

## Has Sin and Repentance Left the Pulpits?

You must accept Jesus as your personal Saviour.

This phrase, though popularly used by evangelicals, is not found in Scripture. It also ignores an essential element of the Gospel, namely repentance. Today men and women are properly told to confess their sins and to seek forgiveness, but they are not informed about the need for repentance. Few indeed are the sermons that stress repentance. The result? The cross becomes a token of sentimental love rather than God's only provision for salvation. And the old way of life of the natural man continues, while adding Jesus as a personal insurance policy for the life to come.

Repentance is not a peripheral teaching in Scripture. The disciples went out "and preached that people should repent" (Mark 6:12). Paul said to King Agrippa "I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds" (Acts 26:20). The converted man feels brokenhearted about his sin, confesses his guilt and seeks restitution. Perhaps the best example of this change of heart and attitude is Zaccheus. Encountering him, Jesus turned him from thievery to philanthropy.

Repentance today is largely ignored because there is so little awareness of sin, so little understanding of the holiness and justice of God. Modern man sees sin as the inevitable slip of creatures who cannot help themselves. The "repent or perish" at the hands of the holy and just God confrontation seems foreign to the man who glories in his independence and feels quite confident without God.

Repentance is difficult as we are always very ready to limit others. Everyone else is guilty except us. Our own sins are not so easily visible to us. The sins of the neighbours are noticed much quicker than our own. Pride tries to prevent us from crossing the threshold of self-love. But the kingdom of God belongs only to those who humbly confess their need for God.

The church fathers all noted how humility was a must for genuine repentance. The greatest psychologist among them said that the first step towards liberation and truth is humility, the second humility and also the third humility, and so often as you ask me, I shall give you the same answer. St. Augustine spoke with the voice of experience. The history of his own conversion had taught him how pride stands in our way, but also how much light and strength we receive through a humble and contrite prayer to God.

But not only individuals are called to repentance. There is also national repentance; the call for nations to turn to God. The greatness of a people doesn't lie in the largeness of its gross national product. It is found on the level of its inner development. Repentance opens up paths of new relationships with other nations, and it will lead from talk to action.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn raised the question whether or not it is sensible to expect repentance from a whole nation. His answer: A nation can no more live without sin than can an individual. He also believes that national repentance is now a matter of life and death.

We must stop blaming everyone else – our neighbours and some distant people – for all the ills of the world. Repentance is the only starting point for spiritual growth.

National repentance has taken place in the story of warring mankind. And history can repeat itself. The Evangelical Church in Germany in 1945, in the well-known document called the "Stuttgart Confession of Guilt," confessed the culpability of the church and the German people for all the terrible things that happened in Germany and had been committed by its people. The document said: We have believed too little, confessed too little, loved too little, otherwise all this could not have happened. The German theologian Helmut Thielicke reported that, as a consequence, what happened was the incomprehensible miracle that in the midst of a feuding and self-accusing world, something like a fellowship of sinners dependent upon forgiveness came into being.

We need to hear from our pulpits, a call for individual and national repentance and a confession of guilt, which should lead to the seeking of God in Christ. If we do not change, the scenario of Oswald Spengler's book, *The Decline of the West*, depicting the fading and extinction of the Western civilization, may well become true. "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov.14:34).

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