

The Bible and Evangelism. 3: Faith and Repentance

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This is the third and final article in the series specially written for the METHODIST RECORDER by the Head of the Department of Biblical History and Literature in the University of Sheffield.

We have seen how the apostles and other early Christian preachers made Jesus Christ central to their message, bore testimony to His saving work as they had come to know it in their personal experience, and adapted their presentation of the gospel to the varying character, background, and understanding of their hearers. They laid equal stress on the objective truth of what God had done for men in Christ, and on the necessity that His saving work should become effective in them by the power of the Holy Spirit. And they emphasised the challenge to their hearers to make a positive response to the message which they proclaimed.

This response (if we use the simple phraseology of the apostolic preaching) took the twofold form of repentance and faith. But the very simplicity of these familiar words may tempt us to use them without properly understanding them ourselves—not to speak of making sure that our hearers understand them.

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Repentance involved a complete change of attitude to God—a turning back toward Him instead of keeping one's face averted from Him. Just what that might mean in practice depended on the people concerned. When the Jerusalem crowd that heard Peter on the day of Pentecost were convicted of the guilt of Messiah's rejection and death, and cried out in deep alarm, "What must we do?" the first thing they were told to do was to repent (Acts 2. 38). For them that meant first and foremost a complete change of mind about Jesus of Nazareth. Hitherto they had refused to believe that He was the promised Deliverer, and had at least acquiesced in His death, if some of them had not actually clamoured for His crucifixion. But now His claims had been vindicated; God had exalted Him as Lord and Messiah. It was for them now to accept God's verdict on Jesus, instead of the verdict of Caiaphas and his colleagues; and that change of attitude naturally carried with it a genuine sorrow of heart for their former error and blindness which had led them into such a crime.

When the Athenian Areopagus was told by Paul that God, having hitherto overlooked men's failure to know Him aright, was now calling on all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17. 30), the particular form which their change of attitude was expected to take was the abandonment of the mistaken outlook which pictured the divine nature in such a variety of material guises, together with the abandonment of their acknowledged ignorance of the true God, and the acceptance of the new and full revelation which God had now given of Himself. All turning to God in Christ involves a measure of repentance, though the actual manner of the repentance will vary in accordance with the convert's previous belief and practice.

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Faith, the regular accompaniment of repentance, naturally involved primarily the assent of the mind to the message that was proclaimed. But it involved more than that. There is a form of gospel preaching that has been called "only-believism"—not because the expression "Only believe" is not Scriptural (it is, of course), but because it is used in a loose way which suggests that an assent of the mind to certain facts about God and Christ is all that is called for. The faith for which the apostles called involved not simply belief in the factual truth of the story of Jesus as they proclaimed it, but an unconditional self-commitment to the Jesus of whom the story told. This meant that they relied upon Him there and then for the remission of sins that was offered in His name. But it meant more: it meant that they relied upon Him henceforth for victory over the power of sin. It meant—and the lesson was vividly driven home by the outward and visible sign of their baptism—that they were now Jesus' men and women, set apart to be like Him and to carry on His work in the world through the energy supplied by His Spirit within them. There is, to be sure, an initial act of faith in the sincere response to the gospel, but that act of faith, if it is genuine, is but the beginning of a continuous life of faith—a life in which the believer (to use Professor Butterfield's language) "holds to Christ, and for the rest is totally uncommitted."

The apostles called for repentance, but they also called for works worthy of repentance (Acts 26. 20)—a following course of life and action which showed that the repentance had been real. They called for faith, but expected to see the genuineness of their converts' faith demonstrated by its radical expression. The apostle who insists most uncompromisingly that we are right with God by faith alone, apart from the works of the law, goes on to show how "the righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in us, who walk after the flesh, but after the spirit" (Romans 8. 4). The life which is lived by faith in the Son of God is nothing less than Christ Himself living out His life in the believer (Galatians 2. 20); and the faith which saves is the faith which works through love (Galatians 5. 6). Good works can never procure for us the favour and salvation of God; but the man who is justified by faith will practise those "good works which God has prepared in advance for us to walk in" (Ephesians 2. 10).

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Again: there comes a point where a man must have solitary dealings with God. But once that point is passed and he has entered into faith in Christ, his union with Christ unites him with all the other people of Christ; he is a member of the community which exists on earth to continue the ministry of the Servant of the Lord. He shares a common life with others; he neither lives nor dies to himself. The apostolic gospel, like the rest of the Bible, knows nothing of a solitary believer.

Biblical evangelism, therefore, will have room for all these emphases. And Dr. Billy Graham's ministry, to the best of my knowledge, is not found wanting when it is tested by these apostolic criteria. When he preaches as he does on the Ten Commandments we are confronted by a standard of righteousness which will show us firstly how far we fall short of God's glory and how much we need His pardoning grace, and which will remind us secondly that the righteous requirements of the divine law may justly be looked for in the lives of Christians. (If it be suggested that the Sermon on the Mount would serve this purpose better, we may remember that its requirements are far higher than those of the Ten Commandments, and that if we come short even of the minimum standard of the latter we need not expect to find the law of Christ easier to fulfil.)

Biblical preachers, before and after the coming of Christ, took men and women where they found them, and preached to their condition. So when Dr. Graham, knowing his fellow-countrymen and their need as he does, tackles the question "Will God spare America?" there is something in his preaching uncomfortably reminiscent of the prophet. Amos. (But would he be so welcome a visitor to this country if, like the prophet Amos, he dealt in equally forthright terms with the condition of the sister-nation?)

Finally, he avoids the mistake of so many popular evangelists who have been content to win converts and have made little or no provision for their future care. Some of his keenest critics have paid tribute to his "correctness" in this regard. But it is more than "correctness"; it is sound apostolic procedure. If God "sets the solitary in families," as Psalm 68. 6 tells us, His servants are but following His example when they see to it that new converts are welcomed into the fellowship of Christ's Church, where they may receive all the encouragement and help they need in understanding the Christian faith and living the Christian life.

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