

The Alternative

By

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“Except ye repent, ye shall all...perish” (Luke 13:3, 5). From the preaching of John the Baptist – “repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” – to the final warnings in the book of Revelation these two alternatives are offered: repentance or destruction.

In commissioning the disciples to their ministry Jesus said, “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name” (Luke 24:47). On the day of Pentecost the initial gospel message of Peter, the key that opened the gates of the Kingdom, was climaxed by the command, “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Years later Peter wrote that judgment is delayed because God is “longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

The church has failed miserably in declaring to the world these two alternatives in spite of the feverish activity called evangelism, in which people are begged, tricked, pressured, and manipulated into church membership by every kind of technique modern psychology can invent in the laboratories of religious clinics and conventions. Such evangelism runs from bowing one’s head in prayer on a busy street or signing a decision card, to going down the church aisle, shaking the preacher’s hand and being baptized. Quite often the baptism is made optional, thus making the process more convenient. This is the “evangelism” that results in church houses being full and the people empty.

Missing are the clear alternatives offered by the Almighty: repent or perish. Instead one hears a lot about love, with the word glibly tossed about as if it were some kind of potion that God gushed forth over the globe to tranquilize and equalize all creation. It is significant that Christ never commanded men to preach love, but rather to preach the gospel of repentance and remission of sins.

Divine love is nothing at all like the blind sentimentality that often passes for love. God’s love is founded upon stark reality of what God knows is true. Hence the message, “Repent or perish,” contrary to the common idea that it is void of love, is in reality the true message of love.

In the eternal plan of God only one reason is revealed for man’s existence, and that is that he should be in God’s image. Thus scripture speaks of our being holy and without blemish before Him in love” (Eph. 1:4), and that “we shall be like Him:” (1 John 3:2), that we are to be “found unto praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 pet.1:7) when He shall “fashion anew the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of His glory:” (Phil. 3:21). The saints of God (and ONLY saints have any promise of immortality) are those who have turned from the natural world to

God, who desire the way of God over against the ways of man, who trust God with their lives and thus seek to do His will. In other words, they have repented.

It is useless for men to conceive substitute plans and to “imagine vain things” as possibly satisfying to the Creator. God’s nature is unchanging and His purposes are perfect. Therefore, in the final consummation of the age He will have man in His image, *and nothing less*. He will not endure sin forever, which is the same as saying that he will not endure sinful man forever. God’s love is such that He will not let man go on in the state of sin, never fulfilling the purpose for which he was created. The sinner will perish.

When Jesus used the term “perish” he used one of the strongest words in the language to convey the thought of death. There are 14 different Greek words used in the New Testament to express the doctrine of the final destruction of the sinner. These 14 words, some of them used over and over, are (expressed in the English alphabet): *Analisko, Apoleia, Apollumi, Apothnesko, Diaphtherio, Exolothreao, Katakaio, Katanalisko, Katargeo, Kolasis, Olethros, Phtheiro, Phthora* and *Thanatos*.

Translated into English these words mean: to consume, death, ruin, destroy utterly, expire, corrupt utterly, cut off, burn up, consume thoroughly, abolish, etc. The word *apollumi*, used 23 times in the New Testament, is the strongest word in the Greek language to denote a final and complete end, to bring to naught, to utterly destroy. It is this word that Jesus used to solemnly declare that God can “destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

Another verb and noun for “destroy” and “destruction” is *exolothreuo* and *olethros*, signifying utter destruction by death. Thus “every soul which will not hear that prophet (Christ) shall be destroyed (*exolothreao*) from among the people” (Acts 3:23): and the wicked “shall be punished with everlasting destruction (*olethros*) from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9, 1 Tim. 6:9).

So God offers no alternative to repentance but destruction. He offers no purgatory, no state of eternal life short of His glorious image. It is repent or perish: and that says it all.

Dr. R. F. Weymouth, a noted Greek authority and translator of *The New Testament in Modern Speech*, strikingly declared in an authorized published statement:

“My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language than when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses, signifying ‘destroy,’ or ‘destruction,’ are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. To translate black as white is nothing to this.”

John the Baptist, whose mission was prepare the way for the Messiah, in his first recorded sermon, said, “Repent ye: for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand...I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance, but he that comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire; whose

fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor: and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:11-12). John’s plea for repentance was predicated upon the fact that a housecleaning is coming and all who fail to qualify as “wheat” and are unfit for the presence of God are to be destroyed. Sin cannot exist in the presence of God and therefore will be destroyed in the destruction of the sinner.

Evangelists tell people that they will spend eternity either in heaven or in hell. They are wrong. Hell is not a place where people live: it is a place of destruction.

Thus the message, “repent or perish,” is the anguished cry of the loving Creator to his sinful creatures. It is the true appeal of love. The modern preaching of “love” which minimizes sin and studiously avoids any hint of impending destruction is as far removed from a true concern for the lost as death is from life. It is sin that requires from God a judgment, and it is only repentance, a complete turning from sin to total faith in God and the gospel that will save man from judgment. God is not capricious, nor cruel nor in need of feeding His ego. It is not as some imagine, that He is saying, “If you don’t grovel in the dust before me, I’ll smash you.” Instead it is the most tender of all messages, that there is an alternative to the course of death.

Furthermore, He gives to all the capacity to heed it. The insolent criminal, who whines that he couldn’t help it, that he was the victim of society or of mean old parents, will not be excused in the Judgment. It will do no good to shut one’s eyes, to plead ignorance, or blame somebody else.

Also, just as the punishment is final and total, so must the repentance be final and total. Many may think to squeeze by with a simulated repentance; that is, by giving up the obvious sins and going through the motions of obedience, such a confession and baptism. One woman said to me that if it were not for the fear of unending punishing (as if God were going to roast one alive forever) she would not have given up the pleasures of the world. Alas! Anyone with such a confession admits that she has not truly repented. The desire is for fire insurance, not the life that is in the image of God. The sinful nature has not changed, yet she hopes to escape the penalty for sin. What God seeks is NOT to scare people into submission. He desires people who are sanctified, cleansed; people who are “transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18); in brief, people who have repented.

The work of God in providing a rescue from destruction was in making Christ an offering for sin. He bore the complete death sentence, so that “whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This was the essential mission of Jesus, to pay the penalty for sin by his own death that some might be saved from destruction.

Repentance is not merely sorrow for sin. “Godly sorrow works repentance.” Sorrow should lead to repentance, but one may be sorry and yet not repent. Repentance is a complete change of the purpose of life, from seeking the natural desires to seeking the

purpose of God, and therefore it includes obedience to God, an earnest effort to know the mind of Christ and to live in harmony with his will.

The issue that Christ settles reaches to the very heart and core of a person's life, and settles not only the actions of life but the motives as well and, finally, its very existence. The modern church does not settle the issue because its leaders will hardly discuss it, much less teach it. In the promotion of all kinds of activities, the image of God is forgotten and the impending destruction is pushed out of mind. We sing, "Do Lord, O do Lord, O do remember me..." and forget that He said, "repent or you shall perish." But He does remember. He, the Ancient of days, whose mind is not dulled by mortal decay, remembers His eternal purpose and the warning He has given.

"Except ye repent, ye shall all perish."

(From The Witness of October 1969, slightly modified)

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