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ESSAYS

REPENTANCE from an EXPERIENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

Much has been written about the psychological dimensions of repentance. Most of us have only read of the behavioral manifestations of true repentance. The best descriptions are found in historical accounts of great moves of the Holy Spirit. Repentance did not accompany the most recent moves in the 1960's of the Holy Spirit across the country and in the last decade at Lakeland, St. Louis, Toronto and Pensacola. Recently a book came to my attention that described an event in a Houston church where repentance came about as a result of another dramatic move of the Spirit. This book, written by Tommy Tenney, is entitled *God Chasers*. I have reviewed it in one of my previous newsletters. The tenor of the book is that after a supernatural revelation of his power by God the entire congregation began to repent. This move of the Spirit lasted for weeks. The manifestations of repentance were those that have been described in similar moves of the Spirit in the past. There was profound weeping as a result of heart felt sorrow. People were on their face before God seeking forgiveness, a cleansing and filling or refilling of the Holy Spirit. Afterwards the people and the church were dramatically changed.

What happened in Houston was nothing new. These things happened with the move of the Spirit when Whitefield, Wesley and Finney preached. They have only rarely happened in modern evangelistic efforts primarily because most evangelists do not call people to repentance. They do not believe it is necessary for salvation. They are, of course, right for both Calvin and Wesley held the same beliefs. But then no one else calls people to repentance either. Sadly it is true that most preachers do not call for repentance because they believe that salvation is enough, or that repentance is not necessary. Their belief is that if you get your ticket to heaven you are home free.

Such thinking is not biblical. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). Since we all sin, we all need to repent. Salvation does not cleanse us from sin, it only provides the soap for cleansing. Why do so few of us not repent? It is

primarily because repentance is neither preached nor are the biblical injunctions to repent taken seriously.

In my entire Christian life (34 years) I have heard only two sermons on repentance and I preached one of them. I don't believe that at the time I really understood the profound importance of repentance when I preached. I know the other person who preached on it did not know either. If we had really known its profound importance, then people might have taken both of us seriously.

A call to repentance is of the utmost importance in Christianity. When Jonah cried out against Ninevah the people repented and God did not destroy the city. John the Baptist's call to repentance preceded the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In Luke 5:32 Jesus said that he had not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Later when he was about to ascend to heaven he said that repentance and forgiveness of sin were to be preached to all nations (Luke 24:46,47). But as I said above it is not preached. In this day with the moral decay that is taking place it is time for people to be called to repentance. Their moral paralysis will not be overcome if they do not repent.

In the *Institutes of Christian Religion* John Calvin asserts that repentance can only take place after a person has developed faith. He must have believed the Gospel and installed Jesus in himself. The Holy Spirit who is the spirit of the Father and of Jesus is necessary before a person can repent. We sin against God. As David said, "Against **you, you only**, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge" (Psalm 51:4). Repentance has to arise out of our sorrow for offending God. When Jesus took our punishment on the cross he suffered. God suffered as he watched his Son's agony. We have to have a deep (godly) sorrow for causing the Son of God to suffer the pain that he took upon himself for our sake. Only when the Holy Spirit reveals to us the enormity of his suffering will we develop that Godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10) . I fortunately was finally able to comprehend it after being a Christian for 33 years. Here's how it happened.

Recently, I was seeking a new measure of the Holy Spirit's power. I did, therefore, spend much time in prayer. For several weeks I did not have much success, so I decided to devote an entire day in prayer. To be sure I would be free of distractions, I went to my sailboat and spent the day in solitude praying. You need to know that my sailboat cabin is about the size of a large walk in closet. It is quite small, so I was indeed heeding the Lord's injunction to go into my "closet" to pray (Matt 6:6 KJV). It takes three hours to drive there, so I left early in the morning and prayed during the entire trip down to the coast. I got on the boat and spent the next 9 hours fasting and praying. In my prayers I told the Lord repeatedly that if I needed to repent to be refilled I was anxious to do so. I began by confessing my sins and doing what I thought was repenting. Though I thought I had done a good job of it, I had not been sure that the sorrow I experienced was really godly. Even though I prayed most of the way back home

that evening, I did not get what I asked for. God did not give me that extra measure of his Spirit.

I continued my prayers during the next two weeks, mostly as I drove to work each morning. Still nothing happened. Then one morning when I was praying with my wife as we routinely do before I go to my office, I felt a profound sorrow come over me. It was not anything that I had experienced before. I began to confess sins that I had never recognized as sins. And I sobbed violently as I told the Lord how sorry I was for having caused him to suffer so much for me. I cannot describe the depth of that sorrow. I had not felt such sorrow when my mother, father and brother died. I had not had it when other tragedies had impacted my life. It was not like anything I had ever experienced. This lasted for an hour before I could get control of my emotions. I had to gain control because I had patients waiting for me at the office. Still throughout the day in moments where I was alone, I would find myself weeping.

Interestingly I have found that the process of repentance is ongoing. It was some time later that I wanted to get my business with the Lord finished. I again requested a new measure of the Holy Spirit. I asked the Lord why he would not give me what I wanted. Suddenly, it came to my mind that I wanted more power so that my ministry would be like that of some of my friends. I wanted to see demonstrable physical evidence that the people I was ministering to were being dramatically changed. With this realization I quit praying and listened to the Lord. What came to me was "I have given you the gifts you need to do my will. You have power, use it." It was then that I realized that I had wrong motives. I felt ashamed and confessed my greediness and the sin of my wrong motives. It was then that I spontaneously truly repented for this sin. I told the Lord that whatever he wanted to give me I would take, but to let me know why he was giving it to me, and how to use it. It seemed apparent to me that once we have truly repented, the Holy Spirit will continue the process of keeping us clean.

There is even more to the story. I knew deep down in my heart that Jesus had suffered because of my sin, but how deeply he suffered I could not fathom. Of course I knew he suffered physically because several years ago I got a tape that described the physical mistreatment that Jesus was subjected to. I understood the physical pain He felt when he was scourged with a flagellum, that instrument of leather thongs with little dumbbell shaped weights tied on the ends. I understood that He had a crown (cap), not a coronet of thorns (as it is depicted in Durer's head of Christ) jammed down on his head. The thorns pierced His scalp penetrating down to his skull. I understood the pain He felt as the spikes were driven through the upper parts of his hands and feet. I also could understand the agony He felt as he had to pull himself up on those spikes so he could breathe. As His strength ebbed he could no longer pull himself up, and he began to suffocate. I can understand the feeling of suffocating. The tape did a good job of describing His physical suffering, but it could not describe the enormity of the emotional pain he suffered. I still had to learn about His emotional suffering.

A few weeks after my initial episode, I had an emotionally draining day with my patients. As a psychiatrist I listen to stories of great suffering. It is not physical suffering, for it arises out of life situations that had produced great emotional pain. This first account described the agony that a man was suffering because his marriage of 23 years was ending. His wife had left him. He loved her dearly and in spite of his entreaties and the profound changes in his behavior that had taken place after his conversion three years before, she adamantly refused to forgive him and come back. He tearfully told me of his pain and recounted all the good things that had gone on in his marriage, and how he had tried to be a loving husband. "Why" he asked "did this have to happen?" I really did not have an answer that would help his pain so all I could do was weep with him.

The other two patients were hurting with the same intensity although for different reasons. At the end of the afternoon I was emotionally exhausted. This had happened many times in my life before, but that day their emotional pain seemed unusually burdensome. I drove home burdened with the pain of my patients. When I prayed before our evening meal and told the Lord that I was exhausted from bearing the burdens that arose out of the agony that I had witnessed and experienced that day, the Spirit illuminated my mind. He said, "Now you know how great was the Lord's burden when he took our suffering on the cross. Multiply what you experienced by billions." I have a finite mind so it is impossible for me to conceive of infinite suffering. Even so, I had suffered what Brer Rabbit called a "teenchy" little taste of that burden. To say the least, it was exquisitely painful. I tried to imagine how much greater was the pain that Jesus suffered. All I could come up with was that because He was infinite God he could infinitely suffer.

I want to say to those who read this that real repentance is a life changing experience. I have found that I am now more Christ centered. My thinking has been dramatically changed. It is as though my mind has been cleansed, just as my mouth was washed clean when I first encountered God. Then, I quit saying bad words. Now, I have, for the most part, quit thinking bad thoughts. I am not sure that I will ever stop completely, but it is so easy to turn them off now when they start to emerge into consciousness. It is easier to think of things that are true, that are noble, that are right, that are pure, that are lovely, that are admirable — and are excellent or praiseworthy (Phil 4:8).

Did I get what I was after? No, I still have not received the extra measure of the Holy Spirit that I so earnestly desire. I will keep praying and seeking God's face. I have become a God chaser. I want to know Him more dearly. I want that extra measure! In the meantime I have repented. It apparently was a prerequisite for obtaining my heart's desire.

I have also learned one other lesson. In this day when our culture has become so polluted by sin, we desperately need to repent. We need to repent of our inaction in crying out against it. We need to repent of our failure to witness to the truth

found in the Gospel, i.e. that men must repent and that when they do God forgives their sin. We need to repent as a person, as a church, as a community and as a nation for our sins. God told us what would happen if we disobeyed his laws (Deut 28). We have disobeyed and we will receive and are receiving in just measure what He ordained for us. The time has come to repent.

How do we bring it about. (1) The first thing we have to do is to realize that we are sinners. There are no persons without sin. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)." (2) We have to realize that in the repentance that arises in our souls there can only be a worldly sorrow. The Holy Spirit must work repentance in us. (3) We must make a list of the sins that are in our conscious purview. (4) We should confess these sins to God, and ask him to reveal to us any others that are to be included. (5) We have to pray unceasingly for God to work repentance in us. We must obey Jesus, injunction to keep on praying until God gives us the "bread" (Luke 11:5-8). (6) We will know that we are truly repenting when we experience godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10). It will be like nothing we have experienced before. (7) It will include a great emotional outpouring, and it will also include confession of sins we have committed that we did not consider when we made our list. God will bring these to mind. (8) We will be acutely aware of our sins causing Jesus to suffer. (9) Lastly, we will feel cleansed when we have truly repented.

Repentance changes things. It can change our thinking and behaving. It can change our churches, it can change our communities, it can change our nation. It will change the world. Once we have repented let us carry out what Jesus said, that repentance and forgiveness would be preached to all nations. We have to do it!