

REASON AND REPENTANCE

By

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Back in the 1960s during President J. F. Kennedy's "Camelot" administration there began a trend in politics and education to denigrate reason and logic and find answers to all problems through emotion and sentiment. Joseph Fletcher's concept of "Situation Ethics" was popular, and even used as a study in some churches. Debate and serious inquiry gave way to polls on popular opinion

The churches, always trying to be "relevant," took up the same trend and abandoned hard thinking and discipline to adopt sentiment and entertainment. Church growth took the place of evangelism. Church leaders became more concerned with what is practical than with what is true. The slogan became, "Do whatever works," which meant follow whatever program fills the pews, never mind that it leaves people spiritually empty and fails to produce a body of disciplined members committed to follow Jesus. Money and time went for aerobic classes, yoga instructors, entertainment and sports. Majestic and classic hymns gave way to short repetitive choruses accompanied by primitive rhythm.

Under the government-controlled schools, everyone is taught that there are no absolutes. (University professors are absolutely sure of this claim!) This has resulted in religion being based on sentiment rather than on faith in revealed truth. To reach the young people, who have been indoctrinated in school to think that absolute truth is non-existent, churches now aim at appealing to their sentiments. The music and sermon are designed, not to focus on truth, but to stir feelings.

What is obvious by its omission in today's religious mix is the one thing that was emphasized by Jesus and his forerunner, John the Baptist. The message then was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Whether addressing the religious hierarchy or the common man on the street, Jesus insisted that repentance was necessary. Jesus not only announced that God loves the world, He also said, "Except you repent you shall perish" (Luke 13:3).

The first sermon of the New Covenant order was delivered by Peter at Pentecost, and his message was, "Repent and be baptized." (Acts 2:38) According to Luke the final message of Jesus to the apostles was that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached" to all nations. (Luke 24:27).

Biblical repentance is never motivated by mere emotion or sentiment, but is generated by a process of reason based on facts of the gospel. John the Baptizer stirred people to repentance by laying before them the facts of God's Messiah and the judgment to be faced. Multitudes responded because there was propositional truth to reason with, and not because of John's charisma or oratorical ability.

Preachers need to forget their books of illustrations, the tear jerking stories from the latest book by the popular writers, and concentrate on the rich gold mine of the Bible. Yes, Jesus did tell stories. But His parables were to challenge thinking and expose truth, not to evoke sentimental feelings nor arouse emotions.

His story of two sons gives the essence of repentance. One son agreed to work in the vineyard, but never went. The other at first refused to go, and said, "I will not," but "afterward he repented himself and went" (Matt. 21:28-30). The church, as the salt of the earth, should ever be exposing the sins and idolatry of society, but, instead, it seeks to be contemporaneous and acceptable to that society. Instead of repudiating the pagan culture, it imitates it, tries to look like it, sound like it, and go to extremes to avoid offending it. It boldly displays the cross in conspicuous places and spends a few minutes with the communion service but these symbolic gestures offer no challenge to the pagan world.

To a large extent we have exchanged reason for emotion and sentiment. The emphasis is on one's experience and feelings. These may be mistaken for faith, but when circumstances change, so does the faith. Emotional exhortation may stir people to feel that they are having a religious experience, but if it is not grounded in a reasoned belief in the gospel it is devoid of power. Millions now agree with Joseph Fletcher that "Nothing is inherently good or evil." Without absolute truth and definite standards of good and evil, there is neither basis nor motivation for repentance. It is the gospel that is the power of God to change a person. This gospel is the good news of facts to be believed and understood, which requires reason, not sentiment and emotion.

Repentance can take place only when the penitent one is convinced that a wrong has been committed. This requires reason and logic. "Come now, and let us reason together, says Jehovah: though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow..." (Isa. 1:18). Luke records that it was the Apostle Paul's custom to reason with people from the scriptures. (Acts 17:2) "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and in the marketplace every day with them that met him" (Acts 17:17). He considered it his task to "bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). The power of God to bring man to repentance is in the Gospel when understood and believed.

When "faith" is not based on reason one is led by what is felt to be right. Such feelings often result from the influences of the non-Christian world. Without objective reason, good and evil are only sentiments. If morality is based on such sentiment – how one feels about it - then there is no sense of guilt toward God and no need for repentance. Evangelists seek to get a response by arousing one's emotions, to make people feel guilty. As one who for years led the singing in evangelistic meetings (or revivals) I was continually made aware that my part was to prepare the audience by establishing the proper emotional setting for the sermon. Although the message might be based on Biblical truth, the closing words and the invitation hymn were usually designed to appeal to emotion.

Response that is based on sentiment and emotion can hardly be considered repentance. Repentance must be based on the reality of a consciousness of sin in the face of the

reality of God's perfect nature and purpose for His creation. One may weep bitterly over some serious action that has brought grief to oneself and to others, and it might be defined as repentance, but not necessarily repentance toward God. Godly repentance is a sorrow for having offended God and a reasoned change of mind and heart. It is a change that involves all of one's life.

The prodigal son of Luke 15 is a classic example of true repentance. He had torn himself away from his father and lived in pagan revelry until he realized he was in desperate circumstances. Jesus said that he "came to himself" and began to reason that he was about to perish, and needed reconciliation with his father. He admitted that he had sinned and was now willing to submit to his father's will as a humble servant. All of this was part of his change of mind, but that wasn't all there was to his repentance. Jesus said, "And he arose, and came to his father." He left the pagan lifestyle, where he was feeding swine, and actually journeyed home to face whatever shame or punishment might be waiting. His father, in extreme mercy and grace, received him in love.

Repentance means that one will no longer take part in the practices of the pagan people around him; that he will separate himself from the common pagan beliefs and lifestyles of today. Turning to God our Father means turning away from the modern idols of society and seeking to please God rather than the fashion of the hour. "If any man love the world the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). This means that a Christian will not feel at home in the popular culture of the unbelieving world, but will be as a stranger and sojourner. (Heb. 11:13-16, Rom 12:3)

Such a Christian might not even feel at home in the modern church, as many church leaders strive to keep the church from appearing different from the world's institutions. The person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness (Matt. 5:6) may be seen by others as a religious fanatic or oddball, but Jesus said that he will be blessed and satisfied.

It only takes a few moments of real thought for one to change his mind. As the light and salt of the world, it is the Christian's place to awaken people from their media-induced stupor and tell them the truth of Christ and the gospel. It is this truth that will produce repentance and make them free, free from sin, free from death, and free to live.

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