

The Subliminal Message

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A moderately or fashionably well-dressed man (or woman) stands before a passively attentive audience and delivers a monologue speech that lasts anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour. This scene is repeated once, twice or three times a week (in some cases more) and the same people (more or less) return every week to hear the same speaker deliver a similar speech every time.

From these bare facts alone, what might an unbiased observer conclude? First, the audience must consider what the man is saying of some significance and importance and the man (or woman) himself must be considered to be the possessor of a greater amount or quality of information than the audience possesses. Second, the man must receive some sort of satisfaction from having so many people routinely sitting at his feet to partake of his superior knowledge and insights.

Let's put this in plain terms. Every time the man takes his place at center stage, the very position he holds says this:

“You must sit at my feet because you are ignorant, maybe even stupid. But I am exalted because I have an understanding of the subject matter that far surpasses yours. Therefore I must speak down to you common cows in your ignorance and stupidity and afterward congratulate myself for how I spend my time and energy, even my life, just to help you out.”

Let us be equally clear. The *man* (or woman) will never, **never** say this, nor is even likely to consciously think this – but the ***position*** **always** says it and, as advertising experts well know, the subliminal message is the one that always sticks the longest even (and especially!) when that hidden message is not perceived or understood consciously.

If we were discussing a university level class on English Lit. or the lives of various famous artists, this would be one thing. But we are discussing the usual, average “discipleship” method that occurs at almost every “church” around the world! This method is often called “sermons” but also includes “Bible studies” and other Bible-based “inspirational” messages. Purportedly, these men (and women) stand up to deliver to the people a teaching message that comes from the truths of God but unfortunately (even lethally, spiritually speaking), the position the man (or woman) takes is a position that belongs to God and any truth he (or she) speaks is drowned out by the subliminal message of “Sit at my feet and let me do all the work you're not qualified to do.”

How did this come about? The answers are deep but are not too hard for any unbiased researcher to discover – the researcher will have more trouble discarding his own preconceived and unrecognized paradigms than he will have in finding the historical facts. Consider these few briefly mentioned items and then go look up the histories for yourself.

- After the deaths of the original apostles (that we see in the book of Acts, etc.), the bishop arose over the presbytery (elders) and the whole class of bishops, elders and deacons (and their various descendent titles) evolved into the higher exalted class of clergy. This division is perpetuated even in denominations (and

“non”-denominations!) that denounce the clergy/laity split. The split is most preserved by simply having the people routinely sit at the man’s feet!

- When the bishop arose out of the presbytery, he truly drew followers away from Christ and after himself. (Acts 20:30) Bishops like Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 110 A.D.) even taught that it was right and proper for the bishop to stand “in the place of God” (“To the Magnesians,” c. 6) and for the people to “look upon the bishop as...upon the Lord Himself.” (“To the Ephesians,” c. 6)

- The modern practice of sermons derives from the Greek practice of sophistry (rhetoric, oratory and wisdom) and not from the Biblical precedent of a disciple of Christ speaking spontaneously from the inspiration and prompting of the Holy Spirit. Frank Viola has perhaps captured this aspect the best and is eminently worth quoting at length. He wrote:

To find the headwaters of the sermon, we must go back to the fifth century B.C. with a group of wandering teachers called sophists. The sophists are credited for inventing rhetoric (the art of persuasive speaking). They recruited disciples and demanded payment for delivering their orations.

The sophists were expert debaters. They were masters at using emotional appeals, physical appearance, and clever language to “sell” their arguments. In time, the style, form, and oratorical skill of the sophists became more prized than their accuracy. This spawned a class of men who became masters of fine phrases, “cultivating style for style’s sake.” The truths they preached were abstract rather than truths that were practiced in their own lives. They were experts at imitating *form* rather than *substance*.

The sophists identified themselves by the special clothing they wore. Some of them had a fixed residence where they gave regular sermons to the same audience. Others traveled to deliver their polished orations. (They made a good deal of money when they did.) Sometimes the Greek orator would enter his speaking forum “already robed in his pulpit-gown.” He would then mount the steps to his professional chair to sit before he brought his sermon.

To make his points, he would quote Homer’s verses. Some orators studied Homer so well that they could repeat him by heart.) So spell-binding was the sophist, that he would often incite his audience to clap their hands during his discourse. If his speaking was very well received, some would call his sermons “inspired.”

The sophists were the most distinguished men of their time. So much so that some lived at public expense. Others had public statues erected in their honor.

(Does all this not remind you of many modern-day preachers?)

About a century later, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) gave to rhetoric the three-point speech. “A *whole*,” said Aristotle,

“*must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.*” In time, Greek orators implemented Aristotle’s three-point principle into their discourses.

The Greeks were intoxicated with rhetoric. So the sophists fared well. When Rome took over Greece, the Romans fell under the Greek spell of being obsessed with rhetoric. Consequently, Greco-Roman culture developed an insatiable lust to hear someone give an eloquent oration. This was so fashionable that a “sermonette” from a professional philosopher after dinner was a regular form of entertainment.

The ancient Greeks and Romans viewed rhetoric as one of the greatest forms of art. Accordingly, the orators in the Roman Empire were lauded with the same glamorous status that Americans assign to movie stars and professional athletes. They were the shining stars of their day.

Orators could bring a crowd to a frenzy simply by their powerful speaking skills. Teachers of rhetoric, the leading science of the era, were the pride of every major city. The orators they produced were given celebrity status. In short, the Greeks and Romans were addicted to the pagan sermon – just like many modern Christians are addicted to the “Christian” sermon...

How did the Greek sermon find its way into the Christian church? Around the third century a vacuum was created when mutual ministry faded from the Body of Christ. At this time the traveling worker who spoke out of a spontaneous burden left the pages of church history. To fill his absence, the clergy-caste began to emerge. Open meetings began to die out, and church gatherings became more and more liturgical.

During the third century, the clergy-laity distinction was widening at breakneck speed. A hierarchical structure began to take root, and there grew up the idea of the “religious specialist.” In the face of these changes, the functioning Christian had trouble fitting into this evolving ecclesiastical structure. There was no place for him to exercise his gifts. By the fourth century, the church had become fully institutionalized and the functioning of God’s people froze.

As this was happening, many pagan orators were becoming Christians. As a result, pagan philosophical ideas unwittingly made their way into the Christian community. Some of the new converts at this time happened to be former pagan philosophers and orators. Regrettably, many of these men became the theologians of the early Christian church. They are known as the “church fathers,” and some of their writings are still with us.

Thus the pagan notion of a trained professional speaker who delivers orations for a fee moved straight into the Christian bloodstream. Note that the concept of the “paid teaching specialist” did not come from Judaism. It came from Greece. It was the custom of the Jewish rabbis to take up a trade so as to not charge a fee for their teaching.

The upshot of the story is that these former pagan orators (now turned Christian) began to use their Greco-Roman oratorical skills for Christian purposes. They would sit in their official chair and “*expound the*

sacred text of Scripture, just as the sophist would supply an exegesis of the near-sacred text of Homer...” If you compare a third-century pagan sermon with a sermon given by one of the church fathers, you will find both the structure and the phraseology to be shockingly similar.

So a new style of communication was being birthed in the Christian church – a style that emphasized polished rhetoric, sophisticated grammar, flowery eloquence, and monologue. It was a style that was designed to entertain and show off the speaker’s oratorical skills. It was Greco-Roman rhetoric. And only those who were trained in it were allowed to address the assembly! (Sound familiar?)

One scholar put it this way: *The original proclamation of the Christian message was a two-way conversation...but when the oratorical schools of the Western world laid hold of the Christian message, they made Christian preaching something vastly different. Oratory tended to take the place of conversation. The greatness of the orator took the place of the astounding event of Jesus Christ. And the dialogue between speaker and listener faded into a monologue.*

In a word, the Greco-Roman sermon replaced prophesying, open sharing, and Spirit-inspired teaching. The sermon became the elitist privilege of church officials, particularly the bishops. Such people had to be educated in the schools of rhetoric to learn how to speak. Without such education, a Christian was not permitted to speak to God’s people.

As early as the third century, Christians called their sermons by the same name that Greek orators called their discourses. They called them *homilies*. Today, one can take a seminary course called *homiletics* to learn how to preach. Homiletics is considered a “*science, applying rules of rhetoric, which go back to Greece and Rome.*”

Put another way, neither homilies (sermons) nor homiletics (the art of sermonizing) have a Christian origin. They were stolen from the pagans. A polluted stream made its entrance into the Christian faith and poisoned its waters. And that stream flows just as strongly today as it did in the fourth century.” (*Pagan Christianity*, 1st ed., pp. 79-84, emphasis in original, footnotes withheld)

There are two more insights from history that ought to speak volumes to us. It should be obvious to any observers of church history that the sermon is unable to deeply change Christians’ lives. While it is difficult for someone steeped in the “church” paradigm to separate true preaching from sermonizing, once one has gotten away from it, the differences are easily discernible. But even those who are still ensnared under the pulpit paradigm should recognize the snare for what it is when only a day or two after the sermon has been given all that is routinely remembered are the jokes and quips! The main part of the sermon generally cannot even be brought to recall.

John Chrysostom (347-407 a.d.) – nicknamed “Goldenmouth” for his skills and eloquence as a rhetorical orator – received the equivalent of a standing ovation for his sermon against applause! (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. III*, p. 938, note 3) Three hundred years after Christ, the position so drowned out what was spoken that the Greeks who

clapped their hands and stomped their feet, most enthusiastically applauded his sermon against the hidden wickedness of their applause!

The advertising experts have it right. The subliminal message is the one that is retained while the spoken message is quickly lost and forgotten. Sermons are not God's methods of delivering His truths to His people – three points and a poem or joke are Aristotle's methods! “My sheep hear *My* voice...” (Jn. 10:27) We have received an anointing [unction, enablement] that resides in us and we have no need for *anyone* to routinely and constantly teach us. (1 Jn. 2:27) The New Covenant of God (which has been in effect since the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit on Jew and Gentile alike) is of such a nature that “there will be *no need at all* [Greek, emphatic negation!] for each one to teach his countryman or each one to teach his brother saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ since they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest.” (Heb. 8:11 - emphasis added)

It is the apostasy, the great falling away from the faith, the counterfeit “church” that will heap up many false and deceived teachers who stir up the “itch” in regard to hearing stories and myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4), teachers who claim to have special anointing from God who deceive many (Mt. 24:5), teachers who secretly (stealthily, unobtrusively) introduce damaging divisions (denominations) that remove the Lordship of Christ from over the people (2 Pet. 2:1), teachers who flatter and compliment their passive audiences sufficiently (with intellectualisms, if nothing else) to keep them content and comfortable in their passive listening attending by fleshly and corrupt lifestyles and behaviors. (2 Pet. 2:18)

It is the paradigm of the pyramid (one man at the top who stands between God and men) that is of demonic origins and that most needs utterly and completely forsaken and abandoned. There is only one Man who holds the Headship of the body of Christ and He has not and never will share that position with any man. He alone is to have the preeminence in all things over His people. (Col. 1:18, etc.) Let us never forget that it is a Diotrophes, a false “pastor” who loves to have the preeminence in the local assembly – routinely lording over the assembly and speaking down to them – who will reject the messengers who truly are sent by God and who will not allow such messengers to step into his pulpit and present the full counsel of God to the people. (3 Jn. 9-10) “Diotrophes” doesn't really need to worry, however. Any true message from God would be drowned out because the man stood in the pulpit to speak it! Only those who go “outside the camp” to hear whatever Christ is saying and listen to whomever Christ happens to be using at that moment (until such time as they learn anew how to hear Christ for themselves) will be able to hear His call and go out to meet Him. (Heb. 13:13, etc.)

The paradigm that we are to imitate must be changed. We must exchange the “pastoral” pyramid scheme for the example that the New Covenant says we must imitate:

- Jesus said, “For I have given you an example – you should do just as I have done for you.” (Jn. 13:14) Jesus had just washed His disciples' feet and the washing of the feet represents both a servant's task and a task that must be done by another to complete the cleansing process. (Jn. 13:8-10) In effect, Jesus was telling us that because we walk in the dust of this world, we will need to both serve our brothers and sisters to help them remove this world's filth that persistently clings to our heels and also to submit to other brothers and sisters who would perform that role for us. Because the Master humbled – and did not exalt – Himself, there simply is no place or room for the exalted-“pastor”-on-a-pedestal-behind-a-pulpit paradigm.

- Peter also wrote, “For to this – to do good and suffer and so endure – you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in His steps.” (1 Pet. 2:20-21) Suffering *is* part of God’s will for the life of a true follower of Christ (1 Pet. 4:19, 2 Tim. 3:12, etc.) – those who teach and believe otherwise are simply deceived.

These are the *only* two Scriptures that speak of Christ’s actions as an example to follow and this *is* the paradigm that must replace the “pastoral” pyramid scheme. And it must be a total replacement. Diotrephes and Christ simply cannot both share the preeminence that belongs to Christ alone. *All* who stumble others and practice lawlessness (what is right in their own eyes) will be removed from Christ’s kingdom when the angels come to remove the counterfeit tares out from among the genuine wheat. (Mt. 13:41) The wise man will humble himself now and make certain which category *God* says he belongs to!

Let he who has ears hear.

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