



Osborne, Larry.

Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and the Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012. Pp. 196. Paper. \$14.99. ISBN 9780310494447.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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As a newbie in Christ I reasoned that what God wanted for one believer was what he wanted for all believers so I mimicked my seniors in the faith and did what they did because I thought it's what God wanted me to do. On top of that I pushed my beliefs about what I thought God wanted for me on others and judged them disobedient for not living up to the standards I had become accustomed to. I also fancied myself as something of a master discerner; able to spot demonic activity and the intentions of people's hearts in a single stare.

Without knowing it, I had become a Pharisee, and that's what Larry Osborne's *Accidental Pharisees* is about: well-intentioned believers taking things a bit (or way) too far, but not intentionally so. The thing about Pharisees is that they think they're pleasing God. They really believe themselves to be doing God a service. I know that my zealous Christian infancy was marked by a strong desire to please God. It wasn't until I learned that God wasn't pleased with what I was doing and how I was acting that I eventually sought deliverance.

In reading through *Accidental Pharisees* I saw a lot of my former self, and if I'm honest, some of my present self as well. Pride is a constant struggle but as a young believer who had discovered a passion for Bible study I became puffed up quickly. I looked down my nose at those who didn't know the Scriptures as well as I thought I did. God humbled me publicly as I was teaching a Bible study in my former church. I completely forgot my material and had what felt like a panic attack

in front of the entire congregation. I stopped teaching, fell to my knees, and asked God to forgive me in front of everyone (talk about embarrassing!). After that I continued without incident.

So when Osborne talks about pride (part 2, chapters 4-6) it resonates. I've been there. In some ways, I'm still there! Extolling my own virtues while condemning the vices of others is something I can relate to and Osborne does a great job of showing how easy it is to deceive ourselves into thinking that we don't do it. But it doesn't stop at pride for me; not even close! Exclusivity (part 3, chapters 7-9) was a struggle early on as well. I had a core group of friends and when new people tried to enter the group I didn't like it. I criticized like crazy because I felt that if I could point out what was wrong then I could make a case for why they didn't belong. How sad!

Legalism (part 4, chapters 10-12) was a huge problem as well. I was indoctrinated into legalism so I can't take all of the blame (even though I'll accept a lot of it). Judging others according to a strict standard of holiness that went beyond what the Bible said seemed normal. I never even considered that adding fences to keep from committing sin was a problem since the goal was to avoid sin. But Osborne poignantly points out the way that this type of thinking suggests that we know better than God! Like he didn't know what he was doing when speaking his commandments! Talk about convicting.

Osborne goes on to talk about plenty of things I've seen in action, but weren't so much of a problem for me personally, such as idolizing the past (part 5, chapters 13-15), where people grab a hold of some descriptive account of the early church and make that the template for all modern churches to follow, when it was never said to be prescriptive in the first place. Uniformity (part 6, chapters 16-18) is something I've experienced for nearly my entire Christian life. Coming up in Pentecostal circles speaking in tongues is expected. Non-speakers can be made to feel inferior at times but this misses the point of the diversity of gifts that God has given to profit withal. Trying to make everyone the same actually destroys unity and promotes competition.

Likewise, gift projection (part 7, chapters 19-21) is something I've seen plenty of without falling victim to myself, at least not that I'm aware (but remember, accidental Pharisees usually aren't aware of what they're doing wrong!). Osborne shows how people turn their particular gifting or cause into the model that all believers should follow. I recall writing a [blog post](#) years ago critiquing this type of view. Someone who was called to minister to the mentally ill rebuked all the Christians who didn't take up this calling. In a sharp counter-rebuke I said:

The Church has a ministry for everything imaginable and it always will. So my advice for all you whiners is to get down off your high horses, realize that not

everyone is called to the same ministry (other than the ministry of reconciliation), and get over the fact that we all don't do what you do.

But the flip side of the coin is believers who get down on themselves for not doing what others are doing. I think this is something that we all have battled with at one time or another. I've found myself wishing that I prayed more, or preached the gospel more, or spoke more eloquently like so-and-so, etc.

Page after page of *Accidental Pharisees* offers personal anecdotes; vivid vignettes; examples from Scripture, which all show just how easy it is to think you're doing God a service when in fact you're nullifying his abundant grace and mercy. Osborne's message is convicting; no doubt about it. But I worry that it's a little too easy to spot all these Pharisees. It seems like most everything falls into some pharisaical category or another. Granted, Osborne recognizes the need for holiness, and he talks about righteous judgments in essential matters, but that's where it gets kind of squirrely. Pharisees, accidental or otherwise, generally see the matters they harp on as essential. And even if we can reasonably show that the issue itself isn't essential then it's usually not that difficult to connect it to an essential.

I guess my concern is that it might be just a bit too easy to label others as Pharisees. What's to stop someone from labeling Osborne as a Pharisee for pointing out so many pharisaical traits? I don't have that answer but it's a problem I'm willing to live with. In the end I think Osborne has done the body of Christ a great service with this easy-to-read volume and I'd love to see it in the hands of believers everywhere. The layout makes it perfect for group settings (each part is concluded with a list of discussion questions) such as book clubs or Bible studies. So make every effort to grab a copy and read it with your Bible close at hand. I'm convinced that you'll be a better person for it.