

An Essay on *Tipping Point*

Malcolm Gladwell



“Tipping Point is the biography of an idea, and the idea is very simple. It is that the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. *Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.*”

My mind turned immediately to the ways this would apply to theology and how one could apply these principles to the spreading of Truth. Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Tipping Point*, so inspired me with statements such as the above that I would like to set out what I have learned.

“The world around you may seem immovable. It is not. With the slightest push — in just the right place it can be tipped.” This idea is dynamite. It is thrilling and exciting and invigorating. It lines up with the advice given some years ago by Madelyn Albright, former Secretary of State: “You will find your strongest beliefs ridiculed and challenged; principles that you cherish may be derisively dismissed. But no matter how weary you may become in persuading others to see the value in what you value, have courage still and persevere.”

Why does change happen the way that it does? Because of the degree of contagiousness, or, as Gladwell contends, the “Stickiness Factor,” that specific quality that a message needs to be memorable, indeed so memorable that it could produce change, or even spur someone into action. (Apparently, little things can make as much of a difference as big things. And little things can be subtle.) Gladwell has learned this and his many other insights through the study of marketing, advertising, and very careful analyses of both material and abstract phenomena. He has studied Hush Puppy shoes and their unpredictable return to tremendous popularity, well-known restaurants, public television programming, and even reactions to the teaching about The Good Samaritan as experienced in American culture. His deductions are challenging and helpful as he clearly sees that what might work for Nike might not be reasonable for ordinary people. Would there be less expensive ways to make something stick?

There is a tipping point for all successful ideas just as there is at the introduction of new technology. Gladwell says, “But the world of the Tipping Point is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is more than possibility. It is — contrary to all our expectations — a certainty.” We need radical change in theology where for too long smugness and dismissiveness have ruled, where Truth has been not only ridiculed but trampled on, where the religious environment does not even allow the option of Truth on its menu. I think that the principles which Gladwell has identified could be extremely useful in combating “Big Church.” (Big Oil and Big Pharma are not our only problems.)

Gladwell notes that the world that follows the rules of epidemics (1-Contagiousness, 2-Little causes can have big effects, 3-Change happens at one dramatic moment) is not the world we think we live in. Interesting point, this one. He argues that there are epidemics of crime, fashion, toys, etc. and that social epidemics work in the same way. He asks, “Why is it that some ideas, behaviors or products start epidemics and others don’t? And what can we do to deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own?”

We all know about the 80/20 principle (80% of the work being done by 20% of the people). Gladwell translates this as the Law of the Few and says that when it comes to epidemics, the

numbers are even more extreme. This is very good news because this is one principle which we have "all wrapped up" — we have few! But there is a twist here as it is not just *any* few: "The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts." (Don't despair! As I understand it, it takes only one of these gifted to lead the few.) Actually the Law of the Few states that a critical factor in epidemics is the nature of the messenger.

You must have Stickiness! (a message that makes an impact — it sticks in one's memory). The third rule of tipping: context. This is particularly interesting to a Bible-based concern as it is a well-known and much respected ground rule in that field.

Gladwell describes certain people as connectors, those with the knack of making both friends and acquaintances and introducing or linking people with similar interests together. When one leaves the pack, particularly because of the strength of one's religious views, one can become friendless overnight. We all desperately need kindred spirits, never more so than when desiring to worship. Scattered brethren need to be brought into the fold in whatever way possible.

What we need is a learning epidemic. I cannot think of a discipline more in need of learning than that of theology. The need is so great that it is desperate. This concept actually worked for the producer of Sesame Street whose ambition was to counter the epidemic of poverty and illiteracy that she saw. Sesame Street was built on the insight that if you can hold the attention of children, you can educate them. This insight proved a breakthrough and provided the tipping point necessary for the program's success. What a mountain of thought goes into such programs which pale in comparison with matters of one's salvation. But the insight could be most valuable and transferable as well.

Gladwell writes, "When we are trying to make an idea or attitude or product tip, we're trying to change our audience in some small yet critical respect: we're trying to infect them, sweep them up in our epidemic, convert them from hostility to acceptance." And, I would add, in terms of what I have in mind (the reception of the Gospel as Jesus preached it), we're trying to give them life-saving tools and instruction.

We are required to reframe our thinking in order to understand this theory of Tipping Point, i.e. reframe the way we think about the world. We must allow for personal peculiarities and not expect that the way people behave will always be straightforward and transparent. Gladwell argues that it is messy and opaque and that the world does not function according to our intuition. "Those who are successful at creating social epidemics do not just do what they think is right. They deliberately test their intuitions...To make sense of social epidemics, we must first understand that human communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules."

This next statement is most compelling: "What must underlie successful epidemics, in the end, is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus." We are warned that this contradicts many of our inbuilt assumptions. We are reminded that we are much influenced not only by our surroundings, but also by the people around us. We must identify those special people who have the gift of persuasion and help them to shape the course of the epidemic we are working toward.

"In the end, Tipping Points are a real affirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push — in just the right place — it can be tipped."

I felt compelled to write about the Tipping Point. I am a biblical unitarian, a minority viewpoint if ever there was one, and yet one with an incredibly noble and fascinating history. Tragically the history is all but unknown. Does anyone know, for example, that traditional orthodoxy was once considered a heresy?! There is a vast treasury of material which has been written on this subject

which needs to be examined. Suffice it to say that the title of one of these books gives the game away: *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* (Philip Jenkins).

The closing of the Christian mind is a tragedy of epic proportions. I have known of many writers, theologians, and professors who will not openly state their theological views. The reasons may be many and varied but seem to translate to position, reputation, and salary. That would be power and money. The Tipping Point will not be achieved by these people as they have chosen to hide in order to retain their positions. The Tipping Point *will be* achieved by earnest and honest men and women who decide that they must stand for the Truth. (It is utterly absurd to believe something and be ashamed of it at the same time.)

Our American society has been dumbed down to such an extent that some are not even able to use language according to its rules and regulations. If we can't use language properly, how long before our thinking is affected? For example, to millions of Americans it is apparently not jarring, let alone shocking to say or to hear that God died on the cross. Again, that is *God died*. At this point, churchgoers should exit by the thousands in protest.

Sadly, it is not the thousands who are thinking, but the few. The few will do. Einstein said that great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said that all truth passes through three stages: First it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. And third, it is accepted as self evident. If you believe in Truth, you must find the tools to tell others about it. All it takes for evil to win is for good men to do nothing. The phenomenon of word of mouth is one not to be scorned. It has been the impetus for Tipping Point in the past and may well be in the future. Remember the adage: each one — teach one. It actually works!

“I know no greater delight than that of fighting for the triumph of a great truth that is still misunderstood” (François Guizot). Join us in this tug of war. Let the story of Truth be told. Help us advance the Tipping Point. We owe it to the giants who have gone before us, men like John Biddle and Michael Servetus who gave their lives for the knowledge of the Truth. We must turn this ship — and we need all hands on deck.

Respectfully submitted,
Barbara Buzzard