

Whatever happened to repentance? You rarely hear the word mentioned in most churches today - even in Baptist, Pentecostal or evangelical circles. Pastors nowadays seldom call for their congregations to sorrow over sin - to mourn and grieve over wounding Christ by their wickedness.

Instead, the message we hear from many pulpits today is, "Just believe. Accept Christ, and you'll be saved."

The text used to justify this message is Acts 16:30-31.

In this passage, the apostle Paul was being held in jail when suddenly the earth shook and all the cell doors opened. The jailer immediately thought all the prisoners had fled, which meant he faced execution. In despair, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself when Paul and Silas stopped him, assuring him no one had escaped.

Seeing this, the man fell down before the apostles and cried out, "...Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*" (ACTS 16:30-31).

As we read this passage, it's important to remember that the jailer was on the verge of suicide, with sword in hand. He was already at a point of repentance — on his knees, broken and trembling, before the apostles.

So his heart was truly prepared to accept Jesus in genuine faith.

In the gospel of Mark, Christ tells his disciples, "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned*" (MK

# Whatever Happened To Repentance?

16:16). It's clear from what Jesus says here that salvation is found in simply accepting Him and being baptized.

However, Jesus prefaces His statement with this word: "...*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*" (verse 15). He's saying, in essence, that before people can believe in Him, the gospel must first be preached to them.

And what is this gospel Jesus refers to? It's the gospel that Jesus Himself preached - the gospel of repentance!

Think about it - what was the first message Jesus delivered, after He emerged from the temptation in the wilderness? Scripture says, "*From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (MATT 4:17).

Jesus called people to repent before He even called them to believe! Mark writes, "...*Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel*" (MK 1:14-15). Christ preached, "Repent first - and believe."

Elsewhere Jesus says of His mission, "...*I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*" (MATT 9:13). And He told the Galileans, "*I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*" (LK 13:3).

Jesus' gospel was all about repentance!

## John the Baptist Also Preached Repentance, to Prepare Israel for the Coming of Christ.

John's message to the Jews was simple and straightforward: "*In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (MATT 3:1-2).

People came from everywhere to hear John preach. And he told them in no uncertain terms: "The messiah is soon to appear in your midst - so, you'd better get ready to meet him! You may feel excited that He's coming. But I'm telling you, your hearts are not prepared - because you're still holding onto your sins!

"Outside you appear clean and holy. But inside, you're full of dead men's bones! You're a generation of vipers, snakes, with absolutely

no fear of God. Yet you have no concept that you're even sinners. I warn you - you must deal with your sin before you can believe on the Savior and follow Him. So, repent, turn from your sin - and live in a way that reflects genuine change!"

What gospel did Peter preach to the masses on the day of Pentecost? The Bible tells us that when the people heard the apostle testify, "...they were pricked in their heart, and said...Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (ACTS 2:37-38).

Peter didn't tell these people just to "believe and be saved." He didn't ask them to merely make a decision, to cast a vote for Jesus. No - he told them to repent first, and then be baptized in obedience to Christ!

What gospel did Paul preach to the pagan Athenians on Mars Hill? He told them very directly, "...God... now commandeth all men every where to repent" (ACTS 17:30).

These Greek intellectuals had no trouble believing in God. In fact, you could say their very pastime was "believing." They believed in many gods - first this one, then that one. Whenever someone came along preaching a god persuasively, they believed in it. So, they believed - but they did it while living in sin.

Simple belief wasn't enough!

Paul told these men, "No, no - that's not, Christ!

Jesus can't simply be added to your list of gods. You may believe in them all, but you can't merely do that with Jesus. He has come to save you from your sins. And He commands all his followers to repent and be cleansed!"

Later, Paul preached the same gospel of repentance to King Agrippa: "...I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: but shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and

*turn to God, and do works meet for repentance"* (ACTS 26:19-20).

Paul is saying, "Everywhere I've been, I've preached repentance. And genuine repentance proves itself by its actions!"

These passages make clear to us that the apostolic church preached unabashedly the same gospel John and Jesus preached: "Repent for the remission of your sins!"

### What Does It Mean To Repent?

Some Christians believe repentance means simply to "turn around" and go in the opposite direction. But the Bible tells us repentance is much more than this.

I once heard a man say, "I'm so glad I know New Testament Greek. It translates the word 'repent' as meaning, 'to change one's mind.'"

No - this man doesn't know his Greek! The full, literal meaning of the word "repent" in the New Testament is "to feel remorse and self-reproach for one's sins against God; to be contrite, sorry; to want to change direction." The difference in meanings here rests on the word "Want." True repentance includes a desire to change!

Moreover, simply being sorry doesn't constitute repentance. Rather, true sorrow leads to repentance. Paul states, "*Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death*" (2.COR 7:10).

Paul is speaking here of a sorrow that's without regrets - one that's genuine, that "sticks" in the life of the repentant person. This kind of godly sorrow naturally produces a repentance that includes a hatred for sin, a righteous fear of God and a desire to right all wrongs.

It shouldn't surprise us, then, that Paul preached repentance to believers. He delivered a strong message of repentance to the Christians in Corinth. The Corinthian believers had been richly blessed by God, having sat under mighty teachers of the word. Yet their congregation remained rife with sin.

First Paul testifies to the Corinthians, "*Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds*" (2.COR 12:12). But then Paul tells them very directly: "*I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would...*" (verse 20).

What was Paul's fear? It was simply this: "*Lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed*" (verse 21).

This tenderhearted shepherd loved the compromising saints in Corinth. Yet he knew they'd been well-taught that a lifestyle of gross sin was wrong. And he told them, "When I come to visit you, you're going to see me hanging my head in grief. My eyes will flow with tears, and my voice will wail in sorrow.

"If I see you continuing to indulge in uncleanness, fornication and lust, I'll be utterly broken - because the gospel has not done its work in your heart. You haven't yet repented of your sin. And I will call you loudly to repent!"

### These Words of Paul Put Me to Shame!

As I read Paul's words, I find myself examining my own ministry. And I have to ask, "Have I cut short the gospel Jesus preached - the gospel of repentance? Have I essentially taken scissors to my Bible and removed the higher cost of following Christ? Have I lowered his standard by telling people, 'Just believe and be saved?'"

As I look at the church today, I wonder: Do we evangelicals insist on a biblical "godly sorrow" as evidence of true repentance? Or are we leading masses of unrepentant people into a false peace? Are we wrongly instructing them that all God requires of them is to say, "I believe in you, Jesus"?

Have we cut short genuine conviction for sins? Have we jumped in and offered salvation to those who haven't actually repented - who

haven't sorrowed over their trespasses, who haven't seen the exceeding sinfulness of their sins, who have sought faith so they could merely hide their lusts behind it?

We constantly hear awful exaggerations about the numbers of people who come to Jesus through various ministries. Christians report that scores of people were saved as they preached in prisons, schools, tribal meetings. They say, "Everybody in the place gave his heart to Jesus. When I finished preaching, they all came forward for salvation."

No - that is a tragic exaggeration! All too often, what actually happens is that everyone simply repeats a prayer. They merely pray what they're told to pray - and few of them grasp what they're saying. Then most go back to their heathen ways!

Such people never experience a deep work of the Holy Spirit. As a result, they never repent, never sorrow over their sins - and never truly believe. Tragically, we've offered them something Jesus himself never offered - salvation without repentance!

I believe the church has even taken the feeling out of conviction. Think about it - you hardly ever see tears on the cheeks of those who are being saved anymore. Of course, I know tears don't save anyone. But God made us all human, with very real feelings. And any hell-bound sinner who has been moved upon by the Holy Spirit naturally feels a profound sorrow over the ways he has grieved the Lord.

The apostle Peter felt this kind of godly sorrow, when he denied knowing Jesus. Suddenly, he was flooded with the memory of what Jesus had told him: "*Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him, Before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. And when he thought thereon, he wept*" (MK 14:72).

As Peter remembered these words, he was overcome with emotion. And suddenly, he went running through Jerusalem, weeping, "I've betrayed the Lord!"

Beloved, we simply cannot work up that kind of repentance in our own flesh. Only the Holy Spirit can reveal to us how, like Peter, we also have wounded our loving Savior. And that revelation ought to fill us with deep sorrow!

I don't agree with all of the Puritan writers' doctrine, but I love their emphasis on holiness. These godly preachers called their sermons "deep ploughing."

They believed they couldn't sow true seeds of faith until the soil of their listeners' hearts had been deeply plowed.

So the Puritans made sure their preaching went deep, cracking all the fallow ground of their listeners' souls. Their sermons produced genuine repentance in their congregations. And, in turn, over the years this produced strong, mature, faithful Christians.

Today, however, most preaching is all sowing with no plowing. I hear very few sermons nowadays that dig deeper than the topsoil. Deep plowing doesn't just address the disease of sin; it digs down to the very cause of the disease. Much of the preaching we hear today focuses on the remedy while ignoring the disease. It offers a prescription without providing surgery!

Sadly, we cause people to think they've been healed of sin when they never knew they were sick. We put robes of righteousness on them when they never knew they were naked. We urge them to trust in Christ when they don't even know their need to trust. Such people end up thinking, "It can't hurt to add Jesus to my life."

C.H. Spurgeon, the powerful English preacher, said the following about the need for repentance:

"I trust that sorrowful penitence does still exist, though I have not heard much about it lately. People seem to jump into faith very quickly nowadays... I hope my old friend repentance is not dead. I am desperately in love with repentance; it seems to be the twin sister of faith.

"I do not myself understand much about dry-eyed faith; I know that I came to Christ by the way of weeping-cross... When I came to

Calvary by faith, it was with great weeping and supplication, confessing my transgressions, and desiring to find salvation in Jesus, and in Jesus only."

### **When Times Square Church Was Founded, We Pastors Preached the Law for the First Few Years.**

Why did we preach the law for so long in our church? We did it because many in our congregation were calling themselves Christians - yet their lives didn't reflect it!

In those early years, many people came forward to the altar at the end of every service. They repeated a pastoral prayer and "accepted salvation by faith." Yet, most of those people never felt any conviction for their sin. They didn't experience godly sorrow - and so their lives didn't reveal true repentance.

Supposedly repentant theater actors professed Christ on Sunday but went back to their blasphemous shows during the week. Homosexuals prayed for salvation but still indulged in their sinful lifestyle. Others confessed Jesus at our altar yet continued their adulterous affairs, fornication or drug use.

This is why we thundered conviction from our pulpit!

The Holy Ghost led our pastoral team to expose all sin, rebellion and disobedience to his word. We preached hell so hot, people got up and left our services. And we preached heaven so real, compromisers trembled at the awesome reality of Christ's holiness.

Our preaching of the law was absolutely necessary at that time. It is God's mirror, revealing every hidden, secret thing. And it brought the people in our congregation to an awareness of the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

While some people ran out, others ran forward in genuine repentance. One of these was a booming-voiced actor named David Davis. He surrendered all to Jesus in true repentance. And today, he and his wife pastor a thriving church in Israel, where they've preached Christ for almost ten years.

While the true work of repentance was accomplishing its purpose in our church, the Holy Spirit then led us to preach the glory of grace. We taught on the New Covenant, on power over sin through the Holy Spirit, on walking by faith. In short, we began to build up the saints.

Through that whole experience, we also discovered the dangers of preaching only the law and focusing primarily on sin. If people are given a steady diet of this message alone, they begin to lose hope and wallow in despair, thinking, "I'll never measure up." They constantly turn inward rather than looking to the cross for hope.

Yet when a church is the Lord's, it can trust God's Spirit to bring the message of the law whenever it's needed. If Jesus sees his people lapsing into an "easy believism," he'll once again bring the lash of the law upon them, with all mercy and grace.

You see, repentance isn't a one-time experience. It's not some hurricane that strikes once and then is gone forever. Nor do we experience repentance only in a moment of crisis, and then merely talk about it the rest of our lives. No sorrow for sin should be our constant teacher!

Spurgeon testified, "I freely confess that I have a very much greater sorrow for sin today than I had when I came to the Savior more than thirty years ago. I hate sin more intensely now than I did when I was under conviction. There are some things that I did not know to be sin then, that I know to be sin now. I have a much keener sense of the vileness of my own heart now than when I first came to Christ..."

"Sorrow for sin is a perpetual rain, a sweet, soft shower, which to a truly saved man lasts all his life long... He is always sorrowful that he has sinned... He will never stop grieving until all sin has gone."

### **Jesus Said Something to the Church in Ephesus That Causes Me to Tremble!**

You may remember the seven churches that John mentions in Revelation 2. Among them is the church of Ephesus - a congregation Jesus commends very highly.

I like to think of our church in Times Square as being like the Ephesian church. That body of believers labored in one of the world's most populous cities, never fainting in the midst of vile wickedness. The people lived sacrificially, hated sin and refused to accept false doctrines. They stood strong in faith, loving God with all their heart no matter what temptations Satan threw at them.

Yet Christ knew something was amiss among these people. And He so loved this church - it was such a bright lamp to the nations - He wasn't about to sit idly by and let it die. So He told the Ephesians, "*Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love*" (REV 2:4).

Jesus was saying, "Your fire is going out! The love for me that once motivated your faithfulness is waning. You once bore my burden for the lost - but now you're satisfied merely to sit and listen to sermons. You've become totally engrossed in your own personal concerns, and you're ignoring mine. You've fallen far from where you once stood!"

Jesus then tells them, "*Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen...*" (verse 5). He's saying, "Think back! You used to yearn to come to my house, to be with my saints, to bear my burden. But now an hour on Sunday morning is plenty for you!"

So, dear Christian - are you still on fire for Jesus? Are you in love with him as passionately as when you first got saved? Or have you lost interest in his concerns, forsaking all ministry? Do you have too much else going on in your life? If so, the Lord says to you, "I've got something against you. You've left your first love!"

Listen to what Jesus says to us at this point: "*...repent, and do the first works...*" (same verse). He's saying, "Mourn over your growing apathy. Be contrite - take it seriously. Then let your grief lead you back to where you were when you first loved me!"

Christ then gives us a word that lets us know we'd better take heed. He says, "*...or else...*" (same verse).

He immediately spells out the consequence: "*...I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick...*" (same verse).

Jesus is saying here that unless we repent, He's going to remove all the spiritual authority we've been given. This includes our influence on our city, our community, our neighborhood, those in our sphere of influence. Every bit of influence we have will be taken from us, He says, "*Except ye repent!*"

Right now, churches across the world are shutting their doors. Their lights are literally being turned out - because that's the judgment they incur for refusing to repent! God said they would lose their discernment, their spiritual blessings, their finances, his very presence. Now they're dead, lifeless, with only memories of His past blessings.

I preached in many such churches thirty years ago. At that time they were packed with zealous believers. Today, barely a dozen people sit in their pews. Soon they'll dwindle to nothing, and their doors will shut for good. God has written "Ichabod" over their doors - meaning, "The Spirit of the Lord has departed!"

Yet, beloved, God gives this same message to every Christian individually. He says, "If you refuse to repent - if you remain in your apathy - I'll remove your lampstand. You'll no longer have any influence over your family, your co-workers - anyone!"

This is exactly what happened to the Ephesian church. God waited patiently - over 1,000 years, in fact - for that church to repent. Yet finally the time came when their backsliding was more than He could endure.

The historian Gibbon writes: "The first candlestick of Ephesus was extinguished. The barbarous lords of Ionia and Lydia trampled on the remains of Christianity. Now the Mohammedan mosques invoke the god of Mohammed. Only the church of Philadelphia still stands erect."

Yet, even as we read these words, we are not to fear. Jesus ends His admonition to us this way: "*...To*

*him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God"* (REV 2:7).

Dear saint, Jesus is that tree! He's telling us, "If you'll repent, I'll give you constant life from My very being. And as long as you continue to love Me, I will provide a flow of supernatural life in you.

This life will be revealed in your discernment, your love for people, your good works for my kingdom!"

This is the trait that distinguishes every Christian who's truly in love with Jesus. Such a believer is full of life - and everyone around him knows it!

Jesus promises that your godly sorrow, your repentant heart and your renewed love for Him will lead you to life. So, pray to Him right now: "Lord, give me a truly repentant heart. Take me back to who I was when I was first in love with You. Yet, this time take me

farther, deeper in You, than I've ever been before!"

As you repent, God's Spirit will begin to produce in you a new revelation of the glory of Christ. And He'll make it known to everyone around you!

By David Wilkerson  
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**CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLIES INTERNATIONAL, P.O. BOX 888, COFFS HARBOUR NSW 2450, AUSTRALIA**