

Repentance...

The first words that Jesus said when he came into Galilee were, "Repent and believe the good news! (Matt 4:17)". We saw in the introduction that this word 'repent' was misunderstood for centuries. Rather than an act of penance, a change of mind is called for. In this chapter, we will try to suggest how one might go about repenting (Luke 24:47).

People can choose what beliefs they act on. Jesus is asking his followers to leave behind their own beliefs, and take on a new set of beliefs. They were to do so on the basis of his teachings.

The so-called sermon on the mount contains instructions about changes of attitude (Matt chs 5 - 7). It should be read carefully, and often, so that the teaching can sink in. We will not attempt to discuss it fully here, as the length of this book could get out of hand if we did. What we will point out is that Jesus spoke on matters which were relevant to the culture of the people he was addressing. These included attitudes to the law and the prophets (5:17-19), the need to avoid copying the religious leaders of the day (5:20, 6:1, 5 & 16), and how to behave under a repressive regime, since Israel was ruled by a foreign power (5:38-41).

We could not possibly do justice to all the areas of life that are likely to be affected by a decision to follow Jesus. We will therefore limit our discussion to some of the more pressing areas in which members of our culture today may need to repent, in my opinion. We will number the sections so as to be able to refer back to them easily.

1. Domination, manipulation and control.

There are various ways in which we are tempted to make others do what we want them to. We can try to dominate them by sheer will-power, raised voices, severe looks, and so forth. Or we can try and steer them, in a secret manner, manipulating them into doing what we desire.

Some families have a long history in which certain members have been under the control of others.

My father once observed a man at a sherry party who had been talking freely, until he caught sight of the look on his wife's face at the other end of the room. A tremor then passed through him and he shut up like a clam.

All this sort of behaviour needs to be turned from. When God created man, he created him in his own image and likeness, male and female (Gen 1:26-27). He gave man dominion over the trees and animals (v29-30), but not over one another. Woman was to be the helper of man, not the slave of man, nor man the slave of woman (2:18-23). Humans are to relate to each other freely, out of love, not under compulsion; this is how Father Son and Holy Spirit relate to each other, and we are made in their image.

Jesus told his followers that rather than lording it over one another, they were to be servants, like he was (Matt 20:25-28). Such an attitude seeks the welfare of others.

2. Intimidation and Fear of others.

A common means of controlling others is to try to make them fear us. Threats, whether spoken or not, violence and threatening behaviour, and anything which makes causes fear, are out for the Christian. When some Pharisees told Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him, as he had killed John the Baptist, Jesus refused to be intimidated (Luke 13:31-33). Likewise, believers should refuse to bow to threats of any kind. In other words, it is not only important to turn from controlling others, it is also necessary to escape from the control of others. Imagine a rabbit rigid with terror in the glare of a snake. It is not right for human beings to be in either state. One of the most frequently repeated instructions in Scripture is the words "Fear not" (eg Gen 15:1, Isa 41:10). This command addresses a deep tendency in us to allow ourselves to be controlled by fear.

3. Rebellion.

Rebellion is not a godly characteristic. If people rebel against God, it angers him (1 Sam 15:23). To rebel against proper authority is lawbreaking, which is sin (1 John 3:4), and Scripture says that those who do this have only themselves to blame for what happens to them (Rom 13:2, Heb 10:26-27). Even if they don't get caught, they will still reap what they sow (Gal 6:7-8).

In Hosea's day, people were described as having sown the wind; they would reap the whirlwind (Hos 8:7). If indulged in, rebellion and lawlessness increase. They are pronounced features of our society today.

4. Occult powers.

It has been said that priests in eastern religions will pay to be demonised, in order that with the occult powers they gain, they will be able to control others more effectively. We have seen that attempts to control others are not Christian. This means that any use of occult powers is unacceptable.

Jesus was accused of controlling demons because he had a stronger demon (Matt 12:24). He not only denied and rejected the claim, he explained that he operated only in the power of the Holy Spirit (v28, Luke 4:1 & 14).

There are many spirits in the world (1 John 4:1) - the only one Christians should have anything to do with is the Holy Spirit, and they should be so taken up with him that they are best described as filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18). There is no room for any other spiritual powers in the lives of believers (Ps 62:11-12).

From this we can see that even apparently trivial forms of occultic behaviour or power seeking are also out. These things slip insidiously into our lives. It is helpful to go through a check-list. The most thorough one I have seen to date is available from Ellel Grange, Ellel, Lancaster. It runs into several pages.

Under this heading come fortune telling, horoscopes, and the like. These may be described as the attempt to prophesy by using powers other than the Holy Spirit. Prophecy is speaking mysteries from God, under the influence of the Holy Spirit; the insights from fortune telling would appear to come from spirits other than God.

5. Secrecy.

As we reflect on numbers 1 to 4 in our list, it is striking how frequently they take place in secret. Who wants to be known as someone who dominates members of their family? Who readily admits to being crippled by fears? When scandals finally come to light, it is often the cover-up which offends us most; an honest confession of wrong earlier on would have gained our sympathy in many cases.

Jesus said, "What is said in secret will be shouted from the rooftops" (Luke 12:2-3, but cf 10:26-27), but we tend to ignore this fact. Believers should decide to live an open life, honest, with nothing hidden. Bringing faults to light in the right context is healthy (John 3:19-21). Skeletons need to come out of the cupboard. James taught that those who confessed their sins to one another would be healed (James 5:16).

We have now made a start on outlining things from which believers can repent. Immediately we run into a problem, which is that Christians are not under law, but under grace (Galatians throughout, esp 2:16).

The gift of life which Jesus brings is unconditional; he never turned anyone away because they were bad. Quite the reverse; he was accused of associating with sinners (Matt 9:10-13). It does not matter how wicked a person is - they are welcomed by Jesus (John 6:37). Is it wise, therefore, to start listing wrongs to turn from? Might people not start to conclude that the Christian way is only for good people? Are we not in danger of turning Christianity into a system of rules?

The answer is, yes we are. Christ came to set his followers free from law, so it is most important that we don't reintroduce it. Our aim here is to offer helpful ideas, not to supply rules. It is important that people do not turn from such things just because this book tells them to. Christians have escaped from being under law - their lives are to be characterised by love rather than rule-keeping. God loved men and women first, and they then responded to him (1 John 4:19).

The thinking behind this chapter might be expressed this way. You cannot fill a bottle with oil if it is already half full of water. For a start, you won't get so much oil in, and secondly, oil and water do not mix, no matter how hard you try. So those who want to be filled with the Holy Spirit need to be empty of other spirits. This stands to reason. Our purpose is to understand areas in which Christians are likely to encounter problems when it comes to being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The reason I have begun with the five items that I have chosen is because they are the leading characteristics of witchcraft. Witches attempt to dominate and control people, using fear and occultic powers, and they operate in secret.

Most of us were brought up with stories about witches that gave the impression that they were a harmless piece of superstition. However, over the last few years, witchcraft and allied interests have grown in our society. It is said that in West Germany there are now more registered witches than Christian Pastors, whatever a registered witch may be (UK Christian Handbook 1992/3, p24). One wonders how many unregistered ones there are in addition.

In Britain, witchcraft was illegal until after the second world war, when the relevant act was repealed by parliament. It is doubtful that anyone could have foreseen the explosion of witchcraft and similar occultic behaviour that would ensue in our society.

Not all witchcraft is self-evident. People don't have to wear special clothing or possess broomsticks to practise it. The effects of witchcraft can be widely observed, once our eyes have been opened to it.

Take terrorism for example. It is one thing to know instinctively that terrorism is wrong; but I find it helpful to realise that it has at least four of our five hallmarks of witchcraft about it - 1, 2, 3 & 5. It is therefore not surprising to hear occasional allegations of occultic behaviour by terrorist organisations, completing the picture.

Derek Prince has helpfully pointed out that anyone can practise witchcraft, without being aware of it. It can come as a shock to realise that one has been controlling and manipulating others. But whether sins are big or small, the remedy is always the same. Jesus died for our sins, so that we might be forgiven (1 Peter 3:18), so believers can confess them, repent, and turn to a new way of life. We will say more about this in the next chapter.

A number of other evils, such as corruption in national and local government, also have several of the above characteristics. This leads us to another area:

6. Love of Money.

The sentence that Paul wrote is often misquoted; it was not "money is the root of all evil", but "the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10)." Very often evils can be traced back to a love of money. For example, part of the reason why it proves difficult to do much about abortion in the UK may be because money is involved. Our laws are said to be more relaxed than elsewhere in Europe; this results in people arriving from the continent to have abortions here.

An abortion cost around £200 in 1990, and there have been more than three million since the law legalising it was introduced in 1967. That is six hundred million pounds at 1990 prices. As a result, there is resistance to changing the law to make abortion harder. The love of money lurks in the background.

Jesus said we cannot serve God and money (Matt 6:24). A surprising amount of his teaching relates to money, as we shall see later. At this stage, we can see that the love of money is a hindrance.

Because of this, earnest people could decide to reject money altogether, since it is capable of abuse. However, it seems wiser to resist such a tendency. Surely there is no need to reject something just because people can become addicted to it; that is to react out of fear. Rather, Christians should choose what they do on the basis of the will of God, trying to please him (2 Cor 5:9).

Scripture will prove a sure guide here. For example, Christians do not all need to become teetotal, simply because some become addicted to alcohol; Jesus and his followers drank wine (Luke 22:17-18). We can see once again how easy it is to introduce rules that are not required. That is unhelpful. The church does well to resist all legalism.

7. Other faiths.

From first to last, the Bible instructs followers of God to turn from other gods. This theme is most pronounced throughout the book of Exodus, where the people were delivered from the gods of Egypt, and set free to worship the living God (Exod 12:12). Despite all they had learned about God

at the Red Sea and at Sinai, they were so accustomed to other gods that they created a golden calf to worship, when life became difficult (ch32).

Jesus teaching here is that there is only one God, whom people are to love and serve (Matt 4:10, 22:37). This means that all the other so-called gods are counterfeits. What a contrast there is between the God who made the galaxies and an idol ten feet tall (Isa 40:18-22)!

In the world today, there are many gods, and systems of belief, that do not acknowledge the living God. There are others that appear to acknowledge God, but do not acknowledge his Son Jesus, or do not give place to the Holy Spirit. There is only one true system of belief. Perhaps that is why people are to be baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If we leave one or more out, we will be in error.

So followers of Jesus need to turn from all other faiths. This thought is not popular. A line of teaching often heard today is that all faiths have an element of the truth in them, and we need to combine them to get at the full picture. This sounds plausible at first hearing. But on reflection, surely some belief systems at least are to be excluded. Few readers of this book would expect to come closer to the truth by combining Christianity with Melanesian Frog Worship, for example.

The nursery rhyme "The Three Jovial Welshmen" (Oxford Nursery

Rhyme Book, eds. I & P Opie, OUP, 1955, p161) includes these verses:

And all the night they hunted,
And nothing could they find,
But the moon a-gliding,
A-gliding with the wind.

One said it was the moon,
The other he said, Nay,
The third said it was a cheese,
And half of it cut away.

If somebody suggested that we combine these insights of folklore with the knowledge and experience of NASA and the Russian space programme, in order to reach the fullest possible body of truth about the moon, we would conclude either that he was joking, or that he was ignorant. The resulting mixture would lead to confusion rather than truth.

Not every proponent of the "all roads lead to God" teaching is ignorant about what the various faiths actually teach, but it has to be said that many are. It is a theory that sounds attractive at first, if only because we imagine it might lead to more peace and harmony between races and peoples. It is also a theory that tends to appeal to people who secretly are sceptical about belief of any kind.

In practice, there is complete disagreement between different belief systems on many if not all points.

I used to believe that while many of the smaller sects were simply wrong, the major world religions with millions of followers must come in a different category. However, I once needed to look up what a certain faith believed about marriage. As I went to the library to consult a book, I was praying for wisdom and speaking quietly in tongues. As I sat down, I received the strong impression that I was not to browse, but should look only at the passages where marriage was mentioned, and nowhere else, finding them from the index at the back. As I jotted down what they said, I began to feel more and more sick, until eventually

I had to stop reading to go out for some fresh air.

The sick feeling passed off, but I was left with the impression that what I was experiencing was the heart of God, that the teaching of this faith was revolting to him. Even the few paragraphs I looked at were sufficient to show me that this faith's teaching on marriage, and the Bible's view of it, were completely incompatible.

The truth is that Christianity is unique, and there is no other system of belief which fits fully with it at all. Believers who take this line may well come under more and more pressure to retreat from it in days to come, but as we have seen, they are not to let their lives be ruled by fear.

One test of any worldwide faith is this - are people frightened to speak out against it for fear of repercussions? If so, the presence of the fear element helps us to see that the faith is incompatible with the way of Jesus, following 2 above.

8. Non-Christian Philosophies.

As well as the religions themselves, there are beliefs which are associated with them, from which believers can also turn. For example, the practice of Yoga involves saying Hindu mantras. Not that people are told that when they begin Yoga - they are only introduced at a later stage. Similarly few people are aware of the occultic background to homeopathy, as this is not evident when you buy a remedy from a health shop. Once again we detect secrecy at work.

For helpful information on healing, readers can consult *Healing at Any Price?*, by Samuel Pfeiffer (Word Books). This book gives factual information about the various alternative therapies around today, from which you can make up your own mind.

When widespread practices are questioned, as in this chapter, people sometimes respond with the idea that something is harmless, or that it is trivial. A lady told me recently that her habit of touching wood did not actually mean anything. But if that was so, why did she do it at all?

We do well to be aware of a tendency to play down the importance of an action. The employee who steals his employer's stamps, for example, justifies the action on the ground that a trivial sum is involved. Such an argument often disguises wrongdoing.

Recently I heard of a University where some students were about to start a Satanist church. It occurred to me that some of those involved would have gone along at first "for a laugh". That is, they said to themselves that their involvement was not serious. Again we need to hold in mind the teaching that we will reap what we sow, whatever attitude we sow it in (Gal 6:7-8).

9. Lies.

Lies are widespread in our society. I have found it helpful to recognise that because of early experiences in life, people often grow up believing a number of lies. Some of these came from authority figures in childhood. The angry statement, "You'll never be any use!", can become a self-fulfilling statement to a child, as he or she believes it. For such a person, every time a major obstacle is met in later life, the tendency will be to give up in the face of it, because of the inner conviction of being unable to cope, born out of the adult's remark.

If believed, such a statement has the status of a curse that recurs through life until it is dealt with.

One lie that a close friend believed was that because he was an unplanned baby, he should not exist. With the help of counsellors, he came to see that the truth was that he was alive because God had put him here, and that although his earthly parents may have had their plans, his heavenly father had other plans. God's control of events is not limited by people's behaviour. My friend saw this, and then confessed that he had believed a lie and turned from it. This was a first step towards changing his low view of his own value.

The devil is the father of lies (John 8:44). He wants to sow lies in people's minds, because people act on the basis of what they believe. Christians need to protect themselves by "binding on the belt of truth (Eph 6:14)." This expression includes the idea of deciding to accept truth alone, and having nothing to do with lies. Once a lie has been recognised, then believers can repent of it, choosing to believe the truth instead.

This chapter has not aimed to cover everything, but rather to give an idea of some broad areas where repentance may be needed. There is one more point to be made.

Jesus emphasised that we are easily deceived (Matt 24:4). This is true in the areas we have been considering. I once wrote to a man who held a senior post in Christian work, suggesting that Freemasonry might not be compatible with Christian faith. He wrote back several sides of A4 in an attempt to prove that it was. Some readers may wish to agree with him. But I suggest that if we reflect on it, at least six out of the nine headings of this chapter are characteristics of Freemasonry. This makes it questionable.

Notice too how tempting it is to try and justify one's practices. This should be seen as a dangerous option; believers who allow themselves to do this run the risk of giving a foothold to deception in their lives.

How subtle people can be. Recently I saw the musical "The Sound of Music" once again. I found myself reflecting on the various characters. It was easy to see faults in the Nazis who took over Austria. But was Baroness Schreder that much better? What was going on that caused the telegram boy to behave as he did? Uncle Max had his devious, secretive side, and even the Baron's apparently upright behaviour slipped a bit on occasion. Only Maria seemed above reproach... or was she? What was the meaning of her body language as she ascended the stairs, having noted the effect that the children's singing had on the Baron?

Christians will never agree fully about what is acceptable, and what is not. Nor can anyone hope to discern all his secret faults (Ps 19:12). However, Pearl Coleman's account of how she flushed £2500 worth of homeopathic remedies down the lavatory, after having prescribed them for years in her clinic, is a powerful one. She was bold enough to be consistent in her new belief once she had arrived at it (See her *Go and Do Likewise*, New Wine Press, 1990, ch11).

There is a truth here for all Christians. People who want to follow Jesus need to be thorough about it (Matt 3:7-10). They need to make sure their repentance is both real and deep. In addition, my own experience is that as well as being a once-and-for-all decision, repentance is a life-long process. Some of the material we have looked at may take time to work through. It may prove necessary to cover it more than once, at greater depth each time. Grit and determination may be required.