

The Importance of Repentance

The last couple of years of my life had been very difficult. Every Sunday service was marked by a sense of heaviness, labour and nausea. From counselling I knew where the problem came from. At 4-5 years of age I had regularly been physically cornered by my grandmother who hated me intensely and reduced me to an emotional pulp by verbal harassment. It was clear to me that I must have defended myself in these situations by emotional withdrawal and shutdown. This strategy, activated by any threatening circumstance (like preaching) was keeping God at a distance. Attempts to shake off the pattern were futile.

Then I went to visit another minister who I'd not seen for a year. As he put it there was a heaviness over my life, it was as if I wore a cloak over my emotions which I only threw off in moments of intense excitement. His question was not about my intention to repent, but as to whether I had got in touch with the original decision to protect myself emotionally. This offered new hope.

As my friend laid hands on me and we asked God for a connection with the childhood decision things moved quickly. Immediately I had a deep sense of feeling very small, as though I were a tiny boy. Then I was aware of turning in on myself trying to hide inside and if possible become non-existent. The words of the second century church Father Irenaeus came to me: 'The glory of God is a man fully alive'. I explicitly repented of turning inwards and asked God to help me turn inside out, especially that Jesus might be seen through my life. It was through this repentance that God healed me of the oppression which had covered my life in such a damaging way.

Yet so often repentance seems marginalised or misunderstood. This was brought to my attention recently in two quite different ways which provoked this present article. Writing in the controversial book *Power Religion* David Powlinson tabulates the dominance of psychological over theological categories in the North American Christian counselling scene. Personality theory, psychopathology, health and therapeutic change have replaced biblical anthropology, sin, grace, holiness and sanctification. The problem here as I see it is not psychology but the impossibility of translating biblical into extra-biblical categories.

Shortly after reading *Power Religion* I was confronted with an almost textbook illustration of the problem it highlighted. Robyn was a middle-aged woman who came to see me in deep distress because of a long history of marriage difficulties. She had a remarkable grasp of her situation due to considerable 'Christian counselling' in the past. When however I asked her if she had repented of her co-dependency there was a failure to understand the impact of the question. Her past experience of counselling had simply led her to try to replace one set of beliefs and practices with another. She was trying hard and exhausted by this procedure. This had not been helpful. It was a considerable relief to her once I explained how to outwork her responsibility before God in terms of repentance.

Powlinson's observations and Robyn's case point to the unique role of repentance in truly Christian counselling. In traditional theological terms men and women live first and foremost *coram Deo* (before God) and then *coram hominibus* (before humans). In the words of the apostle Paul men and women must 'turn to God in repentance' (Acts 20:21 MV). This awareness of responsibility before God constitutes repentance to be what it is.

The older theologians distinguished 'legal' from 'evangelical' repentance. In the case of 'legal' repentance a person experiences sorrow over personal moral failure to keep a set of rules. It may be self-interested regret or genuine distress over the hurt caused others. This of itself does not constitute repentance, even if the individual confesses the matter as sin in prayer. To recognise sin nominally is not to be aware of sin as sin. As James Denney put it, there must be a revelation of what God is in relation to sin.¹⁴¹ Or, in biblical language 'knowledge of sin' (Romans 3: 20 KJV). Against its Hebrew background knowledge means more than intellectual persuasion, it implies a deep inward and intellectual awareness. The 'knowledge of sin' is a sense of moral guilt in the presence of God.

From this knowledge the power of repentance issues. As David Ames puts it: 'true moral guilt is an agent of God to draw us back to himself. What makes repentance so potent is not the awareness of separation from God alone but the availability of mercy. It is the presence of mercy offered in the form of unconditional forgiveness which evokes (draws out) repentance from a person. This is what makes true repentance 'evangelical', that is, rooted in the gospel (evangel) offer of forgiveness. As Paul says: 'God's kindness leads you to repentance' (Romans 2: 4 MV). There is no place, especially in the intimate situation of counselling, for haranguing people to repent or encouraging them to strive to attain proper repentance. Repentance is not so much something which you do as something which happens to you. As long as repentance is seen as a condition for forgiveness it cannot be 'evangelical' only 'legal'. Repentance is a gift (Acts 5: 31, 11: 18; 2 Timothy 2: 25).

An excellent illustration of 'evangelical repentance' is found in Dr White's *The Masks of Melancholy*

'As he talked about earlier years in his life, two things seemed to bother him. He had drunk a bottle of beer several years before when his doctor had told him not to. More significantly, he had avoided enlisting in World War 2, and felt bad that some of his friends had died in Europe. Curiously he felt equally bad about both his "sins"... "What about forgiveness?" I asked him.

"I want it so bad."

"What's your religion?"

"Russian Orthodox."

"And what does your priest say about how you get to be forgiven?"

"He doesn't talk much. We go to confession."

"And what does that do?"

"I don't often go."

I groped for words. "But if you do go, why would God forgive you?" "Because Christ died. He shed blood."

"So?"

"But I'm too bad for that."

Unaccountably I grew angry. No logical reason. It just happened. "What d'you mean you're too bad?"

His voice was rising like my own. "I don't deserve ever to be forgiven." "You're darn right you don't!"

He looked up at me surprised. "I can't be a hypocrite. I gotta make amends." It may be hard to believe but I found my anger increasing. "And who d'you think you are to say Christ's death was not enough for you? Who are you to feel you must add your miserable pittance to the great gift God offers you? Is his sacrifice not good enough for the likes of you?"

We continued to stare at each other, and suddenly he began both to cry and to pray at once. I wish I could remember his exact words. As nearly as I can recall he said something like this: "God, I didn't know. I'm real sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. God, thank you... It's amazing... I didn't know it worked like that... I thought... but, God, I didn't know much... Gee, God, I don't know how to say it. Thank you. Thanks an awful lot. Gee, God, thank you."

Since repentance involves a revelation of the unconditional grace of God and is God's gift it depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit. John White usefully summarises much of what I have said so far: 'When people ask me what repentance is I have to talk about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit so awakens the understanding of a human being that he/she perceives personal sin and the love of God represented in Calvary in a new way. Repentance takes place, not because we decide to repent, but because the Holy Spirit moves in and so illuminates us that we really understand for the first time. The inadequacy of purely psychological categories becomes important at this point. In psychological terms repentance can be represented only as an attitudinal or volitional change. The scripture however speaks of: 'the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Hebrews 4: 12 RSV). In biblical anthropology the heart is the governing centre of the whole person: 'Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life' (Proverbs 4: 23 NIV). Psychological states, whether understood in terms of mind, will or emotion do not exist as self-contained phenomenon but are governed in their operation from the primary faculty of the heart. [

Theologically interpreted, what is happening when a human being repents is not a simple intra-psychological event. Rather, God 'opens the heart' (Acts 16: 14 NIV) so that 'the eyes of the heart are enlightened' (Ephesians 1: 18 NW). This illumination of the heart with respect to sin and mercy before Q evokes a change of heart. Since it is a change of heart it affects the total disposition of the person. There is fresh intellectual comprehension, emotional contrition and volitional change. In order to emphasise the holistic nature of repentance, a totality that can only be produced by the grace of God, it is probably better to think of repentance as a 'change of heart' rather than a 'change of mind'.

In terms of the history of counselling these matters were well understood by the Puritans, who had a sophisticated diagnostic system. The eighteenth century American theologian and revivalist Jonathon Edwards seems to be the end of an era. After Edwards evangelicalism became pietistic - focussed on emotions, rationalistic - obsessed with propositions, or voluntaristic - the answer to personal problems was to try harder. This fragmentary approach to human persons and their deepest problems necessarily failed to provide solutions in the personal context.

The modern counselling movement in the Christian Church can be interpreted as an attempt to meet genuine needs via psychological methods but usually without an adequate theological basis. It is to be expected that many of its results are transitory. John White is right to say: 'unless the moral aspects of the problem, which include the

response of the person doing the remembering, are faced, the experience is unlikely to lead to permanent change'. For it is only when men and women know themselves *coram Deo* - created in His image, sinners, redeemed by grace, can there be the possibility of change at the deepest possible level - that of the heart.

Why is repentance so important? Simply because in truly repenting we are dealing not merely with other human beings and our own troubled conscience but with God. With the living God who is our Creator, Redeemer and Judge. The God whose image is our destiny. If as counsellors we do not cooperate with God in bringing men and women to evangelical repentance then we must question in what sense our counselling is authentically Christian.

References

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