

## Leaven and the Leavened

### *Agents of change in a rising Church*

Before we advance much further into the subject of this book, we should, if we are to be understood, define our terms. And since this is a book about Pharisaism and the spirit of religion, we need to explain what we mean by that. We are using these terms to connote a particular type of spirituality, one characterized by “leaven.”

The leaven of the Sadducees and Pharisees was a frequent theme of Jesus’ instruction. He warned His disciples to be wary of it several times. Clearly then, they were vulnerable to its influence. And since the apostles were to be Jesus’ agents, commissioned with the task of conveying the gospel message to Israel and the world beyond, He naturally wanted their minds to be free from any form of deception or distortion, especially regarding how man was to please God, or relate to Him.

At first though, the disciples were confused by His warning regarding leaven and thought He was talking about literal bread.<sup>1</sup> Apparently the notion that the Pharisees were dangerous was an entirely foreign concept to them. Why? Because the Pharisees were the “best and the brightest” of their day. Admired. Trusted. Committed. They had given their lives to the pursuit of religious perfection while preserving the traditions that defined their nation. Many of them were teachers, expositors, leaders, shepherds (pastors), scholars. They were fine, upstanding, loyal citizens, doing their best to motivate people toward righteousness according to the Law as they understood it (oral and written). They were sincere, diligent and influential, just like many of our most celebrated religious leaders are today. Based on their popularity with the common people, we can also guess that, for the most part, they were also likeable, smart and they would have said they hated hypocrisy. They were “good people,” earnest in their desire to protect the common people from error. We would all have admired them just as their followers did, and just as we do our own stellar Christian leaders today.

Stop and think about this for a minute. There are basically two options here regarding Jesus’ warning. We can either assume that “the leaven of the Pharisees” is no longer an issue, since (we like to think) the Pharisees are no longer an issue. Or we can take Jesus’ words seriously and ask ourselves if there is any possibility that this leaven still exists. If it does, we absolutely *must* open our eyes to the evidence. But it won’t be easy to identify. After all, if it was nearly impossible for the apostles to grasp the concept of Pharisaic leaven when Jesus Himself first

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<sup>1</sup> Even though the NKJV translate it as “doctrine” in Mat. 16:12. It should be translated “teaching.”

warned them about it, how much more difficult for us two thousand years later?

### LEAVEN: What is it?

Even though leaven is traditionally understood to be a figure for sin in Scripture, Jesus apparently wasn't talking about sin in general, because the disciples had their own share of that, as we all do. There must have been a particular *form* of leaven that He was referring to that He found so objectionable in the leaders of Israel. It's this form of leaven that we want to explore and concentrate on. Is this form of leaven still operating today, and more importantly, has it found its way into the Church? We think it has, but it's not the easiest thing to see. It's still for the most part almost entirely unrecognized, just like it was in Jesus' day. Almost no one but He and John the Baptist saw it then, let alone recognized its danger, and almost no one sees it now either. There's not much chance of avoiding it then, is there, if we're all oblivious to its existence?

And yet we know the Scripture is given for our instruction, so it must be possible to discover and define this insidious agent so that we can protect ourselves against it. So what exactly is it?

The short answer, as Scripture gives it, is that the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is their teaching (Mt 16:12). It is also defined as hypocrisy in Luke 12:1. Can we get the details about this? Sure. Jesus had a lot of contact with synagogues, the Temple, and the religious leaders. There is no lack of information. This book is an effort to bring that information together where we can examine it thoroughly and inoculate ourselves against it. We do that most comprehensively in the verse-by-verse section entitled "Evidence from the Four Gospels." But we'll give an overview here as well.

### A METAPHOR

Leaven is a metaphor obviously, a figure of speech, and like all metaphors it contains an implied comparison. Jesus used something we are all very familiar with to make His point. Common yeast. This mundane but mysterious substance permeates a lump of dough and, in a matter of a few short hours, doubles or triples its bulk. And it doesn't take much of it to accomplish this either, does it? Like Paul said, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump."<sup>2</sup>

Literal leaven spreads like mad, and once it's baked, it is hidden and invisible. Camouflaged. You can't pull apart a loaf of bread and find it, but you see its effects. Nice tall shiny loaves that give off a luscious odor. An odor people desire, and will pay for. Obviously something very similar must happen to humans when we let *spiritual* leaven into our lives and churches. And

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 5:6

whatever that something is, it looks like an improvement, but it's not, or Jesus wouldn't have warned us about it.

Paul also warned us about it. He told the Corinthians, "Let us therefore celebrate the feast (Unleavened Bread), not with the old leaven, *nor* with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."<sup>3</sup> Note that there are two kinds of leaven mentioned here and it sounds like Paul is making a distinction between them. He speaks of "the old leaven" *and* "the leaven of malice and wickedness." The latter is more-or-less self-explanatory,<sup>4</sup> but interestingly, he does not define the former, the "old leaven," except to indicate that it is at odds with sincerity and truth, just like malice and wickedness are. So his listeners must have been pretty familiar with it and understood what he was referring to, or he surely would have explained it.<sup>5</sup> We suspect "the old leaven" was the same kind that Jesus had talked about so often Himself.

What was this "old leaven" then? And which kind were the Pharisees guilty of?

Was it just false doctrine, as so many have concluded? Not likely. What did Jesus say in Matt.23:1-5? "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore *all that they tell you, do and observe*, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say and do not do....they do all their deeds to be noticed by men..." We suspect the old leaven, then, had something to do with "performance" or works righteousness—in a sense the opposite of malice and wickedness. Perhaps we could call it "hypocrisy in action."

And this is precisely why the "old leaven" is so hard to recognize. It's very different from outright sin. On the contrary, it looks good, smells good, tastes good and, truth be told, is otherwise almost undetectable. And for this reason it is highly valued.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 5:8

<sup>4</sup> Obviously a catch-all phrase for carnality and sin.

<sup>5</sup> We are assuming that by the time Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians, he had had many conversations with the churches about this "old leaven," had clarified its meaning and Jesus' warning over and over, so he didn't repeat that definition here. Interesting, isn't it, though, how Scripture does not spell out the definition neatly and succinctly in any one place, but as in so many other of its principles, forces us to wrestle with our own hearts and the Spirit of God before we come to understand its implications. This is deliberate. Rather than filling Scripture with formulas to be followed, God puts just enough information at our disposal to allow those with a heart for truth to discover its hidden treasures. The parables are an example of this. Jesus did not explain them unless people cared enough to come and ask for deeper truth. If He put everything out there in black and white, how would He judge our hearts? Some would obey the "formula" simply to avoid judgment, and yet their lives might look identical to those who obeyed from a heart of gratitude. Yes "He knows our hearts," (i.e., our motives) but there must be objective evidence for the judgment. When Satan accuses us, God isn't going to pull the "because I said so" routine. He will provide evidence for His judgment so that His name will be vindicated as the all-righteous Judge. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord; not by coercion. God never coerces faith, worship or obedience.

The fact is though, it is dangerous and destructive. Why? Because it is in direct competition with the New Covenant that Jesus came to offer us. You can have one covenant or the other, but not both. You can have new wine, or old wine, but not both.<sup>6</sup> Jesus made that very clear. Old wine and “old leaven” are both part of the old paradigm. And they don’t mix with the new paradigm<sup>7</sup> that Jesus came to bring us.

Unfortunately, the powers-that-be did not appreciate or accept the new way that Jesus offered. Why? Because He upset the status quo, challenged the religious marketeers, and threatened their positions of authority. He didn’t just overturn the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple though. He overturned the applecart of traditional religion entirely. This is evidenced, in part, by the fact that He did not go to the synagogues to find His agents. He didn’t choose His apostles from among the average “church-goers” of His day. Nor were any chosen from those who *ran* the synagogue system. Jesus went into the highways and byways, so to speak, where He could find men who were not beholden to the religious system or its leaders. They were not formally educated by them either, a slap in the face to the religious elite and entirely deliberate.

It was also strategic, and wise. Jesus knew the system would constantly oppose Him and ultimately would reject Him entirely, and He could not afford representatives with divided loyalties who might vacillate, equivocate, or waffle on the truth; who might be confused by the elite or seek their approval. Their minds had to be free from the bondage of religious dogma or influence or ambition, free to hear and grasp His message and ultimately to follow Him in the face of intense ridicule, rejection, persecution and even death. He needed their undivided attention and affection if they were to accomplish their calling in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was not a member of the religious elite and He wanted no part of its system for His followers: hierarchies, academic faith, and most especially, external soulish performance. The Pharisees were experts at all of it. They had developed a didactic, formalized, dogmatic approach to God that they thought was superior. It looked good on the outside after all, but it was fueled by pride. The same pride that drove Adam to seek exaltation for himself. That lust for power, influence, control and admiration is endemic to humankind, and was no less so amongst the Pharisees. Unfortunately, these were all motives to which the ruling elite were entirely blind. The deception of the enemy had again infiltrated God’s program and effectively

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 5:37-38

<sup>7</sup> Where the law is written on our hearts and our relationship is based on intimate two-way communion and fellowship, which in one sense isn’t really new at all. It was the paradigm that characterized Enoch’s relationship with God, and Abraham’s, who was called a friend of God, based on the promise of redemption. It was the paradigm that Israel rejected for an earthly king and a written code. God eventually issued them a writ of divorce. But one day He will covenant with them again as a holy nation apart from the Mosaic covenant, just as He has already done with His Bride.

derailed His plans for His people.<sup>8</sup> And it took Jesus coming on the scene to expose that fact. And expose it He did. But even now, nearly two thousand years later, we have not yet understood His point, much less applied it.

What was His point then?

We believe it was this: that what the Pharisees were *actually* teaching, by their example, their methods and values, was that superior religious performance (as defined by them) equals godliness, and that the path to spiritual maturity and righteousness winds through a comprehensive manmade system of institutionalized religion and practices, a system managed and guided by academically trained professionals.<sup>9</sup> The message they send goes something like this: “My education and my training make me an expert in spiritual matters. I have a Ph.D. in theology after all. If you listen to me, you’ll find out I know a lot more about these things than you do. That’s why I’m the pastor here. God has appointed me to be your shepherd and His spokesman. Do you have a problem learning? Are you rebellious? If not, I can teach you. Your job is to humbly listen and learn.” Few pastors would say this out loud, but many feel it, think it, believe it, imply it and live it. And they use their credentials to validate and enforce it and the whole system supports it.

Actions speak louder than words and it was the Pharisees’ *actions* that really instructed the people as to what godliness looks like. Everything about them conveyed the impression that holiness (which they believed they possessed in spades) was based largely on education, knowledge of the scriptures, religious authority, assiduous conformity to the law, elite status, distinctive attire, and a lofty demeanor and bearing, rather than on inner transformation, humility, brotherhood (equality) and love of God. In other words, it was a false righteousness, though many of them were oblivious to their own deception and participation.

In effect, what they were teaching the people was *how to be hypocrites*. Hypocrisy and self-deceit often go hand-in-hand.

But because the people had been socialized from birth to believe that the Sadducees and Pharisees were the holy ones, the mature ones, the anointed ones, they didn’t question them or their right to lead, and they clearly didn’t recognize the hypocrisy behind their outward righteousness. They wanted a leader and accepted the societal “party line” that these men

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<sup>8</sup> The Pharisaic system was not God’s design or plan for Israel. Fathers were given the task of educating their children and sharing the legacy of faith and miraculous intervention that characterized Israel’s history.

<sup>9</sup> We are not talking about the Levitical system and Temple rights here, but only about the synagogue system.

stood in the place of God, as spokesmen for Him and the Temple and the country.<sup>10</sup> They believed their performance was real. Jesus didn't. He saw behind the veil and discerned the unspoken message that these men were sending to the people: that religious performance equals righteousness. That cleaning the outside of the cup is good enough. That presenting a holy exterior will satisfy a holy God. That elevating oneself and hiding one's flaws is godly.

In summary then, there are two kinds of leaven in Scripture: 1) outright sin and 2) religious performance. These two kinds of leaven are at opposite ends of the same spectrum—the spectrum of human effort—with complete failure at one end and total “success” (based on self-righteous self-effort and human methods) at the other.

Works righteousness based on the notion that godliness can be achieved through self-effort, particularly via an academic, head-faith approach to God (i.e., knowing *about* God), by following the letter of the law (and internally gloating about it), and by masking our weaknesses, is offensive to God and wholly ineffective. In fact it produces the very opposite of what is intended.

The devil doesn't care how academic we become, or how many religious degrees we attain, nor even how righteous we become on the outside, so long as we never get close to God and access His power and authority.<sup>11</sup> Religion is just fine with him.<sup>12</sup> (Truth be told, he's the author of all false religion.) It is God's *power* that threatens Satan's kingdom, not head-knowledge or self-righteous performance. This is why Paul was so adamant about preaching “not in cleverness of speech, but by the Holy Spirit and with power.” And it's why he tossed overboard his own academic achievements. He knew they didn't amount to a hill of beans next to God's power and authority. Satan knows this, too, and that's why he works so hard to keep the Church entangled

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<sup>10</sup> Think back to the time of the judges, when the Jews demanded a king. They did not want to be ruled by God directly. Hearing their complaint He yielded to their demands, serving up a series of kings to rule over them, many of them not exactly noble. The Pharisees and Sadducees were a religious extension of the same desire, to have someone else responsible for the nation's growth, instruction, and relationship with God. A very similar thing has happened in the Church under the New Covenant. The churches have eschewed the headship of Christ (Christ is the head of every man) and replaced it with another mediator, a human authority, who acts as a channel for God's voice, giving us His supposed direction, instruction and correction. Our pastors are often treated like royalty, with jurisdiction over their own little kingdoms.

The Holy Spirit lives inside of us, to lead, counsel and direct us; the human body is the Temple of God, but we've turned the Church into a giant ecclesiastical machine and bible study. *It* is the Temple where those in authority tell us how to think, how to pray, how to dress, what Bibles we should read, what songs to sing, what gifts we can use and how, where to give our money, how much money to give, what holidays to observe, how to raise our kids, and so on. They teach us, counsel us, discipline us, direct us. It is an entirely one-way proposition in which they are always on the giving, mentoring end and we peasants are always the needy recipients. In reality the Church is led by Christ and we are all brothers. It does not depend on professional, seminary-trained individuals to function as it should and yet we've abdicated much of the Holy Spirit's role to those with institutional credentials. The Body, when functioning in health, ministers to itself, repairs itself, heals itself, and the Holy Spirit ministers to the Body, as a functional whole. Christ is the Head, but we have allowed others to tell us we can't hear directly from Him.

<sup>11</sup> Particularly the power to cast out demons and expose their activities.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, he promotes it. It's the perfect camouflage for his efforts to pervert the truth.

in them. He does his best to make sure we never recover our true inheritance and mission: taking back Satan's kingdom one soul at a time in the power and authority of the Holy Spirit and introducing them to the indwelling Savior, their only Hope for transformation and deliverance.

So then, leaven is two sides of the same coin—the coin of human achievement. It is the currency men trade for the privilege of power and influence—for the right to lord it over their fellows and rule. Instead of Jesus writing His laws on our heart and being our Head, *they* will write the laws and enforce them. And we will, in effect, worship *them*, follow *them*, listen to *them*, admire *them*, pursue friendship with *them*, and allow them to be our Holy Spirit.

Keep in mind the coin of leaven has two sides. The human achievement side of the coin does not negate the outright-sin side. It's not either/or, it's both/and. Human achievement on its own does not produce real sanctification. It does not clean the inside of the cup, only the outside. We are shocked at the serious sin sometimes exposed in the lives of Christian leaders, but we shouldn't be. If they've followed the pharisaical route to their position of power and influence in the churches (and most have), they have often neglected the true route to sanctification and holiness: death to self and total identification with Christ, with all its unpleasant side effects. "If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also" *in the synagogues*, the very place where these leaders find their most adoring fans.

Satan's aim in all this is to prevent the New Covenant from occurring at all. He desperately wants to keep that under wraps and the best way to do that is through religion and religious performance. After all, if you think you're already there, already mature and godly, you'll never actually get there, because you think you're there!

Satan is a master at camouflaging the way to true, relational spirituality. He replaces the Holy Spirit with an emphasis on the Bible—you can even *pray* the scriptures—it doesn't much bother him. He turns the Bible into a textbook and the Holy Spirit into a doctrine, a sterile subject, and blocks your ability to hear God's voice or even to know you *can* hear His voice outside chapter and verse, or without the Bible in front of you. He loves the academic approach (word parsing, endless debating, memorization) and has built a system supported by various "schools" which confer credentials and titles (rabbi, etc.) and keep us from accessing our true heritage, which is Christ's power and authority and a restored relationship with the Father.

## LEAVENING AGENTS

So, these men were leavened, but they were also agents of leaven. They spread the message of false spirituality *and* false religion. False religion has “a form of godliness but denies the power thereof.”<sup>13</sup> We are told to avoid such men.<sup>14</sup>

But do we? No. We saddle up next to them, just like Israel did. We let their influence rub off on us, or we try to get into their inner circle where the bright light of privilege and position might fall on us. We’ve been warned, but we too do not recognize the danger. Why? Because the desire for power, influence and acceptance lives in and blinds all of us, to one degree or another.<sup>15</sup>

To be thoroughly inoculated against this threat of leaven, then, as Jesus defined it, we need to acknowledge that there are actually two elements to be on guard against: 1) the leaven itself *and* 2) the leavened—men who ingest it and then dispense it. In effect, they act as double agents in a sense, helping the fallen kingdom to spread its influence, promoting the leaven as positive and healthful, and partaking of it themselves. An agent is “one who acts for another,” but in this case, they do not know they are acting for another. They think they are entirely “free-agents.” But in reality, they are being deceived and used. And the leaven itself is the deception.

Jesus understood the spirit realm and its schemes and that’s why He had such a clear view of the evils of Pharisaism. He tried to keep His people from falling victim to it,<sup>16</sup> a system that too often promotes the values of the world—the very ones we need to turn our backs on (but don’t). Those values include self-promotion, self-righteousness, competition, security, personal significance, recognition, control, and power. The entire system invented by the spirit of Pharisaism supports and is supported by self-interest. And it is facilitated by leavened individuals whose desires for godliness have been co-opted by the devil to do his work.

Satan knows only too well that young and eager Christians are his best foils in this task, and he capitalizes on their limited knowledge (of self and God) and their limited experience to bring them into bondage. He does this by seducing them with the notion that they can “save the world,” “make a difference,” “be somebody,” “use their gifts,” “leave their mark,” or accomplish any other spiritual ambition before they are seasoned enough to know in their heart of hearts that it is in weakness that we are strong; that without Christ we can do nothing; and that we have nothing to give but our empty cups. It takes time for a believer to come to the end of himself and to surrender at the foot of the cross. But so often, rather than seeking a mature

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<sup>13</sup> 2 Tim. 3:5

<sup>14</sup> Matt. 15:14 “Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

<sup>15</sup> This is the same desire that led Adam to choose “knowledge” over innocence.

<sup>16</sup> By publicly exposing and castigating it.

believer to disciple him, a new Christian sets off on a quest to “master the Book,” rather than be mastered *by* it. Or better, by its Author. Satan knows this, so he does his best to capture the heart of the young idealist and steer him toward *his* version of righteousness and his version of truth. He does not want to have to do battle with any more “fools for Christ” (like Paul) than he has to. Fools for Christ are not vulnerable to the seductions of personal glory, success, comfort or fulfillment. They’ve already died to themselves and their own reputation, goals, ambition, or achievement. It’s not *about* them and they know it, and the devil *knows* they know it. And he can’t work with that. So he does everything in his power to grab those with a desire to serve God *before they’ve actually died to self* and snare them with the seductive promise that true spiritual success, opportunity and influence are available only *within* the religious system.

He does this by appealing to their underlying feelings of inadequacy and their need for significance, using the false religious system and its promises to, in effect, bribe them into bondage. Once there, he begins to rob them of freedom and uncompromised passion by making them and their livelihood dependent on the system. Once he has them sufficiently entangled, he keeps them from ever discovering that, in the midst of their “striving for God’s glory,” they are actually living for themselves, feeding their own egos, striving for their own significance and building their own kingdoms. *Keeping* them under the delusion that they are entirely selfless saints, laboring in God’s one true vineyard, is his goal.

This delusion is the source of the hypocrisy that Jesus put His finger squarely upon. Again, it wasn’t the “content” of their teaching so much that Jesus was concerned about (although at times content was an issue). But it was the heart behind the teaching: the notion that they were uniquely qualified (by formal education) to lead and to be the repositories of truth for the people. That they were the exclusive conduits through which God would speak. That without *them* the people were helpless to hear from God or to understand His Word.<sup>17</sup> They were setting themselves up as examples to the flock without having achieved true inner holiness, just outward piety supported by academic credentials. In actual fact, they did not know God nor did they understand salvation. This is made abundantly clear in John 3:1-21, where Jesus tells Nicodemus, arguably one of the more sincere Pharisees, that he doesn’t understand how to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Are we saying that everyone in modern Church leadership is a hypocrite then? No, that’s not our place. But we *are* saying that the entire institutional religious system is leavened, and that that leaven infects every person who embraces it.

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<sup>17</sup> This view was, of course, later adopted by the Catholic Church and subsequently by the majority of Christendom. We have swallowed the same bait, hood, line and sinker.

Once the leavening process begins, it is almost impossible to stop. As soon as a person accepts the notion that the religious system is God's best tool for preparing His ambassadors, they are already deceived. If they continue their association with the system, before long they become spiritually blind, unable to see or hear the truth about themselves, the system or the reality of God's kingdom. Though they may be sincerely trying to seek and follow God and want desperately to be used by Him, the leaven subtly begins to reshape them, their goals, their hearts and even their personalities, and, slowly but surely, their original motives become mixed with self-interest, a desire to be seen as significant and influential, to be elevated and to control others, to make a name for themselves or just to make a living. Before long they will have turned ministry into a profession or career and church into a business. These individuals can be found at all levels of the religious system, not just in the churches themselves. They are the hirelings Jesus warned us about.

Keep in mind that leaven is a deception, and those who are deceived don't know they're deceived. So far as they're concerned, they are just doing their best to labor in the only vineyard they know exists. And they got there by the only means they know exists: Bible school and seminary. Unfortunately, the life they lead is not nearly as effective as they want to believe at modeling the relational and spiritual truths of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in far too many cases, it is actually robbing people of their inheritance in the faith, which is to be full participants and equal partners in the life and work of ministry, whatever their gifting or calling.

### ANOTHER METAPHOR

Have you ever been fishing? If so, you know there are certain essential components to the sport. Let's list them. You need a pole, right? You need someone to wield the pole. You need some fishing line and a hook. You need some bait or a lure. You need some water. And you need some unsuspecting little fishies to swallow the bait and follow where it leads.

If we were to identify these components in spiritual terms, it might look like this:

- Fisherman = the devil;
- Pole = the spiritual forces who serve at his command;
- Fishing Line = deception as a tool of the underworld;
- Hook = the false religious system;
- Lure = false promises of godliness proffered by the false religious system;
- Water = the institutional churches;
- Fish = the unsuspecting man or woman with a genuine heart to serve God.

Okay, let's flesh this out.

Let's say you are a young man about to embark on your life as an independent person. You are a sensitive soul and have an overarching desire to serve God with your whole heart and to know the Bible intimately. You want your life to be spiritually influential and significant. You are committed to righteousness yourself and want to please God. You long for deep fellowship with Jesus and for life-sustaining meaning and purpose. You want to store up treasure in heaven and mature into a godly leader. And you are doing your best to discern God's plan for your life, though it's not easy.

If you've grown up in the Church, or even if you haven't, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that, in order to fulfill your perceived calling and ministry ambitions, you're going to need to follow a prescribed path. A sanctioned path. One that leads through Bible school and seminary straight to your own pastorate or to another area of Christian service, perhaps in a mission or parachurch organization. You know, along with everyone else, that getting the right credentials is everything and will help you achieve the things that you believe God Himself is calling you to do. And so you eagerly embark on the journey that you are convinced will yield your greatest spiritual rewards and satisfaction.

You, my young friend, have just swallowed the proverbial bait.

This deception or bait, part of what we are calling "religious leaven," is what the devil uses to deceive or corrupt good motives and to commandeer them for his own purposes. The perversion of good motives is the devil's specialty and he delights in taking our fondest dreams, what we see as our calling and our mission, and using them to sabotage the Kingdom of God.

Though those motives may be godly and your goals righteous, getting to them through human institutions, formal education, academic degrees, head knowledge, various manmade credentials, religious careers, premature leadership and all the other trappings of the false religious system (not to mention mountains of debt) will lead you astray. They are a false route to the true goal of Christlikeness, and one far less painful than the one that Paul followed.<sup>18</sup>

But not only is this false route less painful, it will be taking you in the wrong direction.

What do we mean by this? We mean that, rather than death to self, your path will lead to self-promotion, self-protection and self-focus. Though you begin with the purest of motives (as far as anyone can discern their own heart which, we are told, is "desperately wicked and deceitful above all things"), you will be forced to jump through the hoops of organized religion: to invest

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<sup>18</sup> Paul, in fact, *gave up* the very things these men are pursuing: formal education, titles, prestige, status, association with the privileged, acceptance, security and comfort in exchange for a life of rejection, ridicule, persecution, privation, incarceration and ultimately death. All for the sake of knowing Christ.

the greater part of your energy in acquiring information at the expense of relationship (including relationship with God); to compromise your passions for the sake of organizational objectives; to conform to hierarchical dictates; to submit to those in “authority” over you even when it seems to contradict what your heart or the Spirit is telling you; to consider how to market yourself and your ministry in order to achieve your or the organization’s financial or ministerial objectives or requirements; to exaggerate the success of your ministry for personal gain or promotion; and to compromise or even suspend your pursuit of your true calling for the sake of paying off your educational debts or making your household budget. (How much harder to walk by faith when you have \$100,000 in educational loans coming due?) And you will spend hours and hours writing and rehearsing your finely crafted three-point sermons for maximum effect.<sup>19</sup>

But besides all this, as you are installed (most probably prematurely) into positions of leadership in the institutional church, you will automatically have to keep certain parts of your heart and life hidden from the people who attend your church or religious functions—those you profess to have fellowship with. You will present an image to them that is consistent with your leadership position. You will learn how to play the role of pastor, or teacher, or church leader. And you will play it well because your livelihood will depend on it.

In this way, you will actually create for yourself two faces: one for public consumption and one that lives in private and often in the dark. Unfortunately, the hidden self that you dare not expose for fear of losing your elevated position and your livelihood is the real you. And the very fact that you cannot be real and show your true self in all its weakness and sin precludes you from the life of transparent fellowship and brotherhood that is the lifeblood of the Church. And so you will slowly starve off the true self and feed the false self, until you are a caricature of religious faith, a paper doll of piety.<sup>20</sup> To make matters worse, as a spiritual leader and mentor, you will actually be promoting a false version of Christianity in a pseudo-spiritual performance that stifles rather than facilitates deep transformation (in yourself or your followers).<sup>21</sup> You will be presumed to have achieved a level of sanctification beyond your years, one that you will do your best to mimic in the public arena. That imitation faith, imitation righteousness, and

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<sup>19</sup> Achieving eloquence of speech was something Paul specifically eschewed, that the message of the cross might not be outshone by his cleverness.

<sup>20</sup> How many vaunted religious leaders have been “outed” for their hidden depravity in recent years? They are perpetrators and victims of their own deception.

<sup>21</sup> Those who attend institutional churches learn by osmosis that, if you want to advance to the role of elder or deacon, or be considered worth listening to in any capacity, you have to appear to have it all together. Or at least appear more mature and godly than your average member. Yet how many pastors, worship leaders, priests, TV evangelists do we all know who have been exposed as pedophiles, philanderers, embezzlers, adulterers, homosexuals? Too many. That is not to cast aspersions on those who live a life of mature faith, but there are far too many imitating that life in public but failing to live it in private.

imitation sanctification will be your undoing. It is a performance. And it finds its best expression in the institutional church.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly then, leaven is a deception, a false promise, that interacts with our fallen hearts assisted by our own unconscious mixed motives, and over time it reshapes us, inflating us with pride disguised as external righteousness and spiritual performance. At the same time, it lies to us about the requirements and benefits of servanthood, the means of sanctification, and the route to usefulness in the Kingdom of God. It promises to fill our empty cups with good things, but unfortunately they are not the same things that Jesus promises or wants for us.

Think about this: If you think God is leading you to accrue the very credentials He insisted that Paul toss out and called dung, then you are not hearing God correctly. If you really want to follow Jesus, then you must leave behind the things He rejected and take up the things He embraced: total alignment with the Father and death to self.

**AN ILLUSTRATION:** I used to attend a "seeker-friendly" church full of talented members. The pastor was a wonderful speaker, funny (*oh, was he funny!*), articulate, smart, not-to-mention an impressive, imposing figure. Tall, handsome, fit, strong. Every week after service I found myself saying, "Boy that Phil, he's amazing. He is so gifted. What a great speaker!" Within an hour after the service (or sometimes less) I couldn't tell you what he'd said. *But I knew it was great.* Or at least I knew *he* was great. Same with the soloists and the actors: wow, were they awesome! Talented, *funny*. "Boy, can that guy sing!" "Man, that Debbie is so good! Such a great actress."

My point? God didn't get much of the glory, at least not from me. And somehow that tawdry cross never seemed to get mentioned.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not judging their motives. I can't. For the most part I think they were doing the best they knew how to serve God with a whole heart. They were trying their darndest to make Christianity *attractive*. But unfortunately, the automatic result of the most talented people being "up front" exercising their natural gifts is that God gets short-changed. It happens without our even realizing it. Somehow we end up being the attractive ones, and the cross gets shoved into a back room somewhere so it won't offend anyone.

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<sup>22</sup> Why do we say this? Because church is the one place you should expect to find integrity, especially among the leadership. And when it goes awry, it is more devastating that a similar failure in business, politics, law, medicine, or virtually any other profession. Yet when we install spiritually unqualified or untested individuals into positions of leadership because of their talent or education, too often we are shocked to find the worship leader running off with the elder's wife, or the church splitting over its corporate vision, or worship style, or other relatively inconsequential issues, or because one of the pastors feels he is losing control of the church's mission or direction or because it's not fulfilling his ministry ambitions anymore. Sad but true. Immaturity wears a coat of many colors.

That is not to say that we must be unattractive shy mumblers to serve God. But at the very least we must recognize that our personal strengths may be our greatest handicap in our service to God, especially if we hide our weaknesses. God has a habit of choosing those who will not steal His glory.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps that is why I always find myself so much more deeply impacted by a "weaker" member who dares to step out past their comfort zone, beyond the limits of their own talent, and let God use them. Because *He* ends up with the glory, and *they* have greater impact precisely because "*when we are weak, He is strong.*"<sup>24</sup>

Maybe that explains why the *content* of all those great sermons somehow gets lost amid all the impressive window dressing. How many great sermons can *you* actually recall more than an hour afterward? And how often do you give *God* the glory for that sermon? Doesn't the pastor usually end up with your praise? How often have you left church feeling entertained but not connected? Or like no one really knows you, and worse yet, no one really cares to? And this, we suspect, is the way the vast majority of the American Church operates. Promote the talented, the good-looking, the educated, the smooth-talking. That guy over there who looks a little off and who doesn't quite have perfect grammar? Forget it! We wouldn't want people thinking he's part of *our* church; certainly not in leadership. People might start leaving, and then who would pay the mortgage? We want to attract the rich and the powerful, so we can build bigger buildings, maybe a gymnasium or a new fellowship hall. Get us some good padded seats.<sup>25</sup>

Is that not how it is? We sit in our pews week after week watching someone else talk about God (if we're lucky), taking our cues from the "leaders," obediently complying like the sheep we are, maybe even applauding here and there. Never openly challenging authority when it goes awry. Never questioning whether or not this is God's way, or whether it really equips us to work in God's garden in the first place. How do you get equipped by someone talking at you for 40 minutes once a week anyway? Even if they "talk real good."

We were not intended to be passive spectators in a Church of the talented few. We were meant to be active participants, "*for the body is not one member, but many...*" (1 Corinthians 12:14) Again, "*When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification...And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment....For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted...*" (1 Corinthians 14:26, 29, 31)

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<sup>23</sup> Think of Moses, little David, the apostles. He doesn't do this because He's a glory-hog or the Grand Narcissist in the sky, but because it is right for the Highest One to be given His rightful place, and He's not interested in contributing to our confusion on that issue. We have enough trouble not creating idols on our own.

<sup>24</sup> Is the corollary also true? When we are strong (in ourselves), He appears weak, or perhaps becomes invisible (fades into the background)?

<sup>25</sup> The vast majority of monies that come into the churches are spent on the churches themselves: salaries, mortgages, maintenance, utilities, programs, benefits, insurance, etc.

Somehow this doesn't sound like most American churches look. But it's God's plan. And we would do well to follow it.

Though the devil is hard at work in all this, Jesus never excused the men who entertained these misguided priorities. He held them personally responsible for their choices, attitudes, actions and influence. And He does today. That's why He told us to beware. But we can't be-ware if we're not a-ware. Awareness comes first. That is the aim of this document then: to help us all become more aware, so that we can avoid the pitfalls Jesus so adamantly warned us about.

If you're still willing, come join us on a journey of discovery.

K.C. and T.L.