

# Twin Dangers—Seeker Sensitivity and Legalism

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If you and I were hiking along a mountain trail and you were in front of me, and I suddenly yelled out, "Look out!" what would you do? I think you would likely stop dead in your tracks and look around. Then you might see that you were on the edge of a precipice, and that with one more step in the direction you were going, you would have fallen over the cliff to your destruction. So you would probably back away, look around, study the terrain, maybe look at a topographical map, and find a safe path and take that.

Well, I am going to yell, "Look out!" because many of you are standing on the edge of a precipice, and you don't know it.

I don't have to know you personally to know of the danger you may be in, because I know there are two trends in the church today that are as deadly as they are popular. In fact, they are growing in popularity. On the surface, these trends seem to be quite opposite to each other. You might even describe them as two cliffs going down from either side of a narrow mountain ridge. But, in fact, both of these trends appeal to the same aspect of human nature, and they are quite related. The two canyons that these cliffs go down to have one common origin. It is self-righteousness, one of the most basic of all human tendencies.

One of these trends is epitomized by something I read in an article in the January 18, 2000, *Washington Post*. The article is called "Believers in God, if Not Church." The article tells about a married couple who, because they were disenchanted with all other churches, started their own church. No, let me say that again. They didn't just start their own church—they started a new religion. And how did they go about doing this? Did they, by chance, consult the Bible? No, they didn't do that because the Bible talks about things like sin and hell and they found that made them uncomfortable. They simply kept the parts of their more traditional background that they liked, chucked the rest, and added some things to boot. They got rid of hell because, they said, that was invented to scare you. They kept Jesus (or, at least, their idea of Jesus) "because Jesus is big on love." They then went to a bookstore and consulted books by the Zen masters and New Age gurus and added what they happened to agree with. "We discovered God within," said the wife. "That's why we need God. Because we are God. God gives me the ability to create my own godliness."

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And there is the ultimate self-righteousness—creating ourselves into a god. Pretty strange stuff, you say. This isn't something you would get caught up in, is it? Look out! You may be closer to that edge than you think. This couple is just on the weirder end of what is probably now the biggest trend in the Christian church. On that weirder end, it is sometimes called private spirituality. But when it is only a little less weird, it goes under the names "pop Christianity" and "seeker sensitivity." Don Matzat, in an article on the Internet called "The Deformed Theology of Seeker Sensitivity" (<http://www.the-highway.com/seekersensitive.html>), tells us something about what this trend is like. He writes, "For those seduced by the concept of seeker sensitivity, Jesus can no longer be the suffering servant bearing the sins of fallen humanity to a bloody cross. Such a message is irrelevant. One highly successful seeker sensitive center in Chicago has chosen not to display a cross in their sanctuary. To this group's way of thinking, Jesus is not primarily our Savior who died to forgive our sins; rather, he is our friend who helps us make it through the day."

Is this beginning to sound familiar to you? It is the message of mega-churches, and aspiring mega-churches all over this continent, and, increasingly, the rest of the world.

Now notice what the apostle Paul said, beginning in 1 Corinthians 1:18: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." What is the power of God? The message of the cross, the very message the seeker sensitive people say is irrelevant. That's why the power of God is not in their message, and, I suppose, why they need to substitute for it psychology and twelve-step programs and seminars on co-dependency and anger addiction, and why, I suppose, they need such powerful amplifiers for their musical instruments, because the power of God isn't there.

Oh, I care about seekers, too. I'm sensitive to their needs. But the Bible tells me what those needs really are, and they are not going to be solved by plugging someone into a bunch of seminars. I'm not going to tell a seeker, you're okay. I'm not going to use worldly psychology and group dynamics to make that seeker feel good the way he is. If the Holy Spirit is working in that seeker, he will feel bad, so bad he's going to get down on his knees and pray. He will know he's a sinner whose just punishment is to suffer the wrath of God for eternity and that there's nothing he can do about his sin on his own. But I'm going to tell him that his one hope is in Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

who humbled Himself to be born as a man. I'll tell him that Jesus came to this earth to take upon Himself the sins of all who will believe on Him as their Savior, and that He suffered a horrible, painful, bloody, humiliating death and God's wrath on the cross to pay the full penalty for those sins. And I'll also tell him that if he will in faith receive Jesus Christ as his Savior, that is, believe in Jesus alone as his Savior who has paid the penalty for his sinfulness, then God will completely forgive him. He will have peace with God and will enjoy eternal life with God forever. That's what I will tell him, because that is really caring for a seeker's needs.

Before I'm finished, I'm going to tell you why we use the name Word of His Grace. It has everything to do with the message of the Cross. But the message of the Cross is rejected by many churches because it does not attract enough people. It is foolishness to them. Better to tell people something that makes them feel good. That's what brings in the crowds.

Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 1, beginning in verse 19,

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and

redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

Why did Paul say this? Why did he feel that he had to contrast the message of the cross with the wisdom and philosophies of men? Because the Corinthians were doing something similar to what many Christians are doing today. They were going near the edge of the cliff. They were bringing the wisdom and philosophies of men into the church. Perhaps they were doing it ignorantly and innocently, but that doesn't lower the danger. Being of a Greek culture that had a rich history of philosophy, the Corinthians were beginning to replace the pure message of the cross, that many would consider to be foolish, with one mixed with philosophy. We might call it a low-cal, diet, or lite gospel. Just as the religion invented by the couple I mentioned earlier, it was a gospel that was less offensive to the Corinthian's sensibilities.

Against this weight-watcher gospel, Paul preached Christ crucified, which is both the power and wisdom of God. People do not naturally like the message of the cross. It is rugged, as the old hymn says. It is dirty, and sweaty, and bloody. It shows us just how sinful and evil we are, that Jesus had to go through that for us. Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about preaching the law. The Holy Spirit will take care of convicting God's elect. When other people hear the Gospel of Christ crucified, they are insulted. It stops them from taking sin lightly. It seems primitive. How can God, who is a God of love, require blood and sacrifice? And so they replace this with a lite gospel; something more progressive; a gospel where the Cross is de-emphasized and replaced with a message that God is my friend whom I can put in my hip pocket so He can help me through each day. Salvation for eternity is replaced with convenience of the moment.

But, perhaps more than any other reason, people do not like the message of the Cross because it is contrary to our human tendency to be god. Remember what Satan, in the form of a serpent, said to Eve in the Garden of Eden. God said that if Adam and Eve ate this fruit, they would die. But, in tempting her to eat from the forbidden fruit, the serpent said, "Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." And she fell for it, didn't she? She wanted to be as God. And we have been falling for it ever since, trying to make God over in our own image, and trying to decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong.

Don't tell me about Jesus dealing with sin on the Cross, they say, it's too negative. Tell me about joy, tell me about love, tell me about peace. Let me tell you something, brother. You will never have true joy, or love, or peace without first encountering Jesus Christ at the cross. You must believe that Jesus shed His blood for you. That He died on that cross to pay the penalty for your sinfulness. You must receive Jesus, and Jesus alone with no self-righteousness included, as your Savior. Then you will know joy and love and peace.

One popular preacher has said that he doesn't think that anything has been more destructive to the human personality than making people aware of their lost and sinful condition. And a seminary professor says, "If our sin is viewed as causing the death of Jesus on the cross, then we ourselves become victims of a 'psychological battering' produced by the cross. When I am led to feel that the pain and torment of Jesus' death on the cross is due to my sin, I inflict upon myself spiritual and psychological torment," so says this professor.

And so churches now tell us we are not so bad. They stress our human dignity. They boost our self-esteem. Jesus becomes merely an example of successful living. He meets our felt needs. The focus shifts from the Cross to our family relationships, our finances, and living productive lives free from emotional troubles. Now, I'm not saying that these have no importance. But they must never replace the Gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to justify believing sinners before God. For as much as that humbles us rather than exalts us, that is the Gospel. Reducing the Gospel to a culturally acceptable message, one that makes us feel good about ourselves, one that exalts the individual over God, is creating and preaching a false gospel.

This doesn't mean that those who are trying to grow their churches with this message have bad intentions. They may sincerely want to reach and help more people. They may want to make Christianity relevant in the 21st century. They know that they will get more people into their churches if they make them feel good, if they promise them help with family, financial, or emotional problems. They know they will attract young people if they give them the music they like and create a "youth culture" in the church. They know people will keep coming if the worship service, instead of seeming like something from the 17th century, gets people up and moving with music and gives them a culturally relevant, and relatively innocuous, message. After all, the reasoning goes, it's better that they are in church where they can be positively affected, isn't it? Is it?

A problem with all of this is that it tempts the church to present a false gospel. And such a false gospel will lead us right over the edge. Another problem is that it often confuses emotional and physical good feelings caused by music, movement, and psychological states with the moving of the Holy Spirit. And, also, it contradicts the very words of Jesus when He said, "Enter in through the narrow gate; because wide is the gate, and broad is the way which leads to destruction, and many are those who enter in through it. How narrow the gate, and confined the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it! But beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:13-15 *English Majority Text Version*). The gate to eternal life is very narrow and leads to the cross. When we artificially broaden it, we bypass the cross and lead people over the edge of the cliff in the way that only leads to destruction. And all of this is due to self-righteousness.

And still I need to bring out that self-righteousness can take another form. This is the other cliff. It has a very different appearance from pop Christianity. Yet, it, too, stems from every human's basic desire to justify himself. This form of self-righteousness is called legalism. It is trusting in works and the law for even a part of one's salvation instead of trusting in Jesus Christ alone.

I was once a member of a church that stressed the law. In fact, I was more than a member. I worked in the head office, assisting the church's founder and writing for their slick magazine that had a worldwide circulation of around 8 million. Sure, we told, I told, people that Jesus is our Savior. But we also always brought the message around to tell people that they had to keep the law. Why? It comes from not believing that Jesus' sacrifice was enough. It comes from not trusting that God can keep His people in line with grace. It comes from trusting in self-righteousness.

The Pharisees really believed that it was possible for them to please God by perfectly keeping the law. They really did. But for a Christian to trust in law keeping to merit him in any way is to return to the bondage of the law. Look out! It is self-righteousness, and it will eventually lead to misery and doubt and depression. It is inventing a new religion based on self-righteousness just as much as the couple did I told you about earlier. The Bible doesn't say to bring the law and grace together.

The Bible says, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The Bible says to Christians, "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14), implying that if you do start trusting in the law, sin will have dominion or be master over you. The Bible says, "I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Galatians 2:21) and warns, "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

Some people say that we start off being justified, or declared not guilty, by grace through faith, but we must then go on to be sanctified, or made holy, by the works of the law. But Romans 6:19 says, "I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness." Now, I just read to you Scriptures that equate justification with righteousness and essentially say that we are not made righteous through the law. And Romans 6:19 says that righteousness, which, remember, comes by grace through faith and not by the law, results in holiness. So where does holiness come from? It comes from righteousness that comes by grace, not by the law. Picking it up again in verses 22 and 23, we see, "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." It is all of grace, friends, all of grace. In Ephesians 2:8-9, we read, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

God, by His grace, opened my eyes to see the great error in trying to mix law and grace, and I left that church I worked for. But I was surprised to find that so many others also mix law and grace. Yes, there is New Covenant law, the law of Christ that is revealed in the New Testament. It guides Christians, showing them how to fulfill their desire to do what is right and kind and loving. But, unlike THE law, the law of the Old Testament, it does not condemn us when we fall short. If we attempt to keep the Old Testament laws as Old Testament laws, the Law of Moses, any part of it, we are guilty of self-righteousness.

Now I am going to tell you why we use the name Word of His Grace. When the apostle Paul suspected that his arrest and eventual execution were drawing near, he called for the elders of the church in Ephesus. His farewell address to them is recorded in Acts 20. In verse

32, knowing that he would no longer be able to be their overseer and shepherd, he told them, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified."

Did you know that there is great significance to the church today, and to you personally, in those words? In fact, there is as much significance in what Paul didn't say as in what he did say. Just what does it mean to be commended to "God and to the word of his grace," and what does this mean to you personally, in your life?

First, what does commend mean? It means to deposit, as a trust or protection. That is, to entrust. Paul is placing these elders in the trust of God and the word of His grace. God and the word of His grace are going to be in charge of them.

Now, of course, it is understandable that Paul would entrust the Ephesian elders to God. But Paul also entrusted them to "the word of his grace," meaning the word of God's grace. What is this word? It is the Word of God. We know from John 1 verse 1 that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God. John 1 verse 1 also says that Jesus is God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In verse 14, we read that "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." And, of course, that refers to Jesus Christ.

Now, because Paul had already entrusted the Ephesian elders to God, I don't believe that Paul, by saying "the word of his grace," means Jesus Christ, at least not directly. I believe he is referring to the expression of the mind of Jesus Christ, or God. In other words, he is referring to a message from God to man.

We can see that the word of His grace is a message in Acts 14, verse 3. Paul and Barnabas were preaching the Gospel in Iconium. As was often the case, some disbelieving Jews were trying to stir up the Gentiles against the preaching. Therefore, Paul and Barnabas patiently preached over a long period of time, and God showed He was on their side by having them perform various miracles. As Acts 14 verse 3 says, "Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which gave testimony unto the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands." Notice that the message of the Gospel that Paul and Barnabas were preaching is called "the word of His grace."

Notice also something right here where we are in Acts chapter 20 and in verse 24. Paul says, "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." The "gospel of the grace of God" is just another way of saying, "the word of His grace."

So, going back to our original Scripture, Acts 20, verse 32, we see that "the word of His grace" is the Gospel. We might even say that it is the New Covenant, since the Gospel is the very focus of the New Covenant—it's what it is all about. It is a message of grace: "the word of his grace."

Now, I want you to see three very important points. They concern what Paul did not entrust the Ephesian elders to. That's right, besides seeing what he did entrust them to, it is important to see what he did NOT entrust them to.

1) Paul did not entrust them to a man. Now, we might expect that he would do this. After all, there were other apostles. Peter was probably still around, and John certainly still was. But Paul did not say, I am going to my death. You will see me no more, and so I entrust you to Peter or to John. No. And there were also Barnabas and Silas and Timothy. But Paul did not entrust these church elders to any man who would be over them. Paul apparently knew that the time of the apostles was ending. So Paul did not put them under the charge of Peter or John or any apostle. Neither did he entrust them to a Pope, Cardinal, or Archbishop. He entrusted them to no man.

Now, of course, these elders were themselves men. They held responsible positions within the Ephesian church. As elders, they may have pastored (shepherded) and taught within the church, and they may have preached the Gospel to those on the outside. But Paul placed no one over these elders in the local church but God.

2) The second thing we might have expected Paul to entrust them to, but which he did not, is the church. This might surprise many. Paul did not even entrust these elders to the church. Why is this significant? This is an important point because there are churches that say that the final authority in all matters of doctrine, practice, church discipline, and so on, is the church. One very, very, very large church in particular says this. But Paul does not. He does not entrust them to the church, or even to the Jerusalem or the Roman church as being

the "headquarters" church over them. Paul does not entrust these elders to a line of church succession, because lines of church succession can become corrupt through false teaching. What connects a church to the church of the apostles is not a line of succession, but what the church teaches. It does not matter whether a church can trace its lineage from one church to another and through the Roman Catholic Church to Jesus Christ, or whether it can trace its lineage from one church to another outside the Roman Catholic Church to Jesus or John the Baptist. What matters is whether the church is true to the Bible. If it is, then it is in the line of the apostolic church.

But, some will say, Many churches claim to teach from the Bible, but they teach different things. This is true. And my answer is that what causes these differences is not the Bible, but tradition and pride. If we are honest when we look into the Bible and are willing to let it correct us, if we are willing to change, the Bible will guide us to the truth. If the members of a church will leave behind tradition, if they will honestly work together with the prayerful guidance of the Holy Spirit, dropping all ego trips and personality cults, God will lead them to agree on the truth as they work through the Scriptures.

Paul entrusts these church elders to God and to God's Word, which, in the written form we have today, we call the Bible.

So, instead of entrusting them to men and the church, Paul entrusted these church elders to God and the Bible. Now, remember, I said that the focus of the New Covenant is the Gospel, which is the Good News of God's grace.

3) The third thing Paul did not entrust the Ephesian elders to is the law. Paul entrusted them to God and the word of His grace, not the word of His law.

Today, we are living in the time of the New Covenant, which is a time of grace. Grace trumps all. Grace reigns, not the law. The law says, do this perfectly or you will die. Grace says, you are pardoned. Under the law, there is guilt. Under grace, there is righteousness. "Therefore," as Paul says beginning in Romans 3:20, "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets." Yes, the Old Testament (often called the law and the prophets) witnessed to, by types and shadows and prophecies, this time of grace.

So, Acts 20, verse 32 tells us that Paul did not entrust the Ephesian elders to any man, to the church, or to the law. Instead, he entrusted them to God and, God's revelation to man, the Bible. What does this mean? It means that, when the age of the apostles ended, the Bible replaced the apostles. The Bible is where we find answers to questions about doctrine and practice. God's authority is no longer exercised in the church through apostles, but through the Bible. And since, specifically, we are left in the charge of God and the word of His grace, then, as Christians, we are to understand the Bible from the viewpoint of the grace of the New Covenant. So that is why we use the name Word of His Grace. I want to stress that you are entrusted to God and to the word of His grace, and I want to encourage you to read and study your Bible as much as possible and begin to understand the entire Bible from the viewpoint of the New Covenant. And the heart of the New Covenant, and, therefore of the Bible, is the message of the Cross. It is not an irrelevant message, and it is not a message to be confused with law. It is the Good News of free, undeserved grace!