course correction is not made in regards to some of these winds of doctrine, it could shipwreck the faith of many professing believers and contribute to the death knell of vibrant Christianity in the West.

The ministry gifts that Jesus gave to the church (Eph. 4:11) bear the primary responsibility of equipping the saints for works of service so that the body of Christ may reach maturity and will no longer be children tossed to and fro by "every wind of doctrine."

"Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will

not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth” (Eph. 4:14, NLT).

Winds of doctrine are clever and tricky because there is often truth attached to it. Winds of doctrine are very common when a particular truth is taken out of context or twisted until it actually becomes a lie, or is overemphasized at the expense of other equally important truths.

Avoiding the Ditches

Someone once said that if an aircraft leaves New York City with a destination marked for Alaska and the flight course is off by a few degrees upon departure; if not corrected at the offset it could wind up in Los Angeles. This is the effect that winds of doctrine produce. It is not the 95 percent truth that will take the body of Christ off course, but the 5 percent error that will potentially run some into the ditch.

One wise old maestro repeatedly warned his students: “When it comes to doctrine, stay in the middle of the road and you will avoid the ditches. Avoid extremes, excesses and abuses of doctrine.”

This is what I’ve witnessed in regards to what many refer to as the “hyper-grace” message—many truths overemphasized at the expense of other equally important truths. These so-called “new” truths are not new nor are they “revolutionary” as some say. They come around about every 20-25 years or once every generation.

The message of what Bonhoeffer called “cheap” grace was around in the 1930s and ’40s. Finis Dake called it ultra-grace. Today it’s called “hyper-grace.” These winds of doctrine toss immature believers to and fro through overemphasis or clever lies that sound like the truth. Sadly, even preachers sometimes get caught up in these winds. It is a characteristic of immaturity.

Here's an example from a book of one of the leading proponents of "hyper-grace."

In this book he compares what he calls the "mixed grace" message with the "hyper-grace" message.

- Mixed grace is grace + effort; you're saved by grace and kept by works.
- Hyper-grace is grace alone; you're saved by grace and kept by grace.

Now what is wrong with that comparison? There is actually truth in both statements, but because the book is emphasizing the hyper-grace message it de-emphasizes the other perspective. Here he rightfully declares that we are saved and kept by grace, while minimizing the importance of effort and works. The Scriptures, however, have so much to say concerning the importance of our works, the truth of it being so obvious, that it is ridiculous and an insult to true Christian intelligence to elaborate on it in any great depth here.

It is like asking, "Does obedience save you or keep you saved?" Yes and no. We're saved by grace through faith, but faith without works is dead. Actually, imbalances constantly occur when we isolate certain Scriptures at the expense of the sum counsel of the Word.

For example, by isolating the following Scriptures we could conclude that we are indeed saved by works and obedience.

"You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (Jam. 2:24).

"And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5:32).

“And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (Heb. 5:9).

But the middle-of-the-road truth is that works and obedience are outflows of an inward grace and faith. They are evidence of our salvation.

Here’s another one of his comparisons:

- Mixed grace says forgiveness is maintained through repentance and confession.
- Hyper-grace says forgiveness is a done deal; in Christ we are eternally forgiven.

Once again there is truth on both sides, but the error is spawned from overemphasizing one at the expense of the other. The aircraft is off course by 5 degrees in both statements.

For example, if all a believer does is repent and confess his sins and never learns to stand on God’s grace and Christ’s righteousness, he will have a tendency to develop a guilt-consciousness and will never be able to take full advantage of his position in Christ.

On the other hand, if forgiveness is a done deal, and we are eternally forgiven for our past, present and even future sins, then repentance and confession become unnecessary. Over the course of time you can readily see where that will lead you. Soon every carnal man would be doing what is right in their own eyes and ensuing spiritual anarchy would result.

Here’s one more:

- Mixed grace tells us to be holy because without holiness no one will see the Lord; so watch yourself.
- Hyper-grace says, “in Christ you are holy so be who you truly are.”

Again, there are truths in both statements, but the way the mixed grace sentence above is presented insinuates that it is wrong to “watch yourself.” But the Bible admonishes us to watch ourselves.

Examine yourself (2 Cor. 13:5).

Judge yourself (1 Cor. 11:28-31).

Take heed to yourself (1 Tim. 4:14).

Cleanse yourself (2 Cor. 7:1).

Although some of the truths of the hyper-grace message are actually sound positional truths, the error through overemphasizing one and minimizing the other creates an imbalance that is potentially dangerous.

Here’s the problem:

The “hyper-grace” message emphasizes the God-side of redemption while nearly refuting and dismissing the man-side. It rightly brings emphases to what God has wrought in us through the grace of God in Christ, but it de-emphasizes the human side and responsibility of walking it out.

The Bible is a mixture of positional truths and the practical application of those truths. We need both. The apostle Paul tells us to put off the old man’s deeds and put on the new man. He exalts the finished work of Christ in the heavenlies, but he also instructs us on how to practically live out that truth in our earthly walk.

Why do you suppose Paul gave that kind of instruction to born again, Spirit-filled people if it was just supposed to happen automatically? And the other New Testament writers followed the same pattern, often reminding these early saints not to sin, lie, steal, commit adultery and fornication, to make their calling and election sure, to maintain good works, etc. The epistles are full of such admonitions.

Even though God through His grace was working in the believer to will and to do of His good pleasure Paul reminded them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12-13).

What some advocates of hyper-grace call the mixed grace message is simply the God-side and man-side of our redemption and sanctification.

Sanctify Yourself

It is true that God has already sanctified us. It is true that Jesus Christ is our sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). That is a high and lofty positional truth expounding on the legal aspect of our sanctification. But the Word also tells us to sanctify ourselves and reminds believers of their personal responsibility to apply that sanctification to their lives. That is called the vital or the experiential aspect of our redemption and sanctification.

So in essence, what I've observed in the "hyper-grace" teaching is error through simple overemphasis of one glorious truth at the expense of an almost complete dismissal of another equally important truth. We need the mixture of the God-side and the man-side of our sanctification.

Paul was sanctified and separated from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15), but he also sanctified himself lest he be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:24-27). The imagery in these verses is that of a Grecian Olympic athlete who trained rigorously for 10 months to compete in the games. That doesn't sound too effortless to me, and yet when we yield to the inward grace it seems effortless. That is understood.

Because Paul sanctified himself he admonished Timothy to do the same (2 Tim. 2:21-22). "Purge yourself" is a part of the language Paul uses—yet another example of the man-side of our sanctification. The problem has been that we are asking God to do many things for us which He tells us to do ourselves.

Of course He supplies the grace and the Holy Spirit to help us, but He will not do it for us. The Holy Spirit is a Helper, not a doer. There are perhaps hundreds of examples in the New Testament of this sort of cooperation that exists between God and man, and between grace and works.

I think it's high time in the body of Christ to heed the wise old maestro's sound wisdom: "Avoid the ditches, and stay in the middle of the road."

In doing this, you will not be tossed by winds of doctrine, and the grace of God won't be received in vain (2 Cor. 6:1).

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