

REPENT AND BELIEVE THE GOSPEL

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The Jewish church was started by a Jew named John who said, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:4).

And a Jew named Jesus who said, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:18).

After the Christian church was formed and well established Christ symbolized His church in her forthcoming history by seven of the churches in Asia Minor and said:

“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus: Repent” (Rev. 2:1-5).

“To the angel of the church of Pergamos: Repent” (Rev. 2:12, 16).

“Unto the angel of the church in Sardis: Repent” (Rev. 3:1, 3).

The Christian church was formed by a call to repentance. After it was formed during four of the seven periods or conditions symbolized by the seven churches, God calls upon her again to repent. “Unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans: Repent” (Rev. 3:14, 19).

“Leaving the first love is represented as a spiritual fall. Many have fallen thus. In every church in our land, there is needed confession, repentance, and reconversion. The *disappointment of Christ is beyond description*. Unless those who have sinned speedily repent, the deceptions of the last days will overtake them. Some, though they do not realize it, are preparing to be overtaken. God calls for

repentance without delay. So long have many trifled with salvation that their spiritual eyesight is dimmed, and they can not discern between light and darkness. Christ is humiliated in his people. The first love is gone, the faith is weak, there is need of a thorough transformation.”¹

The very first sermon Jesus preached after His baptism in the River Jordan was a call, “The kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Thus the first sin we need to repent of is not believing the gospel. Repenting only of outward acts of sin is like papering over a widening crack in the wall—it’s superficial. The sin that underlies all sins is what the Bible calls the sin of unbelief. In that first sermon, Jesus calls upon us to get at the root of our problem, discover the reason why we’ve lost the main road. The outward acts of sin, the addictions, the bad habits that drag us down, all are fruit borne by unbelief that lies deep in our hearts.

But God is so kind to us that He will convict us of that sin and will give us the precious gift of repentance. It’s a step towards eternal life, but we can’t self-start ourselves. We are all born with a dead battery and need jumper-cables from Jesus. The apostle Peter pleaded with those who had crucified Jesus, You “slew [Him] and hanged [Him] on a tree, Him hath God exalted . . . to be a . . . a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:30, 31). The Holy Spirit’s conviction of sin will be complemented by

¹ Ellen G. White, “A Call to Repentance,” *Advent Review and sabbath Herald* (Dec. 15, 1904).

the pure gospel, and the current of heaven's forgiveness will flow through the soul, working miracles of grace. Don't refuse the "gift"! Seeing at last how we had a part in crucifying Him is precious truth that is a shaft of clear bright sunshine pouring into one's dark jail cell, yes, light from Heaven.

Fresh from His own experience of corporate repentance "Christ had taken the necessary steps in repentance, conversion, and faith in behalf of the human race, He went to John to be baptized."² Jesus demanded the same from the Jewish nation: "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). And His disciples also "went out and preached that people should repent" (Mark 6:12).

Christ's greatest disappointment was that the nation did not respond. He upbraided "the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent" (Matt. 11:20). He likened the nation to the unfruitful "fig tree planted in His vineyard. . . . For three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none" (see Luke 13:6-9).

The barren fig tree which Jesus cursed became a symbol representing not merely the mass of individual unrepentant Jews, but the corporate people which as a nation rejected Christ:

"The cursing of the fig tree was an acted parable. That barren tree, flaunting its pretentious foliage in the very face of Christ, was a symbol of the Jewish nation. The Saviour desired to make plain to His

² Ellen G. White, "Our Supply in Christ," *The General Conference Bulletin* (April 4, 1901).

disciples the cause and the certainty of Israel's doom."³

"Our Lord had sent out the twelve and afterward the seventy, proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand, and calling upon men to repent and believe the gospel. . . . This was the message borne to the Jewish nation after the crucifixion of Christ; but the nation that claimed to be God's peculiar people rejected the gospel brought to them in the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴

Personal sin had grown to become national sin. It was accomplished by the nation's leaders, and it bound the nation to community ruin:

"When Christ came, presenting to the nation the claims of God, the priests and elders denied His right to interpose between them and the people. . . . They set themselves to turn the people against Him."⁵

Only national repentance could have saved the Jewish nation from the impending ruin that their national sin invoked upon them:

"For the rejection of Christ, with the results that followed, they were responsible. A nation's sin and a nation's ruin were due to the religious leaders."⁶

In Jesus' last public address He made a final appeal to these leaders at the Jerusalem headquarters to repent. Their refusal broke His heart. With tears in His voice, the Saviour predicted the impending national ruin: "All these things will

³ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 582.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 308.

⁵ *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 304, 305.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. . ." (Matt. 23:13-37).

Christ certainly appealed to individuals to repent, for He said, "there will be joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7). But there is a distinct difference between national repentance and individual repentance. He also appealed to "this. . . evil generation," that is, the nation. "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Luke 11:32). The fate of a nation, not merely that of individuals, hung in the balance.

Like a lone flash of lightning on a dark night, this reference to Nineveh illustrates Jesus' idea. National repentance is so rare that few believe it can ever take place. He used Nineveh's history as an example to prove that what He called for was indeed possible. If a heathen nation can repent, He said in effect, surely the nation that claims to be God's chosen people can do the same! "As Jonah became a sign unto the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation. . . . The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation, and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed, a greater than Jonah is here" (Luke 11:30, 32).

If one picture is worth a thousand words, Nineveh's repentance vividly illustrates a national response to the call of God. A nation repented, not simply a scattered group of individuals. We find it easier to believe a "great fish" swallowed Jonah alive than to accept that a government and a nation

can repent at the preaching of God's Word. "The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). There is no reason to doubt this sacred history.

This repentance began with "the greatest," and extended downward from the usual order in history to "the least of them." Word came to the king of Nineveh and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles" (Jonah 3:6, 7).

It is true that this call to repent did not originate at the royal palace. But the government of Nineveh wholeheartedly supported it. The "city" repented from top to bottom. Fantastic! The repentance was both nationally "proclaimed and published," and individually received. The divine warning had proclaimed a national overthrow of Nineveh; the leadership led the people to repent—a national repentance.

Jesus' point was this: if this happened once in history, why couldn't it happen with the Jews also? The Jews could have achieved national repentance easily and practically. The high priest, Caiaphas, could have led out as well as did the king of Nineveh. Caiaphas needed only to accept the principle of the cross as Jesus taught it.

At first Caiaphas could have been sincerely uncertain how to relate to Jesus in the early days of His ministry. But by the time of Jesus' trial he could have taken a firm stand for right. He needed only to

make a simple speech such as this to the Sanhedrin: "For a time I didn't understand the work of Jesus. You brethren have shared my misunderstanding. Something has happened among us that has been beyond us. But I have studied the Scriptures lately. I have seen that beneath His lowly outward guise, Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the true Messiah. He fulfills the prophetic details. And now, brethren, I humbly acknowledge Him as such, and I forthwith step down from my high position and shall be the first to install Him as Israel's true High Priest."

A gasp of surprise would have rippled through the Sanhedrin chambers if Caiaphas had said these words. Today he would be honored all over the world as the noblest leader of God's people in all history. He could have done what Moses would have loved to do. (In fact, many of them, would doubtless have followed Caiaphas' lead. The religious leaders fastened national guilt upon the people. The same leaders could as easily have led them into national repentance. Christ could have died in some other way than murder by His own people, and Jerusalem could today be the "joy of the whole earth" rather than its sorest plague spot.

Though He was "a greater" than Jonah and "a greater than Solomon," Christ did not appear in the glorious garb and pomp of Solomon. Nor did He "cause His voice to be heard in the street" as did Jonah. Yet the Jewish leaders had evidence enough of His authority. The quality of His solemn call to repentance convinced them of what their pride refused to confess. No other "sign" would be

given that "evil and adulterous generation." Once she refused to acknowledge Heaven's last call to repentance, nothing could stay Israel's frightful doom.

And the sure evidence of the Holy Spirit's work today resides in the True Witness' solemn call for Laodicea to repent.

Could Jesus accuse people of a crime when they were innocent? If someone accused us for example of starting World War I, our response would be that's unreasonable. We weren't even born when it started! Yet Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of His day of guilt for a crime committed before any of them were born. His charge against them sounds unreasonable.

The story is in Matthew 23. Jesus has just upbraided the scribes and Pharisees with a series of "woes" accompanied by vivid flashes of irony and indignation. He concludes by springing on them this charge of murdering a certain Zechariah: "That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar" (Matt. 23:35).

Was Zacharias a victim whom Christ's hearers had personally murdered in the temple during their lifetime? This man was murdered some 800 years earlier (2 Chron. 24:20, 21). Why did Jesus charge this crime on the Jews of His day?

He was not unfair. When we see the principle of corporate repentance guilt, the picture becomes clear. In rejecting Jesus, the Jewish leaders acted

out all human guilt from A to Z (Abel to Zecharias), even though they may not yet have personally committed a single act of murder. They were one in spirit with their fathers who had actually shed the blood of the innocent Zecharias in the temple. In other words, they would do it again, and they did do it—to Jesus.

By refusing the call to repentance which the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, they agreed to assume the guilt of all murders of innocent victims ever since the days of Abel. One who could not err fastened the entire load on them.

Suppose the Jewish leaders had repented? If so, they would have repented of “the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world” (Luke 11:50). And thus they would not have gone on to crucify Christ.

To understand Jesus’ thinking, we need to review the Hebrew idea of corporate personality. The church is the “Isaac” of faith, Abraham’s true descendant, “one body” with him and with all true believers of all ages. To Jewish and Gentile believers alike, Paul says Abraham is “our father” (Rom. 4:1-13). Even to the Gentile believers he says, “Our fathers were . . . baptized into Moses.” “We [are] all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks” (1 Cor. 10:1, 2; 12:13). We “all” means past generations and the present generation.

Thus Christ’s body comprises all who have ever believed in Him from Adam down to the last remnant who welcome Him at His return. All are one individual in the pattern of Paul’s thinking. Even a child can see this principle. Although it is his hand

that steals from the cookie jar, when mother learns what happened, it’s his bottom that gets spanked. To the child this is perfectly fair.

Hosea depicts Israel’s many generations as one individual progressing through youth to adulthood. He personifies Israel as a girl betrothed to the Lord. Israel “shall sing . . . as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt” (Hosea 11:1; 2:15).

Ezekiel defines Jerusalem’s history as the biography of one individual: “Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: ‘Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. . . . When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love. . . . You are exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty’” (Eze. 16:3-13).

Generations of Israelites came and went, but her corporate personal identity remained. The nation carried the guilt of “youth” into adulthood, as an adult remains guilty of a wrong committed when he was a youth—even though physiologists say that time has replaced every physical cell in his body. One’s moral personal identity remains regardless of the molecular composition of the body.

Moses taught this same principle. He addressed his generation as the “you” who should witness the captivity to Babylon nearly a thousand years later. He also called on succeeding generations to recognize their corporate guilt with “their fathers”: “If they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, which they trespassed against me,

and that they also have walked contrary to me; and that I also have walked contrary to them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept the punishment of their iniquity. . . . I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt” (Lev. 26:40-45).

Succeeding generations sometimes recognized this principle. King Josiah confessed that “great is the wrath of the Lord that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us” (2 Kings 22:13). He said nothing about the guilt of his contemporaries, so clearly did he see his own generation’s as the guilt of previous generations.

Let us picture in the crowd that gathered before Pilate that fateful Friday morning. The strange Prisoner stands bound. It is popular to join in condemning Him. Not a voice is raised in His defense.

Suppose you are connected with Pilate’s government, or are in the employ of Caiaphas, the High Priest. You support your family with your wages. Would you have the courage to stand up alone and say, “We are making a terrible mistake here! This man is not guilty of these charges. He is what He claims—He is the divine Son of God! I appeal to you, Pilate and Caiaphas, accept this Man as the Messiah!

Suppose your own close circle of friends has already joined the mockery and abuse of Jesus.

Would you (or I) have the nerve to face them alone and rebuke them for what they do?

Realizing how easily a defense of Jesus might put you on the cross too, would you (or I) dare to speak out? Surely the answer is obvious. We dare not say that the church as a world body cannot know this repentance, lest when we survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, we pour contempt on His loving sacrifice by implying that it was in vain.

Jesus’ appeal to the Jews failed to move them. Yet a glorious demonstration of community repentance occurred at Pentecost. His calls at last bore fruit.

The three thousand converted that day probably did not all personally shout “Crucify Him!” at Christ’s trial, or personally mock Him as He hung on the cross. Yet they recognized that they shared the guilt of those who did.

But the Jewish leaders stubbornly refused to do so: “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? . . . You . . . intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” (Acts 5:28). In no way would they accept community guilt! Thus the Jews denied their only hope of salvation.

Pentecost has inspired God’s people for 2000 years. What made those grand results possible? The people believed the portrayal of their communal guilt and frankly confessed their part in the greatest sin of all ages, which their leaders had refused to repent of. Pentecost was an example of common folk rising above the spiritual standards of their leaders. The final outpouring of the Holy Spirit

in the latter rain will be an extension of the Pentecost experience.

A leadership reaction against Pentecost occurred a few months later. The Sanhedrin refused to accept Stephen's portrayal of corporate guilt through their national history: "You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:51, 52). That "stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him" (Acts 7:57, 58).

Do we see the pattern in this? It began with Cain. Generation after generation refused to see their community's guilt. Finally, impenitent Israel demonstrated to the world for all time to come the tragic end that follows national impenitence. "All these things happened unto them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

But in that tragic hour when Israel sealed her doom by murdering Stephen, a truth began to work itself out in one honest human heart. It would lead at last to correction of the sin of Israel. The "witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." This young man's disturbed conscience thought through the great idea of a worldwide "body of Christ" that would eventually exhibit in full and final display the blessings of repentance which the Jews refused.

God's Word proclaims good news. Christ did not sacrifice Himself to be defeated. The antitypical Day

of Atonement resolves all doubt. In the light of the cross we see the assurance that the church will at last overcome Israel's pattern of unbelief. The church is His prized possession, "which He has purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). In the end His people will not deprive Him of His reward.

For once in history, history will not repeat itself. His church will fully vindicate Christ. He will see that the infinite price He paid for their redemption was worthwhile. An infinite Sacrifice will fully redeem and heal an infinite measure of human sin.