

TRUE REPENTANCE TRUE CONVERSION

by Bill Muehlenberg

There are very few things which are more important than getting the issues of repentance and conversion right. The fact that we need to get them right means that we may in fact get them wrong - to our eternal detriment. Thus this is a vitally crucial issue to ensure that we have got it right. This article may be the result of a divine convergence. Four related issues occurring almost at the same time have led to the writing of this piece. They were: my daily Bible reading; a post on another website; an email of a few days ago; and a book on my shelves. This morning's reading in Jeremiah took me through chapter 34. During the final days of Jerusalem before its defeat by Babylon, there was a covenant renewal effort, in which the people agreed to free their slaves. "But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again" (v. 11).

Yahweh through Jeremiah says this: "Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to your own people. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again" (vv. 15-16). J.A. Thompson comments on this situation: "It was a short lived freedom for the slaves. When the siege was momentarily lifted (vv. 21, 22) they reversed their decision and forced their fellow Israelites back into slavery. It was a predictable response from people whom Jeremiah had exposed time and time again as covenant-breakers.

The whole exercise of proclaiming emancipation was abortive. The crisis led to an apparent repentance and a desire to obey Yahweh's law and to do what was just and right. But there was no depth of conviction, and a reversion to complacency and injustice was evident as soon as the crisis had passed." Thus this was like a death-bed conversion - one which we need to be quite careful about. It was repentance for convenience sake - as a way out of trouble - but not real repentance. Because it was a false repentance, the people simply ended up in a worse jam. Only by true repentance and obedience do we experience real freedom and blessing. Yahweh was certainly not pleased with their turn-around: "Therefore this is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim 'freedom' for you, declares the LORD-'freedom' to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth" (v. 17).

Comments Philip Graham Ryken, "If liberty is what the people wanted, however, then God would give them 'liberty' all right! This was perhaps the most ironic of Jeremiah's puns. God promised to give his people 'freedom' - freedom to suffer war, disease, and starvation. In effect, he was saying, 'You did not release your neighbours from their debts, so I will release - sword, pestilence, and famine!' In the words of J. Gresham Machen, 'Emancipation from the blessed will of God always involves bondage to some worse taskmaster'." The second motivation for this article comes from a recent speech given by US pastor Mark Dever. He has very correctly warned against the dangers of false repentance and false conversion.

One story describes this as follows: "False conversions are a serious problem that could lead not only to the 'suicide of the church' but also to the defaming of God's name, an evangelical pastor warned. Mark Dever, senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., told some 8,000 ministers Tuesday at the Together for the Gospel conference that he fears there are thousands, if not millions, of people in churches who are not truly converted. 'My fellow pastors, could it be that many of our hearers each week aren't saved, even many of our members?' 'The problem isn't just the 'occasional hypocrite lost in unrepentant sin,' but 'systems that seem to produce false converts - not just one man, but whole congregations,' he lamented.

While some may brush off the problem as inevitable and one that pastors should not worry too much over, Dever sought to underscore how false conversions could dim the light of the church. More importantly, 'false conversions obscure God's plan' - which he described as God doing all things for the glory of His name. "The Southern Baptist preacher described false converts as those indistinguishable from the world and who don't hold to certain Scriptural truths. A big source of the problem, he named, is false teachers, and that includes 'health and wealth' preachers. 'We need to know that we can teach the wrong things with disastrous results,' he said, noting that the New Testament has 'too many' warnings about false teachers.

"Dever listed five truths that are frequently distorted and attacked: God's judgment is coming, we should be judged by God, our only hope is in Christ, we don't see the fullness of our salvation in this life, and we can deceive ourselves and others about our relationship with God. By not teaching these truths clearly, churches become filled with those who do not 'evidence the fruit of the Spirit' or who aren't truly born-again." The article continues, "'If you want to get a lot of fake Christians in your church, just tell them that there is this free gift that entails no self-sacrifice and trouble,' the Baptist pastor told conference attendees in Louisville, Ky. 'The truth, however, is "no cross, no crown".' When believers get doctrine and life wrong, church life and mutual edification are eroded, the church's witness to the world is subverted, and God's name is profaned, he summed."

The third factor behind this article is a short video clip which I came across this morning. R. C. Sproul says that false repentance involves people who just want to escape punishment, and the penalties of sin - to get a free ticket out of hell. He contrasts this with true repentance as found in David's confession of sin in Psalm 51. This very brief video clip is well worth watching and re-watching until this message sinks in: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAEKY52qIMQ&feature=share

Fourthly, I was reminded of a title of a book by someone quite different theologically to the Reformed champion Sproul. So I dug out of my shelves a short collection of sermons by Charles Finney entitled True and False Repentance. Six sermons are included here, with the first on "True and False Repentance" (based on 2 Corinthians 7:10), and the second on "True and False Conversion" (based on Isaiah 50:11). There is much of value in these sermons, but let me share a quote from his first sermon. Says Finney in his conclusion, "We learn from what has been said, one reason why there is so much spasmodic religion in the church. They have mistaken conviction for conversion, the sorrow of the world for that godly sorrow that worketh repentance unto salvation, not to be repented of.

I am convinced, after years of observation, that here is the true reason for the present deplorable state of the church all over the land." Quite right. I finish with the words of C.H. Spurgeon as a good summation of all that I have been saying here: "If the man does not live differently from what he did before, both at home and abroad, his repentance needs to be repented of, and his conversion is a fiction."

Source: by Bill Muehlenberg