

## THE ORACLE OF DELPHI

Text: Ro 15:14-16

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I myself am satisfied about you, my brethren, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Ro 15:14-16

Each generation has its own collection of unique problems that must be faced. It could well be that our own generation will go down in history as that time when men were compelled to face up to the "additive explosion" because one mark of the affluence of the 20th Century is the additive: that nonessential ingredient we add to daily life in an attempt to increase the richness of our experiences. A great number of additives are relatively harmless and even valuable; very few of them are really new, but our century has refined and compounded additives beyond the efforts of any previous age. This is the century that the machine-made cigarette was perfected, given exciting names, in fascinating packages; what was once "Bull Durham" became "Parliament Executives." This is the century when we learned how to drink alcohol in large quantities; and then in the 1960's we have found ourselves experimenting with a whole new range of additives: drugs, LSD, amphetamines. Consider these general categories:

(1) The Depressants. These are the additives that slow down the body processes, depress the central nervous system: opium and its derivatives (with the exception of cocaine) and the barbiturates. Each are habit-forming. They are used medically to induce sleep or combat pain. Alcohol is also technically a depressant and, in addition, is toxic. The liver can only handle 3/4 teaspoon of alcohol per hour and amounts in excess of this amount actually burn liver tissue--brain cells as well.

(2) The Stimulants. These are the amphetamines ("bennies," pep pills) which artificially increase the insulin level in the blood. They are not physiologically addictive as are the depressants.

(3) The Hallucinogenic. The hallucinative additives are the best known today--LSD, marijuana. These are psychic drugs and affect the psychic



balance of the brain.

A full scale contest now centers around one or another of these particular chemicals. The friends of the additives argue as follows in favor of their use: they argue that in the case of stimulants the intellectual capacity of an individual is heightened; that the person feels sharper and more alert. In the case of all three categories, it is argued that they widen consciousness of the inner self to the deeper reaches of reality. A less mystical claim is simply that the particular additive makes the user feel good (high).

The enemies of additives argue as follows: they point up the dangers of addiction, whether physical, as in the case of the depressants and alcohol, or emotional, as in the case of the stimulants and the hallucinative forms. I have discovered that this argument is not very persuasive in view of the fact that no one ever intends to get hooked on anything and never estimates himself as the kind of person who might become addicted. "Everyone here who thinks he will become a drug addict, a bad trip candidate, or alcoholic, please raise your hand!" No one raises his hand to that question; nevertheless, the warning regarding addiction is a very major and realistic argument of the enemies of these three additives, even though it is non-persuasive. A second argument is that all three of these tend to block one way or another, to greater or lesser degrees, the control mechanisms of the human personality. We are all aware of the drunken driver who has depressed his reflexes and reactions with alcohol, but with LSD and marijuana, whole new ranges of possibilities have been set loose that go beyond the control shutdown of drunkenness. Two students in Santa Barbara a few years ago, while on an LSD trip decided to "commune with the sun." Incredibly their eyes were permanently damaged because of the tragic shutdown of their body's natural defenses. The hallucination had blocked normal eye reflexes. But, the gravest warning from the enemies of the depressants, stimulants and hallucinogenic additives lies in the danger of the "triggering" aspect present in all three. These chemicals may trigger beneath the surface psychological fears and disorder, and as a result, may potentially leave the user in a permanent shambles of psychological confusion. Where the fears may have been normally resolved through day to day life experience, the effect of the induced experience is to set in motion with full pathological force the fears now armed and reinforced by fantasy.

There, in brief, are some of the principal arguments that always come into the discussion. But, I propose to leave these aside because I am not convinced that the case for or against the 20th Century additive explosion can be thought through meaningfully without seeing the whole subject in a larger context. It seems to me that drugs for our generation have brought forcibly to the surface a very central and haunting question and that is: What is it that modern man really needs and wants out of his life and how shall he find it? John Hersey, in his novel, "Too Far to Walk," uses the word "breakthrough" to describe the 20th Century desire for fulfillment. Many modern men describe this profound



wish with other words as well: "peace," involvement, or relationship, freedom, love or even the word "excitement," the beautiful feeling. Each of us is able to draw up the list and arrange the order of importance so far as we are concerned, but the very crucial question is still this one: How do you propose to achieve breakthrough? What is the door, the hinge, the key, and where does that door really lead? To these central questions very little has been said in the whole battle over drugs and alcohol. It is about time that we face the real issues without subterfuge or evasiveness, without endless discussions on addiction and laws.

I am going to propose two comments to this more central issue.

(1) The first comment is this: A man finds fulfillment when his life goes deep. Take for example the fulfillment of a tree: the branches, the fruit, the leaves, the height; each of these must be in honest proportion to the roots. A few years ago we transplanted five full-sized coconut palms at Union Church. The trees were loaded with coconuts at the time they were transplanted. Naturally, in the actual transplant a very large part of the massive root system of the coconut was hacked away and only a small ball of roots was brought with the palms to their new location. The trees were placed and secured upright with elaborate wire tie-down. Then a fascinating thing happened. Each palm systematically dropped its entire collection of coconuts. It was almost as if the trees were moralistic about the whole thing; there seemed to be a rule at work that without a root system in honest proportion to the fruit high in the air, the tree was determined to strip away all pretense of past glory and be what it really was at that moment; the fruit was not permitted without the roots to go with it. And now three years later, the flowers of new coconuts are there again, the trees are almost as great as ever. I believe that this principle is valid at every level of a man's fulfillment as well:

Take the matter of Art. Let's face it, there is no real breakthrough in the arts without hard work. Work produces achievement in all of the arts and you just cannot escape that fact. George Gershwin was an alcoholic and that was a great burden of his short life and the problem even contributed to his death, but Gershwin did not write American in Paris or Porgy and Bess while he was giddy and cheerful with the additive that so tragically hounded his life; he wrote and worked when he was sober. There are no shortcuts to artistic greatness; the flower is in proportion to the roots. The greatest single entertainer today is probably Barbra Streisand whose performance in Funny Girl is one of the singular achievements in the whole history of show business--this actress is naturally talented, but if you want to really know her secret, then take a look at her work schedule. This performer insisted on such standards of perfection that in her movie recording of the song "People," Barbra Streisand insisted on almost 100 run throughs to get just that performance she wanted. The fascinating timing and style of her achievement in Funny Girl is not ad libbed nor innovated, but worked out.

(2) This principle holds true interpersonally too. If we want interpersonal relationships that are fulfilling, free and joyous, then we



must be willing to obligate ourselves to another human being, because without commitment, there is no authentic human breakthrough. The idea that more money, or that drugs or a few drinks can make a human relationship grow and deepen is sheer nonsense, and anyone who has tried that route knows it.

The fact is that most satisfying experiences occur en route, when we least expect them to happen. The ones that are prearranged to happen are usually disappointing. As I see it, the drug as a means of fulfillment is at the heart of it an attempt to stage experiences which by nature are too wonderful and real to be arranged for or artificially induced. The flower must be in proportion to its stem. When chemical fertilizers first made their appearance on the South Asian scene, many agriculturists were certain that they would create an overnight miracle in rice production, but at first the attempts were disastrous because when the chemical fertilizers were used with the standard Asian rice varieties, the increase in rice per stalk was amazing, but the stems all tended to topple over from the added weight with the result that the rice rotted as it lay in the water. The Los Banos Rice Institute solved this crisis in the development of a new rice strain called IR8 which had one decisive new feature: the stem was shorter and thicker and, therefore, able to support the weight of the increased rice per plant. The principle is obvious: there must be an honest relationship between the flower and the plant.

(2) There is a second principle too. A man discovers freedom in loyalty to the demands of freedom. One of the most complicated issues that comes up in the whole question of drugs is the symbolic significance of drugs. There has been in our time a general pulling away on the part of Western man from the institutions of his society; drugs are the classic symbol of that pull away, and its result, the plunge into aloneness. That is to say, whereas we once gained meaning by our connection to great institutions like the family, the nation, the church, the university, today a very great number of people have "unplugged" from these prior reference points and they have decided to go it alone, or to find meaning within their own consciousness or their own peer group. As I see it, drugs are the simplest and fastest means of arranging this "pull away." The drug is man alone, man into himself, plunging within himself man set free from every other entanglement. But, we have all been discovering that freedom does not come easily! There are two ways to lose freedom: one way is to half-read it, and the other way is to reject its own demands. Abraham Lincoln said this about power: "Does a nation prove its power by trampling on the freedom of people? Does this not instead prove its weakness...." His insight holds true with regard to freedom: "Do I prove that I have freedom simply by the ability to cast off and unplug from others as if freedom were only my own thing?" Freedom is more subtle and rewarding than that. Drugs and alcohol do not qualify as "freedom" tickets because they evade by nature the obligation of freedom. Ironically, I prove my greatest freedom when I bind myself to others, and to great institutions that matter. The fact is that a man finds his greatest breakthroughs in



relationships and not in aloneness. This principle is true not only in terms of our peer group relationships but the principle holds true between the generations as well. It is natural for a son to feel the tension with his father and in this rivalry a young man develops his own identity, but if the father collapses, fades completely from view, then instead of healthy tension, the result is isolation and very little identity is found in isolation. Someone put it this way: "I am not as worried about the youth revolt as I am of the adult surrender." In Western societies this is precisely what has been happening. David Riesman in an article entitled, "Children of the Lonely Crowd," has made this observation: "There is one thing worse than domination of youth by the older generation, and that is the domination of youth by their own generation." The tyranny of the peer group is usually the first result of complete freedom from the patriarch. Against the father you can argue and strain and in that tension grow and even thrive, but there is no resisting the peer group; it makes more sweeping demands, permits less real freedom than even the most rigid father. Freedom is a style of life, not a single act or even a series of symbolic acts.

In the last analysis we are faced with this fact. The irony of the additive is that it promises to give us what it cannot deliver and in the place of fulfillment, freedom, breakthrough, is instead "an ever-increasing appetite for an ever-diminishing pleasure." (C. S. Lewis) A very poor exchange in the end.

Some five hundred years before Christ, the hallucinative drugs were in use in Greece. At Delphi, in the hills above Corinth, there were a group of priestesses called the Oracles of Delphi. They had built a temple around a sulphur spring about which they subsequently created an elaborate mythology. They said that the sulphur smell was, in fact, a dead python and that as the priestess of Delphi, called appropriately "Pythia," would inhale the fumes, she would experience convulsions and hallucinations; following this trip she would then make remarkable predictions (all of which had a double meaning) for those generals and senators who came to Delphi for counsel. But, there was a trick in it all; the priestesses chewed a little laurel bark and together with sulphur fumes, they induced the trance on schedule. Eventually, Delphi faded and the priestesses found other work though the laurel trees still stand and the sulphur spring still works. The reason for the decline of Delphi is that no one can stay in Disneyland for weeks and weeks and weeks. Fantasy finally bores. As for Delphi, I have a feeling that someone must have had the courage to call the bluff of the ladies at Delphi. Was it someone who knew pythons and how they smell that finally discredited the python theory? Or perhaps someone who watched closely and saw through the staged laurel bark visions?

We need this today. Someone must call the bluff of the Oracle of Delphi and the chances are it will be done by many of the very journeyers who have gone to Delphi themselves.