

2.

THE REPENTANCE PROCESS

A few people begin their Christian walk with a blaze of sin-revealing, soul-searching transformation. They are, from the beginning of their experience with Jesus, repentant in a profound way. Their sin has been deeply exposed and they are ready and willing to experience both the death and resurrection of Christ.

These believers have entered deeply into the presence of a holy God and there they have seen themselves in His light. This revelation of their "self" and sin generated in them a profound repentance which allows the Holy Spirit to do His work in them quickly and without much resistance. Such people progress very rapidly in the spiritual walk.

Virtually all of what are known as powerful "revivals" throughout church history have been accompanied by this tremendous conviction of

sin. Deep, heart-searching repentance has been the result. These “visitations” of God have brought a blazing light which convicted men and women both of their sins and their sin – of the error of their actions and words and also of the nature of their flesh which produces such sins.

Those converted during these times of God’s visitations almost always become God fearing, holy people whose testimony continued strong until their physical deaths. This is because the transforming work of God – the exchange of His life for theirs – is greatly facilitated by a deep, soul-searching repentance.

But many, if not most believers today, are not brought to Christ in this manner. They have not come to Him with much, if any, conviction of sin. Instead, they are urged to come to Jesus for any number of benefits. Perhaps they are seeking healings, blessings, solutions to personal problems, financial prosperity or any other such things. Many, instead of seeking to be free from who they are and what they do are instead looking for help to continue on living as before, except without so many problems. Such converts will make very little progress spiritually.

As a note here, I would like to state with the utmost clarity that most of the so-called “revival” experiences of our modern day can do nothing to aid the transformation process. Falling down, barking like a dog, jiggling, laughing or any other such phenomena, do not transform anyone. They do not convict of sin

and therefore do not generate repentance. Consequently, they are at best a waste of time. Worse still, they are often simply a delusion – an emotional experience which many mistake for something spiritual. Such experiences are not the work of the Holy Spirit of God.

As we saw in the beginning of this chapter, in order to survive the coming appearing of Jesus Christ in His power and glory, we must be changed to be like Him. We need to be transformed from what we are into what He is. We must have our life exchanged for His.

The key which opens the way into this most necessary experience is repentance. We must realize what we are and repent, crying out for deliverance from ourselves. We must be willing to die so that our sinful self will live no more and so the life of Jesus can fill our entire being.

Repentance is directly related to our transformation. Simply put: little repentance = little transformation; more repentance = more transformation; deep, thorough repentance = unlimited transformation into the image of Christ. We should never imagine that admitting and repenting for our sins is a negative thing. It is an act which opens up wide vistas of new spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ.

WHAT IF WE DID NOT BEGIN WELL?

Even if we did not have a proper beginning to our Christian life – that is to say we were not deeply convicted of sin and therefore have had

a very shallow and insufficient repentance – there is still hope. It is not too late. Today we can seek God’s help so that we can come to a complete repentance.

You see, it is He who actually makes our repentance possible. Remembering again the verse with which we began this book we see that God “granted” the Gentiles repentance unto ZOE life. They did not come to this on their own. It was He who arranged it for them. Those in darkness do not, and in fact cannot, see their true condition. It is only by the mercy of God when He shines upon us that we see how fallen we are and how much we need salvation. It is when we begin to glimpse His extreme holiness that we understand our filthy sinfulness.

Genuine repentance is not something which we can generate ourselves. It is not an act of scrutinizing our past or present and trying to work up some kind of sorrow. There is no value in self-effort, attempting to feel guilty or trying to remember every single, little sin which we might have committed.

True repentance needs the light of God to work. It is only His presence which can generate it. Although we all too easily can resist this work of His conviction of sin, we cannot produce it ourselves. Our need is to seek His presence. It is from Him that the necessary light will come. As we walk in intimacy with Him we will increasingly see sin in ourselves. Then we will have the wonderful privilege of repenting and being cleansed by Him.

Even if we began poorly in our spiritual walk, even if we never have really repented, today God can guide us into this glorious blessing. He can still shine His light upon us. If we are genuinely hungering and thirsting after righteousness, He will make sure that we are satisfied (Mt 5:6).

We should be always seeking the face of Jesus. In this light, we can see just what we are and repent. This repentance opens the way for His death and His life to be applied to us.

We read: "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Co 3:18).

It is as we see His glory that we are both exposed and transformed. It is in the light of His countenance that we see ourselves compared to His exalted pattern. Our repentance then opens the door for His life to fill what we once were.

AN ILLUSTRATION

I would like to share with you a little story that may help to illustrate this point. Many years ago my wife and I were in the Florida Keys. One Sunday, we went to visit a church meeting. I was surprised to find that I was the only man there. The rest were women and children. When the pastor began to preach, I began to understand why. This dear brother preached a legalism and condemnation you could almost

feel. Needless to say, we did not return for another dose. One of those kind of meetings was enough.

A couple of years later we were back in the same area again and we ran into a woman from that church in a parking lot. She began urging us to come to a meeting. I was quietly thinking, "That's about the last thing I could imagine doing." Yet she kept insisting and insisting. She said that the preacher had changed. He had had an experience with God which made him different.

I must confess that it was with much reluctance that I went again to that meeting. Yet, when the pastor spoke, it was obvious that something had changed. Now he was filled with the love of God. He was ministering by the Holy Spirit. Something significant had happened to this brother. In my curiosity I had to know what had taken place, so I arranged to spend some time with him and ask him about his experience.

What he told me was something like this: He had been fasting and praying for a greater experience with the Lord. One morning he woke up about six o'clock and stood up beside his bed. There he became transfixed by the presence of God. The only way he could describe the experience was by saying that he came face to face with the Spirit of Truth – undiluted, pure, burning truth.

His experience was as if the Spirit reached inside of him turning over, uncovering and

exposing many things. These “things” were attitudes, thoughts, words and actions. He became intensely convicted of his sin. This “Truth” shone brightly into him. Then and there he was brought to a profound repentance.

When this experience ended, he again looked at his clock. He had been standing there by his bed for about one half hour. But this thirty minutes had made him a changed man. His time in the presence of God had convicted him and transformed him. Now his life was much more full of the love and life of Jesus. How much all of us need more of just such an experience!

REPENTANCE IS AN ONGOING EXPERIENCE

Repentance is not a once-and-for-all type of experience. It is not something which we do once, at the beginning of our Christian walk, and then never have to do again. It should be an ongoing process in the life of every believer.

Why is this? It is because the closer we get to Jesus, the more light we should see. He is the light of this world (Jn 9:5). His presence is noted for its intensity of light. Therefore, if we are genuinely getting closer to Him, we should see ourselves with ever increasing clarity. The light should be getting brighter.

In fact, this could be considered a test of the sincerity of our walk with Jesus. Are we in fact seeing more sin? Is the sinful nature being

exposed in an ever expanding way? Is there a deepening repentance in our life?

If not, then something is wrong. Somehow, somewhere we have stalled in our Christian experience. We are not moving closer to God. If our repentance is, in fact, increasing then we can have confidence that our relationship with our Creator is becoming very much more intimate.

CONVICTION AND CONDEMNATION

There is certainly a difference between conviction of sin and condemnation. Many believers suffer from a lot of condemnation but very little conviction. Condemnation can come from several sources. No doubt the devil and his minions work in our mind to condemn us. Many also waste a lot of time condemning themselves. Others, sometimes friends and relatives, may also help to condemn or make us feel condemned.

But true conviction of sin comes from the Spirit of God. A large part of His mission is to "convict the world of sin" (Jn 16:8). So today, He is working to expose our sin and help us to repent.

When God convicts us, there is nothing general or fuzzy about it. He always convicts us of something specific and concrete. His light exposes something which really happened in the past or today exists in our lives. This is not a vague feeling of guilt. God's light always comes with a penetrating clarity.

It is not possible to completely define the difference between conviction which comes from God and condemnation from another source. Ultimately, this requires spiritual discernment. We must learn to know the voice of our Shepherd and follow Him (Jn 10:27).

We need to develop an intimacy with our Creator which enables us to discern which things come from Him and which do not. There is no substitute for this intimacy and discernment.

Although no one should spend their lives under condemnation from sources other than God, there is also another danger. Far too many believers label the conviction of the Holy Spirit as “condemnation.” God is trying to convict them of sin, but they resist this work of the Holy Spirit calling it condemnation. This is a common ailment, but one that is spiritually dangerous.

When we reject the conviction of the Spirit, labeling it as “condemnation of the devil” we resist the work of God in our lives. We block the wonderful things which He wants to do in us. The transformation process is halted. Since the Lord respects our will, when we resist His work to convict us of sin and then change us, His work will simply stop.

Therefore, we should be very careful not to err on this point, quickly and lightly rejecting something which may be from God. Walking in the fear of the Lord, we must prayerfully consider before Him thoughts which might be genuinely convincing us of sin.

I realize that there are many today who suffer under a lot of "condemnation." However, one cause of this may actually be a lack of repentance. When we have repented of some specific sin for example, then we can have absolute assurance that it has been forgiven. Once we have confessed our error before God and acknowledged the gravity of it, then it is removed from us as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12). It is gone. God does not remember it. Consequently, we should not allow thoughts about it to torment us.

The more thoroughly we allow the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin, the less there is in our lives for the devil or others to condemn us about. Once we have confessed and forsaken a specific sin, then we should not allow our minds to dwell on it.

We do not need to constantly be confessing the same sins over and over again. If we find ourselves in this situation, always feeling grieved over sins for which we have already repented, this is a sure sign that condemnation is at work.

There are more than a few believers who labor under a tremendous feeling of guilt. However, in my experience, many such cases are the result of not having truly repented.

There are frequently many, many things in these believer's past which have not been brought into the light. There are things which they are trying to forget and leave behind without bringing them to God in confession and

repentance. Therefore, their consciences continually condemn them. They are not truly at peace with God. This causes them to feel generally guilty about little things in the present, because they have never really cleared up other things, perhaps much more serious things, in the past.

Far too many believers are trying to move forward in the Christian life without having cleared up the past. They are struggling to move on while dragging a huge burden of sins for which they have not repented.

Needless to say, they go nowhere. Their spiritual progress is blocked. They never seem to grow spiritually. Due to their weakened conscience many such believers are also vulnerable to the influence of evil spirits, especially in the area of condemnation.

These sins of the past could be: sexual sins, murder, abortion, lies and deception, prostitution, hatred, unforgiveness, drug use, thefts, unkind words or acts or any number of other sins. No matter what sins we have committed, it is a great relief to confess them before God. A tremendous burden will be lifted from our shoulders.

Confessing may be embarrassing. It might be humiliating. It might even mean going to prison for something which we have done. Yet it will generate great joy. It will liberate much more of the salvation of God. It will unlock the spiritual progress which we need so much.

While we resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit and refuse to confess and repent, we

remain in our private little prison of condemnation and defeat. Our troubled conscience will not allow us to remain in the presence of God for very long. But once we repent, what liberation and freedom will be ours to enjoy! What great joy and transformation will be ours coming from the presence of our Savior!

While our sin remains unconfessed and unrepented of, it inhibits our relationship with Jesus. It limits our access to His intense holiness. When we try to approach Him, still carrying our sins, we may manage to touch “the hem of His garment” once in a while, but we won’t be able to stay in His presence. We may be able to “feel” His blessing from time to time, for example during a time of worship, but we will not feel comfortable around His extreme purity for long periods of time.

This is because in Jesus’ presence, our conscience is touched. As we mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, who He is will certainly impact who and what we are. So the only way to stay in the presence of God, the only way to walk continually in His presence is to be thoroughly repentant. We must respond to and repent for everything which His light is exposing. To remain in intimacy with God, we must respond to what the Holy Spirit is touching within us.