

Just What Do You Mean -- Repentance?

You have always heard you should repent -- BUT HOW? Where does repentance come from? How do you get it? Read, in this article, the steps to true repentance.

WE ARE told daily that a great moral awakening, a renewed religious fervor, is sweeping the English-speaking world. But awakening to what? Renewed religious fervor for what?

Certainly not to a new standard of conduct, a new code of morals or A NEW WAY OF LIFE! Just look at the fruit of our "Christian society"!

Why the Boom in Religion?

The United States is building one thousand new churches a year, approximately ONE EVERY EIGHT HOURS. Yet that's not enough to keep up with the demand. According to the National Council of Churches, America needs five thousand new church buildings each year to meet the growing needs of our new religious interests.

One noted evangelist has drawn record-breaking crowds in his campaigns in the United States, Great Britain and Australia. People around the world profess a deep interest in religion.

Religion has become FASHIONABLE. Do you know why?

WHY, with all the renewed religious interest, isn't the Western World becoming more law-abiding? The answer is partially revealed in a recent surprising report: "But increasingly people are becoming disillusioned with churches -- so many conflicting, confusing denominations. RELIGION SEEMS SO UNRELATED TO REAL LIFE. Today many people are disillusioned because they can't see the difference between the churchgoer and the non-churchgoer; between the BELIEVER AND THE NON-BELIEVER. (Emphasis mine throughout article. "Los Angeles Times", Feb. 16, 1962.)

Man wants religion, but he wants it -- HIS WAY! He doesn't want to give up the way he lives. At the same time, he doesn't want to run the risk of paying the penalty for living that way. As a result, people by the thousands pour into their churches, donate time and help in worthy causes in the vain hope that God will accept their "good deeds" in place of their obedience to Him. Yet their way of LIVING doesn't change.

Church membership and attendance for many is actually a means of making up for their shortcomings and sins. It is something they can DO WITHOUT CHANGING. It is an act of penance in place of REPENTANCE. This is the REAL REASON for the astonishing numerical growth in today's churches.

Our renewal of religious interest hasn't made any real difference in our way of life. What possible good does it do to belong to a church, TO ANY ONE of the "many conflicting, confusing denominations," if no one can tell the difference between the churchgoer and an agnostic?

Jesus Christ said: "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). The Bible speaks of a true Christian as being a light to the world. But apparently in modern-day Christianity this is no longer true. The light has not just grown dim -- IT HAS GONE CLEAR OUT!

A Christian Society?

Church membership in the United States continues to reach new plateaus with over 118,000,000 people. That is nearly 63 per cent of the population, claiming church membership. And it is reported that nearly half the adults of the U.S.A. can be found in church every week-end. Yet in spite of church membership figures, crime among young people under eighteen years of age increased for the FIFTEENTH CONSECUTIVE YEAR at the frightening rate of ELEVEN PER CENT during 1963. Experts claim that only a slight difference can be seen between the families of the average churchgoer and the average non-churchgoer. No wonder "... the annual cost of crime in the United States is now CONSERVATIVELY estimated to be TWENTY-SEVEN BILLION DOLLARS!" So says a report released by the U.S. Department of Justice, July 20, 1964.

All this while church attendance records are being broken!

This is the fruit of our "Christian society." Unbelievable? Incredible? Astounding? The facts are down in black and white -- easily accessible to anyone.

When considered in relation to our population growth, crime is increasing -- FIVE TIMES FASTER THAN OUR POPULATION! And this is not the result of more accurate reporting methods!

Today's great moral awakening and renewed religious fervor doesn't go very deep. It doesn't seem to affect the way people live. There is a reason why!

What Is the Problem?

What is the answer then?

What does religion have to do with the way you live? Most people would tell you: "Nothing!"

Listen to this: "A clergyman-professor at George Washington University said: 'In a period of our history when we are witnessing the GREATEST REVIVAL OF INTEREST IN RELIGION ... never has Christianity been so INEFFECTIVE AND IRRELEVANT. Our Christian faith is equally distant and out of touch with the really perplexing and knotty problems of modern society. The distance between our PRO-FESSED FAITH AND OUR DAILY PERFORMANCE IS ASTRONOMICAL ("Gazette and Daily" of York, Pennsylvania, March 19, 1960.) Today's renewed religious interest is reflected only on paper. It only shines out from the church roll books. It doesn't show its light in human lives!

The problem lies with the people themselves. Jesus Christ said -- in speaking of the religious leaders and people of His day: "... This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit IN VAIN do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:6-7).

People attend evangelistic campaigns, talk of all uniting in the brotherhood of Christianity. But NO ONE seems to want to live the way Jesus Christ commanded.

Most are willing to honor Him with their lips, but they DON'T WANT TO DO the things He taught.

The world-wide interest in religion is simply a facade. The problem is that we haven't, as nations, and all too frequently even as individual persons, DEEPLY REPENTED.

What Is Repentance?

If an increase in the interest in religion around the world doesn't show repentance, what does? If the great evangelistic campaigns aren't producing it, how do you get it? Where does it come from? What does it mean?

The dictionary definition of repentance is: "To feel self-reproach, compunction, or contrition for past conduct, to feel such sorrow for sin or fault as to be disposed to change one's life for the better" ("The American College Dictionary").

The Bible definition means all of that AND MUCH MORE!

Godly repentance means to stop sinning, to turn and go the other way -- TO CHANGE YOUR WAY OF LIFE! It's not always easy to say, "I'm sorry." But it's even harder to MEAN IT. Godly repentance has to come FROM THE HEART.

In speaking of Great Britain -- God's people Ephraim -- whom He's going to punish for their lack of repentance, God says: "And they have not cried unto me WITH THEIR HEART, when they howled upon their beds: ... they rebel against me. Though I have bound and strengthened their arms, yet do they imagine mischief against me. They return, BUT NOT TO THE MOST HIGH" (Hosea 7:14-16).

Your Bible says people have made an OUTWARD show of returning to Him or repenting, but they haven't done it WITH THEIR HEARTS! Ephraim's -- Britain's -- repentance, and for that matter, that of the rest of the world, is the outward, superficial, WORLDLY REPENTANCE with no real sincerity or DEEP feeling.

Repent of What?

What is it you repent of or feel sorrow for? To some it is one thing and to others -- from another society or religion -- it is something altogether different. What does GOD say actually constitutes sin? What would GOD have you repent of?

"Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for SIN IS THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW," (I John 3:4).

What is sin? SIN IS BREAKING GOD'S LAW -- NOT HUMAN CUSTOMS!

Any time you break or disobey ANY ONE of the holy, righteous commandments of God, YOU HAVE SINNED. You need to repent. No one is excluded. No man, woman or child has ever lived who hasn't disobeyed and broken God's law (Rom. 3:10, 23). Therefore, EVERY ONE of you needs to repent deeply and bitterly with all your heart. You need to turn TO GOD for forgiveness. You need to begin to obey Him and keep His commandments -- all His commandments -- with zeal. For "He that saith, I know him {I am a Christian}, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (I John 2:4).

Where Repentance Comes From

We can't just drum up the deep feeling of abhorrence for our sin and our own utter wretchedness. It has to come FROM GOD.

"Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the GOODNESS OF GOD LEADETH YOU TO REPENTANCE" (Rom 2:4).

II Timothy 2:25 tells us, "... IF GOD PERADVENTURE WILL GIVE THEM REPENTANCE to the acknowledging of the truth."

It is God who helps us to see our own wretchedness and shortcomings. He opens our minds and starts us on the way toward repentance.

How Repentance Starts

There are definite steps to take if you sincerely desire to repent and serve God. They are simple steps. Anyone who will follow them can be guaranteed he will find the true God and the deep repentance that God requires.

Your Bible names dozens of men who are going to be in the Kingdom of God. Such men as David, Daniel and other of the prophets of God are guaranteed salvation and a place in His Kingdom. They found how to reach the Creator of the universe. Their example will help us to see how we might attain the same goal.

They all had one very essential thing in common. As soon as they realized God was displeased with them or their nation's ways, they set out to correct it. But how can you know when the Father in Heaven is displeased? How do you know when any father, who really loves his children and has their welfare at heart, is displeased?

"Chastise your son, while there is still hope of him, and do not let him run to ruin" (Prov. 19:18, Moffatt Translation).

Our Heavenly Father many times begins to deal with us and bring us to repentance through chastening. Often He allows financial problems, family problems, sickness, or other serious situations to develop in our lives which will force us to realize OUR NEED of Him. These very things have occurred in your life, but chances are you didn't appreciate them.

These trials are proof of the Father's love for each one of us. Notice Hebrews 12:6-8. "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?"

Seek God!

Instead of fighting these problems in our own strength, we need to learn the lesson God is teaching us. We need to begin to SEEK Him. He doesn't need US. WE DO NEED HIM!

Daniel was inspired to record his own reactions in such a case as this for our instruction. "And I set my face unto the Eternal God, to seek by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes", (Dan. 9:3).

Nehemiah's example is also recorded for us. When he found that his nation which had returned to Palestine was in affliction and reproach, here's what he did. "And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:4). He immediately set out to draw close to God. He didn't do it in a half-hearted, lackadaisical, matter-of-fact way. He did it earnestly, sincerely and WITH ALL HIS HEART. He set himself to find God and His will by PRAYER and FASTING. These men EARNESTLY desired to find God's will. They were willing to do whatever was required to draw close to Him and receive His forgiveness. They were

willing to do without food and water if necessary to demonstrate to God their sincere desire to know His way.

Do It With All Your Heart

Hard as it is to say, "I'm sorry," it is even MORE DIFFICULT TO MEAN IT WITH ALL YOUR HEART. The earnest supplication of God through prayer and fasting shows Him you mean business. He doesn't want a temporary, fleeting repentance which is brought about by an emotional appeal or due to the pressures of those around us. Salvation is a personal matter between you and your God. BUT IT HAS TO BE ON HIS TERMS.

In the days of ancient Israel, God told King Solomon exactly what steps to follow if he found God's displeasure on his nation. These same steps apply to us today. God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). He doesn't change. So if we will apply these steps in our everyday lives, He will answer just as He told Solomon He would.

Read these steps, this formula for repentance, for yourself in II Chronicles 7:12-14. "And the Eternal appeared to Solomon by night and said unto him, I have heard thy prayer, and have chosen this place to myself for an house of sacrifice. If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I command the locusts to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people; If my people, which are called by my name, shall HUMBLE THEMSELVES, and PRAY, and SEEK MY FACE, and TURN FROM THEIR WICKED WAYS; then will I hear from heaven, and will FORGIVE THEIR SIN, and will heal their land."

The steps are so simple, so clear and plain.

What does it mean to humble yourself? How do you go about it? Exactly the same way Daniel and Nehemiah did. David explains in Psalm 35:13 how you humble yourself. "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I HUMBLED my soul WITH FASTING; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom."

Fasting shows our earnestness and sincerity in seeking God and adds impetus to the prayers we raise to Him. If you need more information on fasting, write for additional articles on the subject.

Admit Your Sins

Prayer and fasting aren't the only requirements in seeking God. If you will read back over the examples of Daniel and Nehemiah as well as any of the other prophets of God, you will notice that in every case they FREELY ACKNOWLEDGED their own sins and shortcomings. It takes a deeply sincere man to say, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24).

If we are earnestly seeking God and His way, this is the attitude we will be reflecting. We will freely admit our own sins and shortcomings and be earnestly importuning God to show us the right way. Jeremiah said, "O Lord, I know that THE WAY OF MAN IS NOT IN HIMSELF: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in your anger, lest you bring me to nothing" (Jer. 10: 23-24).

We as individuals do not know how to live. Once we begin to learn that lesson, and look to God to show us how to live and how to change our lives, we are on our way to real repentance.

The steps are simple. Yet it is not easy to completely give of yourself, to admit your own faults and sincerely ask for God's forgiveness.

Turn From Own Ways

The people of this world outwardly follow many of these steps and yet fall short in the final, most important of all the steps -- TURNING FROM THEIR WICKED WAYS. That is why it is so hard to distinguish between the believer and the non-believer. That is why the "distance between our professed faith and our daily performance is astronomical." So many people of this day and age profess to be repentant -- profess Christianity and yet still live in all the wretchedness of their sinful ways. So, finally, one of the most important of all the steps in coming to true repentance is to STOP SINNING! Millions CLAIM membership in a church. They loudly proclaim their belief in Jesus Christ. They testify for Christ, BUT THE FRUIT IS NOT THERE.

All too often our repentance is the worldly repentance spoken of in II Corinthians 7:10. What we really need to come to see and understand is the kind of repentance God speaks of. "Therefore also now, saith the Eternal, Turn ye even to me WITH ALL YOUR HEART, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and REND YOUR HEART, and not your garments, and turn to the Eternal your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil". (Joel 2:12-13).

No, God doesn't want the worldly kind of repentance which is manifested by a trip down the sawdust trail. No, He doesn't just want your name on the membership rolls of some church. What God wants and what you should come to deeply desire is to SINCERELY acknowledge your sins and ask forgiveness. God wants you to say, "I'M SORRY" -- and mean it! He wants you to repent of breaking and to begin obeying His LAW.

The decision is up to you. The steps are before you. You know the way -- "Walk ye in it."