



Biblical Foundations

Repentance & the Church—part 1

by Jack Spender

Conservative scholars commenting on the letters to the seven churches in Asia (Rev 2,3) generally agree that these messages from the Lord Jesus have more than a single significance. They were certainly letters to actual churches in the first century, but they also seem to present an overview of church history as it would unfold through the ages. Finally, the letters provide a warning of the problems against which all churches must be on guard.

In any case, one needs only to read through them quickly to notice how often the word “repent” is found. Since the Lord had so much to say about it, it must be important, - so important that I’d like to devote two articles to the subject. Is there a message for the church today? If so, what part can elders have in fostering a genuine work of God rather than something that deals only with externals and leaves hearts unchanged? Laying the groundwork carefully will pay dividends once it’s time to make some practical applications.

Definition

A proper understanding of the words “repent” (verb) and “repentance” (noun) are important not only because we want to know the truth, but also because there is widespread misunderstanding about the idea these words express.

Simply stated, the words mean, “to have another mind.” We might say, “to have a complete change of mind.” Not a whimsical or emotional change but a decision that the present course of action is wrong and can only be corrected by a 180 degree change of direction. Think of the motorist who sees a road sign informing him that he is heading south when he wants to be going north. He may feel regret, resolve to correct the matter, and even shed tears over the lost time, but until he actually stops the car and turns around, he has not repented in the Biblical sense of the word.

A sad example is Judas Iscariot whose remorse over the betrayal of the Lord (Matt

27:3-4) is an eternal reminder of the difference between an emotional response and a change of direction resulting from a change of mind and heart. Had Judas come to the Lord who alone forgives sins rather than going to the Jewish priests, he would have received the Lord’s forgiveness as a fruit of genuine repentance. We must remember that although various emotions may be experienced and may have a legitimate place in times of crisis, they do not by themselves constitute repentance.

Nor should we think of repentance as a separate step preceding faith in Christ. Sir Robert Anderson in his famous book, *The Gospel and Its Ministry*, explains how repentance and faith are but two sides of the same coin. The Thessalonian believers “turned to God from idols” (I Thes. 1:10), a clear picture of

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the genuine faith that forsakes a wrong course of action to grasp a right one. Anderson makes the interesting observation that the Gospel of John with its stated purpose of helping people believe in the Lord Jesus (John 20:31), does not once use the words “repent” or “repentance.” One word (faith) implies the other (repentance).

A Modern Day Problem

Can a true believer also repent when he sins? Absolutely, and there are numerous examples in Scripture. But sad to say, the church in its preaching has often become so occupied with the need for unbelieving sinners to repent, that one rarely ever hears about the need for repentance in the life of Christians, much less churches! Of course, a believer’s repentance does not have to do with salvation but with preserving fellowship, which is an essential part of the Christian life. Yet let the reader ask himself when he last heard a message about repentance centered on Christians or churches?

A Modern Day Problem

How can this be, when the churches addressed in Revelation that lived only a few decades removed from the earthly life and ministry of the Lord and the apostles were already in need of repenting? Imagine a church, founded by the apostle Paul, being

(Continued on page 4)

Biblical Foundations

Encouraging Hope

by Chuck Gianotti

Studies in Titus —Part 3 (1:5-9 NASB)

Qualifications of a godly elder (5-9)

Elders need to be qualified. And they need to stay qualified. But that sounds rather mechanical, like going to refresher school to maintain one's certification. When the apostle Paul writes to Timothy, as mentioned previously in this series, the immediate application for Timothy was to the existing Ephesian elders, among whom the young disciple was living at the time he received Paul's letter. But with Titus, the instruction concerned the appointment of new elders. These instructions are anything but mechanical. They are dynamic and essential for a man to become an elder. It is a tired old argument used by self-justifying men to immediately and continuously assert that no one can

meet these standards perfectly, thereby sidestepping accountability for falling short of them. In the same way, when we are told, "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16), we dare not hide behind the trite saying, "Well, no one can be perfectly holy," using it as an excuse for unholiness. So too, we cannot hide behind our own imperfections when evaluating ourselves against the elder qualifications.

It is indeed humbling to consider these qualifications. Those doing the evaluating must also hold themselves to the same standard. False humility refuses to make any evaluation, hiding behind superficial self-effacement, wanting to avoid judgmentalism on the one hand or hypocrisy on the other. It escapes many that a man can meet these standards in great measure and still be a man known for his humility. Such an individual does not obsess over his shortcomings or failures. Rather, he acknowledges them and humbly moves forward in his spiritual growth toward Christlikeness. He finds satisfaction in knowing that he is more Christlike now than he was yesterday. This is not a vain comparison with others, but rather keeping before him the mark of the prize of the high calling in Christ.

We have written about all these qualification elsewhere in *Elders'*

ShopNotes, so we won't duplicate that here. Suffice it to say that these qualifications should be the high calling to which all Christians should aspire.

I quickly point out that these qualifications are not stepping stones to gaining influence in the church, they should be the goal of all "normal" Christian growth. As marks of the Christian life, a person strives for them precisely because they are Christlike characteristics — whether or not he becomes recognized as an elder or any other kind of leader in the church. I believe Paul's point is that, because of the nature of the ministry of elders in leading, teach-

Elders must be those who are constantly awake and aware, tuned in to "holding firm to the trustworthy word as taught."

ing, protecting and caring for the people of God, we must recognize men of the highest character in the church.

In essence, it is not the ambition of a man to become an elder, but rather the character of a man that is essential. It is true that Paul writes elsewhere that it is "noble" to seek the office of overseer. However, we err if we see this as sanction for ambition.

Appointment of elders

Very little is said about appointment of elders in Scripture. Here we have Titus being delegated to appoint elders in Crete. Obviously, if Paul were there he would have done it. Why Paul, or why Titus? Since Paul never built on any other man's work (Romans 15:20), presumably he was the founder of the church(es) in Crete, and therefore it was his responsibility to leave it in good leadership hands (as he did in many other places—see Acts 14:23, etc.). Why he didn't do that in Crete before he moved on is not made known to us, but apparently Titus was there to carry on the work in his place, building on the foundation Paul had laid.

How does this work today? We can make some educated inferences. It would seem entirely consistent with the pattern of Paul for elders to be appointed today by the church planter or mis-

sionary who began the church. For succession of elders, it would follow that the appointment of elders be conducted by the existing elders, who presumably would have already passed the test for qualification. In a church without any elders, the first ones must become recognized somehow, without the benefit of a missionary church planter or existing elders. We dare not be dogmatic about this, but some suggestions might include seeking advice from the godly elders of nearby assemblies and engaging the entire congregation in prayer and fasting (see Acts 13:1-3). It may require one strong, godly leader to exercise spiritual

influence to identify whom God selects and then taking the lead in identifying those men—with the end result of godly men as elders. Notice the first qualification in the list has to do with a man's family life. How appropriate! He is a godly family man. The

last qualification, but not least, is "holding firm to the trustworthy word as taught" (vs. 9). In between is a comprehensive list of 13 godly characteristics. The man who aspires to these will make a good elder. And these are the things to look for in a potential elder.

Characteristics of false teachers (10-16)

Keying off the last elder qualification ("hold firm to the trustworthy word," vs. 9), Paul expands on the reason for it, namely, "to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." As we see clearly in the expansion of the church in the NT times, the battle for right doctrine was constantly being waged. Particularly troublesome were "those of the circumcision party" (vs. 10b). Called Judaizers, Paul dealt with their false doctrine (trying to impose the Mosaic law into the gospel of grace), in many places, particularly in his letter to the Galatians. Here, rather than refuting specific doctrine, he focuses on the character of the purveyors of false doctrine.

1. Insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers (10)
2. They upset whole families
3. Teach for shameful gain

Continued on page 3

While enjoying a cup of coffee with a woman from your fellowship, she lowers her voice and says, "Can I tell you something in confidence?" All of a sudden you are hearing some disturbing information about her husband or another woman in your church. The conversation ends with the statement, "Don't tell this to anyone, just pray for me."

You have likely been in this situation and know it can be problematic. At first it feels good to be brought into the circle of what seems like a close friendship that requires secrecy, as the Proverbs say, "The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels, and they themselves go down to inner parts of the body" (Prov. 18:8).

If you are married to an elder, you know that your husband has a charge given him by the Lord to shepherd the flock of God. He is to do this well and with diligence, prayerfully and intelligently. But putting yourself in a situation where you cannot share important facts with him may ultimately hinder

his work of God.

My husband and I agree on what is really a simple solution. Whenever someone says, "Don't tell this to anyone," I reply with, "Just a minute, before you say anything more you need to know my husband and I are one. I

women from passing on information to me that is nothing more than gossip.

Where concerns are legitimate, help can be offered with the support and love of an elder and not just his wife. When others are involved restoration can occur. An added blessing is that the faith

of those in the body of believers is strengthened, knowing the elders and their wives are truly trustworthy and working together.

These situations require Christ's attitude.

"The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels, and they themselves go down to inner parts of the body" (Prov. 18:8).

do not keep secrets from him. If I think it is important for him as an elder to know this, I will need to tell him. You can be confident that I will treat your information with wisdom and love." In other words, I can promise confidentiality (the information will be treated carefully and wisely), but not secrecy.

This simple statement has many benefits. First, it communicates to women that I take their concerns seriously. Second, it protects me from bearing burdens that are not intended to be mine. Third, it discourages

May each of us know God's help as we follow our Master's example, of whom it was said, "All were speaking well of him and were amazed at the gracious words coming out of his mouth" (Luke 4:22 NET).



Encouraging Hope (continued)

- 4. Teach what ought not to be taught
- 5. Lazy, lacking self-control in their appetites
- 6. Devote themselves to religious myths
- 7. Turn people away from truth
- 8. Defile the pure minds of the believers
- 9. Their works put the lie to their words about knowing God
- 10. Detestable, disobedient and unfit for any good work

What a list! Of course, not every false teacher will have all these marks, but any teacher showing evidence of any of these should raise caution flags in our spirits.

Timothy's (and the elders') response should be to:

1. Silence the false teachers. This may mean not giving any sanction to their ministry in the local church, not announcing any of their ministries to the church, forbidding them from speaking

wrong things at the Lord's Supper, etc.

2. Rebuke them sharply. False doctrine is not a time for being diplomatic or gentle. Of course, young believers may sometimes inadvertently slip up, but the focus in the passage is on dealing with intentional false teaching.

Today, false doctrine still threatens the church. It can creep in through the plethora of Internet ministries, creative video vignettes, music lyrics, popular books and speakers on the Christian circuit. The elders must be diligent in keep a watchful eye, and deal not only with blatant false teaching, but also with the subtleties of sly teachers who know how to craft their words.

One example is through the ministry of music. It should go without saying that music is one of the greatest means for teaching Christian truth. I praise God for the godly song writers both in times past as well as in our contemporary

times, those who withstand the temptation to use vain sentimentalism or sugary "feel-good" but relatively meaningless lyrics (one contemporary teacher today refuses to sing what he calls, "Jesus is my boyfriend" kind of songs). However, whether a hymn is in the revered hymn book or whether it is a contemporary tune being sung by all the youth-oriented churches, it does not mean the lyrics are doctrinally correct or God honoring. Godly elders ought to encourage good songwriters who capture great truths about God and life in their songs and minimize those that do not.

There are many other ways that false teaching can seep into the church, whether through small group studies, one-on-one, subtle wording shifts in how to articulate doctrine, etc. Elders must be those who are constantly awake and aware, tuned in to "holding firm to the trustworthy word as taught."



Repentance & the Church - part 1 (cont. from page 1)

told some years later that it needed to repent? How can we not look with serious interest into this subject? What might the Lord say in letters to churches today?

The Lord's Usage of the Word Repent

Of the 58 times the words "repent" or "repentance" are found in the New Testament, nearly half (25) are spoken by the Lord. They were at the heart of John the Baptist's ministry, and as soon as John was put into prison, the Lord took up that same message using virtually the same words (Matt.3:2; cp. Matt 4:17).

In time, the focus of His message shifted, a subject that is beyond the scope of our present study, but He continued to use these words right to the end of His earthly ministry. It is not surprising then, that years later when the apostle John is commissioned to write and send letters from the risen Christ, we find the word "repent" sprinkled throughout the correspondence.

Since our particular concern is repentance as it relates to the church, we must look in greater detail at the way the Lord uses the word in these seven letters. Before making a more detailed study, it will be helpful to list some general observations in summary form:

1. As the Head of the church (Eph 1:22), the Lord has intimate knowledge of each local assembly and can say, "I know your works," - an expression

found in all 7 of the letters.

2. Repentance as applied to local churches should not be considered a rare thing, as it is found in five of the seven letters sent from the Lord.

3. The grievances against which the Lord protests involve major doctrines, not small details or variations in customs or methods.

4. Failure to repent will mean loss of testimony (the light), or loss even of the particular local church itself (the lampstand).

5. In each message, the proper response begins with the need to, "hear what the Spirit says to the churches."


6. In no case do any of the churches discipline or disfellowship another church. Each is answerable directly to the Lord, as expressed in our word "autonomy."

7. Repentance may be painful and embarrassing, but it brings beautiful promises of spiritual life and health in its wake.

Preliminary Applications


In the next article, we will look in greater detail at the things that displeased the Lord, and we will discover how very relevant this whole subject is for the church today. But the brief thoughts given above justify the pre-

liminary conclusion that repentance involving a local church is an appropriate subject for study, and the lack of it may be one reason why blessing has been withheld from the work.

Further, because we are speaking not so much of individual repentance, but the repentance of the congregations, the elders as the responsible "under-shepherds" of the Chief Shepherd who originally gave the words ought to be first in hearing and responding to what "the Spirit says to the churches." Facing sin is not a work for the half-hearted, but could any subject hold the promise of greater blessing for a church? 

From the Q-File

It is axiomatic that successful leaders have in common a background of failures. Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest basketball player ever, once said something like this: "Forty-nine times in my career I had the ball at the end of the game to win or lose." And then he said something very interesting: that he lost more games than he won. "Dennis Bakke's Ode to Joy" in Christianity Today, posted 7/7/2006.

It is not the lack of failure that defines a leader, but rather his ability to continue leading, despite his failures. Look at Moses, Joshua, David, Paul. All the great leaders of the Bible had failures, but they kept on leading! 

Elders, keep leading!

THE SMALL PRINT

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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.

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