

REPENTANCE

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Repentance is not a term that occurs often in modern language because the notion is not very congenial to us. We have dialogue, and we have discussion groups, and we have group therapy for self understanding, but the suggestion that repentance is what we need does not often find expression in modern life. This is an indication of how far removed we are from Bible ideas, in spite of the fact that we may regard ourselves as Bible students, because the need for repentance and the injunction to repent occurs constantly from the beginning of the Bible to the end. For example, John the Baptist's message is summed up in the gospels by the phrase "Repent; for God's sovereign rule is near", and to each group that came to him he gave the same message that they were to repent, that is, to change their attitudes and their way of living.

The call for repentance is to be found in the prophets of the Old Testament also. They called on their hearers to turn, to change their attitude and so to change their way of life. In the New Testament we find that the message of John the Baptist and of the Old Testament prophets was the message of Jesus Himself. In Matthew 4:17 where the gospel records the beginning of Jesus' ministry we read "From that time began Jesus to preach and to say 'Repent, for God's sovereign rule is near'". The Gospels sum up Jesus' message in a single word, 'Repent', that is, change your mind

and so change your way of life. As we go on through the New Testament we will find the same message. In the first Christian sermon preached by St Peter in Acts 2 in reply to the question of his hearers "What shall we do?" Peter replies, "Repent". This is the essential thing. If we turn on to Acts 20 where we find the Apostle Paul summarising the whole of his life ministry as he talks to the elders of the Church at Ephesus we read that he describes his activity in verse 20 as "teaching you publicly from house to house, testifying both to Jews and Greeks repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ". When Paul wrote to his friends at Thessalonica he recalled how they turned to God from idols. To turn is another word for repent, so again the Apostle sums up the Christian life by the concept of repentance. St John, in the Book of Revelation, in recording Jesus' message to the churches constantly commands his readers to repent.

You will see from this brief survey how the message of the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus Himself and the Apostles Peter, Paul and John are all summed up by saying that they called for repentance. And again I ask you to reflect about how deep repentance is in your own thinking about Christianity or in the message that you hear on Sundays in church. Repentance is essential. Why did Jesus, John the Baptist and the Apostles put such stress on repentance?

After all, what did their hearers need to repent about? They were religious and good living people. The community in which Jesus lived and in which the Apostles were brought up was a good living community, as moral a community as there ever has been. It was also a very religiously minded community. Religion pervaded every aspect of life and was observed with a great deal of zeal, and yet it was to these good living and religious people that Jesus, John the Baptist and the Apostles united in addressing the same message - the call for repentance if they were to escape God's wrath and judgment. Is God going to deal differently with us and our community from the way Jesus said He was going to deal with the society of His day? The Christian church to-day, quite apart from secular society, needs to take to heart this call for repentance which the Bible unites in making.

What does repentance mean? What was involved when Jesus called these religious and good living people to repentance? and when John the Baptist and the Apostles did the same? He was calling them to a radical change of mind - not merely to an improvement here or there, or being sorry for this or for that fault but he was calling them to a complete turn round of attitude with regard to God and with regard to God's relation to the world.

We are called to a repentance towards God, to a recognition that God is sovereign in the world. He is its Creator. Nothing happens apart from Him, not even a sparrow falls to the ground, or an ant walks over a leaf in the forests of the Amazon. Every event is under God's sovereign rule. Furthermore, we are called to recognise God's loving and righteous providence in the events which happen. The God who controls even the flowers of the fields and provides the food for the birds of the air, is the God in Whom we are to trust and to honour by trusting in our daily life. Trust is action, not merely pious thoughts. This involves obedience, complete, as Jesus obeyed when He thrust aside Peter's well meaning but worldly wise suggestion that Jesus should modify His duty and not go up to Jerusalem. Jesus trusted God and did what was right without modifying it.

Secondly, we are called upon to change our world view and this will mean a change of values. We are taken up with material things but God values fellowship. Fellowship means sharing and we are to take the opportunities that come to us by God's providential control of the events of our lives to share with others not only our time and our material resources but particularly our knowledge of God and of His relationship to the world, and the salvation that is in Jesus.

Thirdly, ~~repentance will involve~~ the seeing of ourselves as we are, as

people who ignore God and therefore dishonour Him, a people who inevitably are perishing because of these things and who need to be saved. And so repentance leads on very closely to the concept of faith. As St Paul said, he preached repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, for repentance is a turning to God as He is, not only the sovereign Lord and the loving provider, but also the Saviour who in Jesus Christ has overcome sin and opened the way of eternal life. This also is part of the structure of reality and must be central in our thinking. Jesus Christ is the sovereign Lord over everything because He has demonstrated His sovereignty over sin and evil by bearing our sins on Calvary and overcoming sin and so overcoming death and everything else that sets itself against God's sovereign rule.

This is reality, and we are called to live in accordance. A life of religious acts and average moral behaviour is of no significance if our attitudes and values centre themselves on something other than on God; on God as He is, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour.

Repentance is our duty. We are commanded to repent and to recognize God as God in our thoughts and in our attitudes, in our activities, and in our values. We are commanded to repent. It is not just an option, but an obligation.

Repentance is our salvation. This is because of the judgment. When St Paul was preaching in Athens he told the Athenians (Acts 17) that God had appointed a day in which He would judge the world through Jesus Christ, whom He had raised from the dead. "Therefore", said the Apostle, "Repent, change your attitudes, re-orient your life".

Nineveh, in the time of Jonah, was saved by repentance. Jesus calls us to repentance, that radical re-orienting of ourselves to God and reality. Twice over (Luke 13:3,5), Jesus told his hearers, "Unless you repent, you shall perish".

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