

## Challenge For Our Time

By

Curtis Dickinson

It is highly significant that the first word preached by John the Immerser, Jesus, and the Apostles is the last word being preached by most modern preachers and the mainstream churches.

The first message of Jesus was, “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt. 4:17). He repeatedly emphasized the necessity of repentance. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 5:32). “Repent and believe the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). On Pentecost, when the religious crowd asked Peter what they should do, his answer was, “Repent and be immersed” (Acts 2:38). Later he wrote, “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

Just at this critical time of moral deterioration, when all Christian leaders ought to be resounding this message of repentance, a great number of them are doing the opposite and insisting that sinners can be saved without change and that any attempt at discipline is a form of bigotry.

Such leaders may appear successful when they attract a great following. They insure themselves against the persecution which Jesus warned would fall upon those who take their stand on the Gospel He preached. All we have to do to escape such persecution is to keep silent, and when we condone the world’s style, not only do we escape its persecution but we can expect to receive its honors and adulation.

From radio and TV, people are told that in order to be saved they simply need to pray a little prayer and “invite Jesus” into their hearts. Untold numbers of people, who have been convinced that they are “saved” by such a response, continue to live as the world does, going the same direction as the world and with no peace, no joy in fellowship with God, and no influence for Christ and His Gospel.

Charles Colson tells the story of the famous gangster, Mickey Cohen, who attended an evangelistic meeting and indicated some interest. Immediately Christian leaders began visiting him until, finally, one night he was persuaded to “invite Jesus into his heart.” Many hailed this as a victory for the Gospel, but as months passed there was no change in his life of crime. When confronted, he responded that no one had told him he would have to give up his work or his friends. Churches feature Christian football players, Christian TV stars; why not a Christian gangster? It was only then that he was told about repentance, at which point he wanted no more to do with Christianity!

**CHANGE IS IN THE WORD.** In the New Testament the Greek word is *metanoia*: *meta*, meaning change, and *noia*, meaning mind. What Jesus demanded was a change in mind and heart, a complete transformation from the ordinary humanistic system of values to the purpose and values defined by God.

Repentance is both internal and external. It begins with consideration of God and how we measure up to His expectations. It takes place in the intellectual and emotional realm when one realizes his position before God as sinful and inadequate. It was expressed by Isaiah when, in his vision, he beheld the glory and holiness of God. He

exclaimed, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts” (Isa. 6:5).

True repentance brings a decision to give yourself to God, to completely and unconditionally surrender to Him, that His will may be done. This is not mere fear. Repentance eliminates fear. It is not mere sorrow. One may be sorry for sin because of the consequences it brings, sorry that he got caught, yet he may have no desire for radical change that he may be godly.

Others may escape repentance by concealing their true nature. They may outwardly appear to be in no need of change, performing good works and filling life with activity that keeps them from thinking about any relationship with God. They remain joyless and may never understand why peace and happiness are beyond their grasp.

Repentance is turning from self to God, as Jesus indicated when he said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself...” (Luke 9:23). Paul describes it as crucifying self and being dead to sin.

But genuine repentance can never be internal ONLY. If it is real, it will inevitably produce outward changes, as John demanded when he preached, “Bring forth fruit worthy of repentance” (Mt. 3:8). Zacchaeus set an example of repentance when he announced, “Half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have wrongfully exacted ought of any man I restore fourfold” (Luke 19:8). The repentance of Saul of Tarsus meant a radical change in his career, in his friends, and in his entire life. Such a radical change is exactly what repentance means. Jesus said it would be so radical that it might cost one his friends, his family, and even set all the world against him. The change resulting from repentance should be so great that it sets Christians off as entirely different from the pagan world; so different, in fact, that they are seen as “lights in the world, holding forth the word of life” (Phil. 2:15).

**REPENTANCE DENIED.** In calling people to repentance, Jesus challenged them to make a break with the world and bring their lives into harmony with the purpose of God. To apply this in our own day, one would expect a young person, on becoming a disciple of Christ, to make some distinct changes in certain habits; for example, in the music he listened to. Instead of the suggestive, often vulgar and immoral rock, the Christian would favor music that is uplifting in lyric and melody, music that inspires faith and a higher plane of morals. But instead of this challenge, the church often adopts the very style of the of the decadent music of the world, only changing the words, and appeals to the youth on the basis that they can be Christian and not appear noticeably different from their non-Christian friends.

No one is expected to make this great change in his own strength. It is God Himself who gives the power for a new life; therefore, the psychological pressure commonly applied in “evangelism” is an obstacle to true repentance.

No drastic change is expected in today’s conversions, and, in fact, great effort is made to make people feel “at home” in the church before they are converted. Instead of seeking to bring every thought into captivity to Christ, Christ is made to conform to the world in the interest of church growth.

Church growth experts have designed many ways to bring people into church without the pain of repentance. As a result, the church is like salt that has lost its savor. It

is seen by the world as only another social organization. It is structured like a business corporation, rather than a family of people united and empowered by God's own spirit. An organization so in harmony with the world cannot call man to repentance.

**THE JOY OF REPENTANCE.** While true repentance may involve painful self-examination, tears of deep contrition and costly restitution, yet it is the way of peace and joy. After David was made to realize the enormity of his sin, he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me...Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation" (Psa. 51:10, 12).

Repentance and forgiveness remove sin, its guilt, its power and the ultimate punishment of death it brings. It makes room for the true purpose of life as God designed it.

When you have repented—repented of what you are as well as what you have done—When pride has given way to humble confession of sin—When you have finally turned from the ways of the world to the way of God—When you have given yourself without reservation to God and forsaken every ambition and desire that is not in harmony with His teaching—When all decisions are based upon "Not my will, but thine be done"—When you begin to live by God's mercy, depending upon His goodness rather than upon your own power—THEN you will know the "peace that passes understanding" and the inexorable joy of salvation. Through repentance we gain by what we renounce for Christ.

"Repent...and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, so that there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

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