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## Facing Our Worst Enemy-the Little Leaven

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F. C. K r e t z m a n n.

### Facing Our Worst Enemy — the Little Leaven.

Of the many proverbial sayings in Holy Scripture none is more striking, more important, and more applicable to the various conditions of the Christian life than Paul's famous aphorism: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." That this maxim, so frequently used and so variously applied, is worth studying, no thoughtful Christian will deny. Yet it may be doubted whether the average Christian to-day is really aware of its deep significance. In view of the recent amazing changes within the American churches it is quite obvious that these at least are giving little attention to the astounding peril now threatening the best and truest Christians, called the "little leaven" in Holy Scripture. The matter is certainly worth considering.

In the Bible the term "leaven" occurs rather frequently. Our Savior employs it in a good sense when He compares the kingdom of God to "leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till the whole was leavened." Luke 13, 21; Matt. 18, 33. This figurative use of "leaven," applied symbolically to the moral influence of the Gospel of Christ, is quite intelligible to the Bible student. It is based upon the "penetrating and diffusive nature" of leaven; and thus it easily becomes an emblem of anything good, which by exerting a strong, but silent influence works a general change. Leaven (אֵץ, *se-or*) is needed for making bread; ferment (חַמֵּץ, *chamez*), for making wine; and bread and wine were regarded by the ancients as the two chief agencies necessary for sustaining human life. The figurative use of leaven *in bonam partem* is therefore easily explained.

However, Holy Scripture employs the term leaven much more frequently *in malam partem*. Commonly the word as used in the Bible is a symbol of moral corruption. This connotation the term seems to have had also among the heathen. In Rome, for instance, the priest of Jupiter was not allowed to touch leaven. Plutarch,



who is our authority for this, explains this injunction by the fact that leaven "comes out of corruption and corrupts that with which it mingles." (*Rom. Quaest.*, CIX, 6; cp. also Aul. Gellius, VIII, 15.) Similarly leaven was prohibited in many of the typical institutions of the Jews. It was forbidden in the Passover and also during the succeeding seven days, usually called the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Ex. 12, 8. 19. 20; Deut. 16, 3. 4. The statement that in this case the unleavened bread was simply to remind the Israelites of the hasty departure of their fathers out of Egypt explains only in part the earnestness with which God inculcated the commandment. The "purging out" of the leaven certainly had a deeper significance than simply to recall to the Israelite the fact of the exodus. The transgression of the command was punishable by death, and this suggests the fact that the total removal of the leaven before the celebration of the Passover had a moral meaning. Of this moral significance the Jews were certainly aware, for the Law was rigidly observed, and upon the approach of the Feast of the Passover they assiduously put away all leaven from their houses, taking extreme care in searching every corner of their homes to "cleanse out" even the least particle of leaven. The usual leaven in ancient times was dough kept till it was sour. Thus a small part of the lump was preserved from day to day for the purpose of having leaven in readiness, so that leaven was kept continually in the home. It was put away, however, before the Passover, because as an emblem of moral corruption it symbolized to the Israelites their own cleansing and consecration to God, just as their fathers were consecrated to God as His own people when by the exodus they were separated from all unholy association with the Egyptians. On the part of God the exodus was the solemn acknowledgment of Israel as the people of Jehovah; and on the part of the people it was their solemn acknowledgment of Jehovah as their only sovereign Lord. They were unleavened (*ἄζυμοι*) in the sense of being a holy nation, free from all impurity of idolatry and wholly consecrated to the true God. This truth was symbolized by the "purging out" of the leaven at the Feast of the Passover, the feast of dedication to Jehovah.

The figurative use of the term leaven in a bad sense is therefore easily explained, especially also in view of the fact that God forbade either ferment or honey to be offered to Him in the symbolical Temple rites, though these were permitted in offerings designed to be consumed as food. Num. 15, 20. On the same prin-



ciple of symbolism, salt was prescribed as a constant part of the oblations offered to Him. Lev. 2, 11. Salt prevents corruption; leaven induces it. Salt is therefore a symbol of incorruption, while leaven is a symbol of corruption. The *Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia*, to which we are indebted for the information given above, says: "Thus St. Paul (cp. Col. 4, 6; Mark 9, 50) uses salt as preservative from corruption on the same principle which leads him to employ that which is unfermented (*ἀζυμος*) as an emblem of purity and uncorruptness."

In view of these facts our Savior's warning against the leaven of the Pharisees, of the Sadducees, and of Herod (Matt. 16, 6; Mark 8, 15; Luke 12, 1) should have been readily understood by the disciples. Jesus, when warning them against the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees, had in mind their *doctrine*. Matt. 16, 8. This fact, however, the disciples did not understand until our Lord carefully explained to them His warning. St. Mark suggests that Jesus was amazed at this lack of understanding. Mark 8, 21. St. Luke refers the leaven of the Pharisees to their "hypocrisy." This is no contradiction of St. Matthew's interpretation; for the blatant hypocrisy of the Pharisees was apparent particularly in their doctrinal attitude. They pretended to follow Moses, but rejected the very Messiah whom Moses had foretold. John 5, 45. 46. Luther rightly explains the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees as their "hypocrisy and other offenses, when men act falsely and deceitfully, especially when, doing so, they use God's name and still desire to adorn and deck their evil deeds in order that it may not be said that it was wrongly taught, conceived, and done, but that it may be called right, good, and Christian." (St. L. Ed., XII, 489.) The leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees was therefore their obnoxious hypocrisy with respect to the central doctrines of Holy Scripture. They deliberately rejected the Gospel of Christ and yet boasted of being God's children and Abraham's seed.

To-day the dreadful leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is working unspeakable harm within the churches of our country. Of this every Christian who has read such books as Horsch's *Modern Religious Liberalism* and Gordon's *The Leaven of the Sadducees* is fully aware. The great apostasy of the last times which our Savior predicted has come, and the horrible falling away by the wayside of thousands of Christians must fill every true child of God with both horror and compassion. However, the mad hypocrisy of Modernism with its pretentious claims of preaching the real Christ



and His true Gospel, while at the same time it blasphemously rejects every specific doctrine of the Christian religion, has been exposed almost *ad nauseam*. The abomination of Modernism has been pictured so clearly and emphatically that no earnest Christian who is really seeking the truth ought to be ensnared by its lies. If Christians are misled by this leaven, it is because they refuse to see where really they cannot help but seeing. We have therefore little sympathy for the informed Christian who is deceived by ranting and blaspheming Modernists. If he comes to grief and loses his soul's salvation, it is not because the enemy was too insidious for him, but because in clear daylight he foolishly and with open eyes ran into his traps.

The most insidious and therefore greatest danger to-day lies in the "little leaven" which Satan now uses so cleverly to ensnare and destroy the best and truest Christians. The "little leaven" is to-day our worst enemy. And it is against this enemy that Paul warns us in 1 Cor. 5, 6 and Gal. 5, 9. To-day the sincerest Christians in our country are exactly in the same danger in which the Corinthians and the Galatians were in Paul's time. It is well for us honestly to face this fact.

Paul uses the term leaven just as our Savior used it. To him leaven is moral corruption, either in life or in doctrine. He identifies the "old leaven" with malice and wickedness. 1 Cor. 5, 8. In 1 Cor. 5, 6 the term leaven refers to the immoral conduct and vicious influence of the incestuous man and "the whole lump" to the Corinthian church, whose entire moral life was in danger of being corrupted. In Gal. 5, 9 the term leaven is the pernicious doctrine of work-righteousness which the Judaizing teachers inculcated; in particular, the doctrine that circumcision was necessary unto salvation, which was threatening to pervert the whole Christian faith of the Galatian churches. (Cp. *Intern. Crit. Com.*, Epistle to Galatians, p. 283.) Leaven in the Pauline sense is moral corruption both in life and doctrine. It is moral and doctrinal hypocrisy.

At Corinth an "incredible crime" had been perpetrated. A member of the Corinthian church had committed *πορνεία* of so terrible a nature that it was abhorred even by the heathen; for both the Greek and the Roman law put the stamp of infamy upon it. Yet the Corinthian church tolerated both the offense and the offender. In spite of the unspeakable crime, which they readily condoned and for which they were responsible by their wicked spirit of tolerance, the Corinthians were puffed up with pride over their supposed state of Christian perfection and over their supposedly wonderful Chris-



tian accomplishments. Instead of being horrified at what had occurred in their midst, they rather gloried in the fine state of Christian progress which they boasted. It was this almost inconceivable self-deception that wrung from the apostle the soul-stirring warning: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."

In the Galatian churches Judaizing teachers had appeared, who insisted upon the keeping of the Ceremonial Law as necessary unto salvation. They commended themselves as the real apostles and their doctrine as true Christianity. They came with the claim that their destructive teachings were the genuine Gospel of Christ. And the foolish Galatians were "bewitched"; they belittled Paul's authority; they contemned the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone; they gloried in their work-righteousness and, in particular, in their circumcision as a prerequisite of salvation. And again Paul's finger traced on the wall the burning warning: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."

But Paul, in contradistinction to Christ, called attention especially to the *little leaven* (*μικρὰ ζύμη*). He perceived the danger lurking not merely in the leaven, but in the *little leaven*. At Corinth, Paul knew, the toleration of that one sinner and that one sin would infect and pervert the whole Christian life of the church. In the Galatian churches he saw that the one error of insisting upon circumcision for salvation would overthrow the whole Gospel. He did not mean to call the grave offense at Corinth a *little sin*, nor did he wish to call the reinstatement of circumcision a *little error*. The proverbial saying — for such it is in both instances — rather means: A little toleration of such unholiness and a little toleration of such unchristian doctrine will pervert and ruin the entire church. What Paul inculcates in both cases is *PRINCIPIIS OBSTA; sero medicina paratur*. It is against the little leaven in doctrine and life that he warns so vehemently. The apostle demands of his congregations absolute purity of doctrine and of life. The Corinthians were to "purge out" the whole old leaven of malice and wickedness. 1 Cor. 5, 7 f. They were to be altogether a new lump, wholly unleavened (*ἄζυμοι*). The feast was to be kept with absolutely unleavened cakes of sincerity and truth. Chap. 5, 8. A commentator remarks: "As the Israelites were to put away *all* leaven before partaking of the paschal lamb (Ex. 12, 15), which was the type of Christ, so the Corinthians were to put away *all* sin that they might spiritually feed on Christ, the great Anti-type." (*New Testament with Notes, sub voce ἄζυμοι*.) Even so in the Galatian churches Paul would not suffer the *least* false doctrine.



He writes with great emotion: "Behold, I, Paul, say unto you that, if ye be circumcised, Christ shall *profit you nothing*. For I testify again to *every man that is circumcised* that he is a debtor to do the *whole Law*. Christ is become of *no effect* unto you whosoever of you are justified by the Law; ye are *fallen from grace*." Gal. 5, 2—4. Such was Paul's decisive stand against the "little leaven" both in life and doctrine. His slogan was: "No leaven whatever, not the least!"

As Christians living in the godless age that ushers in the final Judgment we have every reason to heed Paul's warning and to beware of the *little* leaven which now endangers our Church. If we apply the warning to our Church alone and not to others which are in equal condemnation, it is only to follow Paul's example, who applied it to just those parishes which then concerned him most. In true penitence and humility let us first "sweep before our own doors."

The warning of St. Paul might be applied to a thousand and one things in which the destructive influence of Satan's leaven is manifestly active in our Church. There is the leaven of *worldliness*, which is rapidly doing away with the line of demarcation between the believer and the unbeliever. There is the leaven of *spiritual indifference*, which reveals itself in so many empty churches and so many unsatisfactory Communion records. There is the leaven of *miserliness* in taking care of the Church's work, which made necessary that elaborate financial machinery of Synod, which in spite of all its high-pressure efforts cannot fill our treasuries as they should be filled, — indeed, they ought to be full to overflowing, — we must be satisfied if they are merely kept from sheer bankruptcy. There is the leaven of *externalism*, which honors God with the mouth, but leaves the heart far removed from His gracious communion. There is the leaven of *satiety*, which is nauseated at the wholesome manna of pure doctrine. There is the leaven of *spiritual pride*, which boasts of our state of Christian perfection and often shows itself in weariness and disgust at what our fathers treasured so highly. There is the leaven of *spiritual security*, which smiles at the thought that we must take heed lest we fall. There is the leaven of *ease and luxury*, which revolts against suffering for Christ's sake. There is the leaven of *unbrotherly suspicion*, which seeks in every word or act some heresy or moral obliquity. There is the leaven of manifest *ungodliness* in our schools, our congregations, and our ministry, which defies God's holy Word.



There is the leaven of *sinful ambition*, which selfishly seeks self-aggrandizement and delights in adulation. But why should we multiply words? Satan is foisting his vicious leaven upon us everywhere — the leaven of malice and wickedness, which sears and destroys. In view of this undeniable fact we certainly have every reason in the world to consider and apply to ourselves as individuals and as a Church the warning of Paul: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." A little only of worldliness, of spiritual indifference, of neglect of the Church's needs, of externalism, of satiety, of spiritual pride, of carnal security, of ease and luxury, of loveless suspicion and envy, and of ungodliness in general, and the whole Church will be ruined! It is now for us to root out the *little leaven* that is creeping in, to guard against the *beginning* of that decay which has always beset the Christian Church, and to "purge out" what seems so insignificant as an evil in life and doctrine. That is the holy work which is demanded of us in the present crisis; for that is the worst enemy which we are now facing — the little leaven in a hundred different forms and manifestations. By the grace of God we are as a Church still horrified at blasphemous doctrines such as we find in Modernism. So, too, we are still shocked at the crying ungodliness of life as manifested in the godless world to-day; but what is so hard to perceive and to detest and to fight is the *little leaven*, the initial appearance of the ruin which threatens us no less than it has threatened the Church at all times. Let us by the grace of Christ see the *beginning* of evil in life and doctrine and wipe out the first and "little" leaven before it will leaven the whole lump.

We must apply the warning in particular to every form of *syncretism*. To-day churches are uniting by the wholesale, and this under the slogan "God wills it." But God does not will that we sacrifice even the least of His commandments and the least of His Gospel revelations. Look at Paul's attitude. His contention was that every one who was circumcised under the conditions as they prevailed in Galatia "was fallen from grace." As Paul resisted and rejected circumcision, so we must resist and reject the twin evils of the Christian churches in America — synergism and unionism. Little leaven indeed! — or so it seemed at the beginning. But oh, how they have leavened the whole lump!

And there is another form of syncretism which is much more subtle even than unionism as commonly conceived — the syncretism of *lodgery*. With respect to the "purging out" of this leaven we



stand practically alone. Here we may expect little support from others. And yet this leaven has already been brought in here and there. Masonry is still viewed in our midst as a pollution; but what about the other lodges that "have no religion"? What about those people who do "not see anything wrong in lodges"? What about those lodge-members "who were in the congregation when I came"? Right here the warning of Paul applies with a tremendous force: "A *little* leaven leaveneth the whole lump." The few lodge-members tolerated in the church,—how many will they offend by their continued membership! How many will they deceive in the end! The few "lodge congregations" in a District,—what an offense they are to those who earnestly fight the Lord's battle against this crafty form of syncretism! Our Synod has taken a definite stand with regard to the "lodge evil." It has declared that "lodge-members shall *not* be admitted to Holy Communion." The meaning of that sentence is clear. It allows no open door for wholesale exceptions. It expects of each minister of our Church to do his duty and "purge out" the old leaven. It calls upon every servant of Christ to abolish the offense of that ungodliness which Satan so surreptitiously seeks to have us regard as insignificant and harmless. Our Church, by the grace of God and in the strength of His Word, has fought down evils as great as the "lodge evil." It came out victorious whenever it faced an issue with the Sword of the Spirit. What we need to-day is *a faith which fights, obedience to God*, which looks not upon men or earthly advantages, but solely upon the banner of our Lord leading us into battle, and *loyalty* unto death. If we retain the little leaven of lodgery in our church-body, the whole lump of Synod will be leavened by it even before the present generation of our Christians will be dead. The greatest ally of Modernism is lodgery. Lodgery is Modernism dressed up in an outlandish garb and disguised by silly puerilities. Our fight against lodgery is the fight against rationalism, Modernism, and Satanism,—the old fight of Paul at Corinth and in Galatia,—against malice and wickedness. The apostle's warning is: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. Purge out therefore the old leaven that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." 1 Cor. 5, 6—8.

And what shall be the *modus procedendi*? Does the fight require special enactments and special resolutions? As was said



on the floor of the last Delegate Synod, resolutions will never wipe out the "lodge evil." That is verily true. Paul did not employ resolutions to purge out the "impurity leaven" from the church at Corinth or the "work-righteousness leaven" from the Galatian congregations. He used the Law with telling force where the Law was needed to show his readers the exceeding sinfulness of their particular brand of "leaven"; but in the final analysis it was the Gospel which he employed as the effective remedy to bring about the cure. To the Corinthians he wrote: "Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us," and to the Galatians: "Christ is become of no effect unto you whosoever of you are justified by the Law; ye are fallen from grace." The crucified and risen Christ, the sinner's only Hope in life and death, was both the basis and the heart of his appeal. That message of the crucified Christ is still effective to-day. It has lost none of its power; it still works miracles. Let our Christians be told that the issue calls for a decision either for Christ or against Christ; and let us plead, in behalf of their salvation, for a decision for Christ. If this will be done in each congregation earnestly and conscientiously, the result will be marvelous. As in Paul's day, so also in our time the Word of God will prove itself — a power of God.

J. T. MUELLER.

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### Sermon on Newton's Hymn for New Year's Eve.

Ps. 90, 9 b.

We are met in our sanctuary for the last time in the year of our Lord 1929. As we began this year in Jesus' name, so we wish to end it also in His name, who is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever!

Many thoughts crowd our hearts to-night. We think of the past year, and the multifarious events of another stage of our life's pilgrimage flit rapidly across the screen of memory. We think of the coming year and speculate as to what may lie in store for us behind the dark and impenetrable curtain of the future. Such thoughts come to Christian and worldling alike. But while the worldling plunges himself into an orgy of pleasure at this time, the Christian turns to serious meditation.

That is what you have come here to do. To that end I have chosen for our prayerful consideration one of the great hymns of the Church, namely, John Newton's hymn for New Year's Eve "While with Ceaseless Course the Sun." And may the precious Holy Spirit be with us in this hour!