

Bible Concepts: Repentance

Repentance is a central and important part of Christian doctrine. This is easily noticed by reading the Bible. The proclamation of the Old Testament prophets were often sermons of repentance directed to individual listeners or entire nations. The New Testament time begins with a description of the activity of a rugged preacher of repentance, John the Baptist. Jesus began His public activity by proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The apostles and all Christians after them preached in the same way.

Just the mere word repentance relates much about Christian faith. It teaches that the Christian proclamation does not exhort man in the spirit of Humanism to accept and fulfill himself or forget the past. It aims at giving up the old and rejecting it and becoming different. Thus, repentance is in close connection to doctrinal concepts such as conversion and new birth, mortifying and quickening, and penitence and faith, which together form repentance.

Self Repentance

It is exactly this sense of repentance that is difficult especially for an unbeliever to understand, unless he is taught and guided. A person whose conscience God has awakened considers the exhortation to repent in an outward manner. He readily begins--as Laestadius taught--to build his own repentance, in other words, clean and correct his everyday life. Socially already this is a good and respectable life. What else so seriously ails our times as immorality. But a person cannot be acceptable to God by proceeding in this way. A person thinking and acting in this way is firmly under the law; spiritually and mentally, his life is difficult.

The Grace of Repentance

God would desire to help a person exhausted by the law to believe freely. Faith is born by the hearing of the gospel. Every person, according to his own consideration, may go or not go to listen to the Word of God, but the true hearing of the gospel on one's own part, for one's own conscience and heart, is not in man's own power. No one can convert himself or "begin to believe." Our confession teaches according to the Bible that repentance can happen only by God's initiative and influence. Man's own "freedom" is to rebuff God's invitation. For this reason, we understand that when an unbeliever comes into faith, the question is always of the enormous grace and miracles of God. How many people are deceived by the enemy of souls when imagining that they can postpone repentance until their deathbed.

The Narrow Gate

Repentance is probably never humanly easy. This is due to two fundamental points of our faith. First, God Himself has made known in His Word how He operates when healing a person spiritually. He awakens man to the knowledge of his own wretchedness by placing him before the demanding and condemning word of the law. He gives new birth by freeing man with the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the gospel.

When a believer falls into sin, the sermon of the law is not behind his repentance, but the Holy Spirit, which dwells in his heart, draws him to an accounting of sin. God does not operate in any other way in these matters. This unconditionality many times awakens temptations and murmuring minds, when all our own ways of correcting, atoning, and sanctifying have been taken away from us. Man must always repent of sin.

Secondly, repentance is a narrow gate because our minds would so gladly change the order established by God. It would feel more natural if we could think that God accepts people who have lived a good and sinless life into His fellowship. However, the Bible teaches in many places that there are no sinless people. God has promised to accept people who know and confess their sinfulness and through faith accept the salvation which

God has prepared in Christ. God cleans our sinful hearts by faith. Through faith, because of Christ, we as sinners can be completely clean.

An ongoing battle is waged in our hearts to keep this matter clear. One day the enemy instructs us to be open-minded. Explanations may always be found to lessen the matter. First, they make sin a vice and then a bad habit. On another day the enemy coaches us to perfect repentance. Sin must be confessed to the confessor father "down to its very roots," digging out, if possible, even secret thoughts and mental images, and only then can it be forgiven. At the same time the tempter may "correct" the grace order so that sins must be conciliated before men, or "the bed must be carried," before sin can be believed forgiven. We continually need the grace of God in order to remain on the sound foundation of faith.

Daily Repentance

In many of the spiritualities of our time daily repentance is made unnecessary by a wrong sanctification doctrine. It is thought that after a person has come into faith he is pure and can no longer fall. The falls which arise in life "seem" to be sin, and to an unbeliever they would be, but on the part of a believer they do not signify a fall which would damage man's relationship to God.

The teaching of God's Word is different. Our Christian Doctrine explains that "the old Adam in us must be drowned in daily penitence and repentance and die with all its sins and evil lusts, and instead, every day a new man must come forth and arise, who lives in righteousness and purity before God eternally."

Sin is thus always true sin. It not only corrupts human relationships, but also the relationship with God. This lesson is difficult to learn. It would be much easier and nicer to live as an angel than as an endeavorer in faith. Even though when faith comes it brings with it the Holy Spirit and a new attitude, it does not destroy our original (inherited) sin, man's corrupted great "me." The old man always feels a pull and lust to sin. Often it also succeeds and brings a believer to the need for repentance. Even though repenting again and again is heavy, greater is a believer's joy that repentance is possible. In the heart of a pardoned sinner is a thankful mind toward God, who is patient to carry us and give us strength to repent.

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