

Study Three

CALLED BY GOD TO REPENT

From the days of the first family on earth, and until the final days of the judgement of this world, repentance is the call of God to man (Gen. 4:6–7; Rev. 16:10f.). God has chosen men such as Noah (II Peter 2:9), and all the prophets, then his own Son and after him the apostles and the church's prophets and evangelists to call men and women to repentance.

THE MEANING OF REPENTANCE

To repent is simply to have a change of mind. In Biblical terms this means to turn away from idolatry, sin, unbelief, lukewarmness, and unfaithfulness (Ezek. 14:6; 18:30; Jonah 3; I Thess. 1:9; Rev. 2:4f.; 3:19), inhumanity and oppression (Isa. 1:16f.), to God, and obedience, and therefore to all that is consistent with God's purposes (Hosea 2:7; Jer. 3:12; Mal. 3:7f.). In the NT, the call is to belief in Christ and to corresponding works. (Acts 26:20).

Repentance has been called the negative side, and faith the positive side of conversion, but the definition appears to be more precise than the varying NT uses of these terms would suggest. Repentance presupposes an acknowledgment of guilt (I John 1:9; Matt. 9:13), and a sorrow for that sin (II Corin. 7:9f.) and anticipates the grace of God (Acts 3:19). But the repentance itself is the change of mind prompted by all these things. Likewise, the actions which flow from repentance and are consistent with it, are not essentially the repentance itself, as though they were needed to 'make up' for wrong done (penance), but are simply the fruits or evidences of that change of mind or repentance (Matt. 3:8).

A WHOLE OF LIFE DECISION

The call to repentance deals with essentials and not with trivia. It is the whole pattern of thought and life that requires a change of direction (Isa. 55:6–9). Jesus called disciples to such a change (Luke 14:25–33, 18:18–30) and said of those who returned, that they were lost and now found (Luke 15). It is relational rather than moral.

Repentance may occur as a dramatic crisis (Acts 9) or as a seemingly unopposed awakening to truth (Acts 16:14; 17:11). But however it comes it results in a new disposition, a new way of life, a radical reorientation. The characteristic NT call to repentance, comes with the proclamation of the gospel and this repentance is expressed in identification with Christ by baptism (Acts 2:38; 5:31; Luke 24:47) and then worked out in every aspect of thought and life (Rom. 6:5–12; 8:1–11; 12:2; II Corin. 5:16–19).

The message of repentance is good news. The word is occasionally used to describe the whole proclamation of the gospel (Matt. 4:17 with Mark 1:15;

6:12), or the whole of man's response to the gospel (Acts 3:19; 10:42ff., and 11:18).

Those who hear the word of God and are glad to repent have no reason later on to regret their action (Luke 15:7; II Corin. 7:10). Even though they err, they move forward in their new understanding of life (Rom. 7:24 – 8:4; 12:1–2). Temporary or shallow repentance must be understood as no repentance at all because no change of direction was effected (Matt. 13:18–22).

We move now to consider how man is called to such a complete turning in life.

THE REASONABLENESS OF REPENTANCE

A call to repentance by its very nature, is a matter of urgency, requiring deep and permanent and active response. Yet for this reason, it is not to be confused with aimless urging. The call consists in a due consideration of many truths. For example, consider the high calling bestowed on man, and the great importance given to fulfilling that calling. Consider the surety with which creation moves to its calling and to the destruction of all that opposes that goal. Try to understand the incredible waywardness of man, and even more, the incredible patience of God in showing mercy, and re-establishing man in his true function. Consider the price with which he purchased that freedom, and the high privileges of the family of God, not dispensed en-mass, but bestowed in person by the Father. All of this, and more, make it greatly necessary for man to turn from every wayward and ungrateful thought, so as to love God with his whole being.

CALLED TO REPENTANCE

One would think that the logic of man's true situation would lead him to repentance but this is not so (Jer. 8:4–7). The experience of sin does not cause him to understand its true nature as though it had an inherent warning capacity. Sin is deceitful and poses as good rather than evil. It is by the law and the Spirit that man has the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20; Luke 16:29, 31; John 16:8) and by the call of God that he comes to repentance. The logic of the situation may be present in the call, but never constitutes the call. So repentance is a command of God. Jesus therefore calls men to repent (Mark 1:4–15) and teaches his disciples to do likewise (Mark 6:12). The apostles continue in the same vein (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 20:21).

GIVEN REPENTANCE

Why some people accept God's call to repentance and why others reject it when the same facts are present to the minds of both, is a mystery to human thinking. However we know that repentance was given to Israel (Acts 5:31) and to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18), that Esau 'found no chance to repent though he sought it with tears' (Heb. 12:17), and that Timothy was to persevere with obstinate people because 'God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth (II Tim 2:25). A favourable response to the call to repentance must be seen as a gift. On the one hand, truth is present to the consciences of all people, but on the other hand, they refuse to acknowledge its validity and therefore cannot do what is reasonable to do. Even though the

Messiah is present, working great wonders (Matt. 11:20; 12:41), and even if one rose from the dead (Luke 16:29–31), and even when men know of, or experience God's judgements (Rom. 1:32; Rev. 9:20f.; 16:9,11), still they will not repent. Therefore those who do come to repentance, understand the deep nature of man's rebellion, including their own, and humbly acknowledge that their turning to God, though involving their own thinking, feeling and choice, is still a gift of God's grace. (Lam. 5:21)

PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The call to repentance is given to all men, regardless of whether they respond favourably or not (Matt. 24:14 with Luke 24:47; Acts 17:30), so that all are accountable for their own response to the call and unable to blame God for not having been sincerely called or not having an adequate opportunity to repent. Jews and Gentiles are without excuse (Rom. 1:20; 3:19f.). God does not have pleasure in the death of anyone and invites all to turn and live (Ezek 18:32; Joel 2:12–14; II Peter 3:9). He gives all men adequate opportunity by delaying his anger (II Peter 3:9; Rev. 2:21).

That man is accountable for his own response agrees not only with Scripture, but with man's own conscience, who because he knows that he deserves to die (Rom. 1:32) is in fear of death (Heb 2:15; I Corin. 15:56) and punishment (I John 4:17f.—all who do not love freely are fearful of punishment).

THE SOURCE OF REPENTANCE

It has been said that there is an element of irrationality in all choices. Certainly man's repentance cannot be finally understood. It is, in fact, a whole life encounter with the living God, where many factors may be seen to operate, none of which, in themselves, bring man to repentance, but all of which must be given their proper place.

Repentance flows from a knowledge of, or encounter, with God, as Job and Isaiah, and Peter discovered (Job 42:3–6; Isa. 6:5; Luke 5:8). They were confronted with the purity, and purpose, and power, and glory of God. So God plainly calls men to consider his judgements in history, and by calamities, and at the end time (Jer. 18:11; Luke 13:3,5; Acts 17:30f.) and repent. He chastens them with love and instructs his people so they will repent (Jer. 31:15–20; Rev. 3:19), and gives them his law and prophets for the same purpose (Luke 16:29–31). But God cannot be known apart from his forgiveness (Ps. 130:3f.; cf. I John 1:6f.; 2:12–14).

Therefore Jesus comes with grace and truth to reveal God to man (John 1:17f.). God fully discloses himself in the gospel of forgiveness so evoking a sorrow for sin that leads to repentance (Acts 2:38). Therefore, the Spirit's conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgement is based on the saving acts of Christ (John 16:8–11; Acts 2:38; 3:19) and the call to repentance is based on Christ's resurrection (Acts 17:30f.).

MAN DRAWN TO REPENTANCE

The idea of a change of mind inherently has within it the idea that what is past is inferior or to be regretted and that something better is at hand. Therefore Biblical repentance may be expressed in self-loathing (Job 42:6), shame, (Jer. 31:19), sorrow (II Corin. 7:9f.), even fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 2:12f., Jonah 3), but these are not requirements. The emotions underlying change or repentance will differ widely from person to person and situation to situation. What is required is change, and therefore sufficient regret or sorrow to lead on to that change (I Kings 8:47; Matt. 21:28–32). No one turns away from something unless there is an element of dissatisfaction. Problems occur in preaching repentance, when people do not see themselves needing repentance (Matt. 9:13), and when they will not come to the light, where healing is (I John 1:5–10) for fear of their evil deeds being revealed (John 3:17ff.). The very clear example of David's repentance (Psalm 51) shows him being very specific about his guilt.

But sorrow for sin does not necessarily lead to change (Luke 18:23; II Corin. 7:10). Joel said, 'Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord,' indicating that sorrow can be put on as a pretence and not lead to change. Change is also dependent on something better being at hand. In fact, many people cannot see that they are dissatisfied with the present, and certainly not turn from it, unless there is the vision and prospect of something better available. (Cf. Luke 11:25). Repentance is often linked therefore, with conversion (Acts 3:19; 26:20), or forgiveness (Mark 1:4; Luke 17:3; 24:27; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 8:22) or faith (Acts 20:21), or knowledge of the truth (II Tim 2:25), or healing (Mark 6:12f.), or new life (Matt 3:8; Acts 11:18; Heb 6:1; Rev. 2:5; 16:9).

It is the grace of God and promise of the gospel that draw people to repentance and in fact, to the sorrow preceding repentance. Sin is too difficult to acknowledge or regret apart from forgiveness. (cf. A.H. Strong p 835 'Sorrow for sin is practically impossible without some confidence in God's mercy.') But amnesty for the unidentified criminal may bring him to the light. Men may still love their darkness rather than light (John 3:17ff.) but those who come to the light can come freely confessing their sin because of the promise of cleansing (I John 1:6–10). David could be frank in his admission of error because of his statement of faith: 'Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow' (Ps. 51:7). The tax gatherer (in the parable of Jesus') who grieved deeply over his sin was asking God to be propitious towards him, revealing the nature of his faith. (Luke 18:9–14). Jesus said that when he was lifted up, he would draw all men to himself (John 12:32f.). It is not hard to see, that where there is an offering for sin, men would be glad to gather. (Isa. 53:10).

Israel was called to repent and get themselves a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 18:30–32). They were also told that God would in fact regather them and cleanse them and give them a new heart and a new spirit, along with many other gifts, and that they would then remember their evil ways and loathe themselves (Ezek. 36:22–32; cf. Isa. 44:22). This indicates that the change of mind which we call repentance, and the sorrow that underlies it are both dependent on the revelation of grace and in some sense the experience

of it. This agrees with Heb. 6:4–6. (Also with Joel 2:13; Isa. 55:1–9; Rom. 2:4; cf. John 9:39–41).

AN OCCASION OF GREAT JOY

Jesus came announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand. Every Jew longed for the kingdom to come (even though their understanding of the manner of its coming was wrong). By announcing its coming, Jesus revealed the grace of God, as also the power of God to effect his will, on which basis he called them to repentance, and belief of the good news (Matt. 4:17). John had also announced the coming kingdom as the basis for repentance (3:2). Israel was called to repent with the hope before them of times of refreshing (Acts 3:19).

The announcement that God is moving forward to establish his reign of peace and justice should certainly be an occasion for great joy. And if by repentance, one could be a part of that, forward movement, that should certainly be an incentive to turn from all hindrances and obey his call.

Jesus told three parables showing that there was joy in heaven over sinners who repented (Luke 15). The prodigal's father reasoned with the older son showing the rightness of his pleasure, and revealing also that the older son had no real knowledge of his father or he would have rejoiced—and repented as well.

All of this indicates that repentance is a matter of great joy, and release, whereby those who mourn are comforted (Matt 5:4). Augustine, in his 'Confessions', found delight in acknowledging his errors, not out of morbid interest in his wrongs but because it led him to think more on the mercy and patience of God. He wrote:

*'I shall still confess to you the story of my shame, since it is to your glory. Allow me this, I beg, and grant me the power to survey in my memory now all those wanderings of my error in the past and to offer unto thee the sacrifice of rejoicing'.
(Augustine. 'Confessions' pg 69)*

Also

'allow me to speak in front of your mercy. I am only dust and ashes, but allow me to speak, since, see, it is to your mercy that I am speaking and not to man, my mocker. You too may smile at me.'

CONTINUED CALLS FOR REPENTANCE

Israel was often recalled to repentance when they forgot the Lord, and in similar fashion churches are called to repentance (II Corin. 12:21; Rev. 2:3), or individuals who have clearly erred (Acts 8:22–24). In these cases, issues had to be settled because they were central to the flow of God's life and purpose in the people concerned. The same would have to be true of any Christian who rebuked a brother, calling him to repentance (Luke 17:3f).

Therefore repentance is never to be based on a legalistic or pietistic requirement that people be better Christians, and the church should not

expect to endlessly urge its people to repentance. This is observably fruitless and prevents them moving on to wider understanding of the truth. In fact, those who have had a full opportunity to repent and have ignored it cannot be renewed in repentance anyway (Heb. 6:1,4,6). This is similar to the experience of Isaiah, who understood that his piece-meal teaching would achieve nothing until Israel had been chastened. Then they would hear the word of God as a voice behind them telling them which way to turn (Isaiah 28:9–13; 29:9–14; 30:8–14; and 18–22).

Daniel is a classic case of repentance among the people of God. Discovering that the allotted years of judgement for Judah were completed, he was deeply moved, both by the purposes of God, and the failure of his race. He said: 'To us, O Lord, belongs confusion of face, . . . because we have sinned against thee. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness; because we have rebelled against him . . . We do not present our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of thy great mercy' (Dan. 9:8–19). This man found the spring from which all change or repentance flows and was himself deeply changed.