

SENT BY JESUS

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Some Aspects of Christian Ministry Today

'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' (*John 20:21*)

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Repentance: Preaching that is Out of Favour

It is always interesting to hear the first sermon a minister preaches in his pulpit, as this is often a key to what he regards as his most important message. And so it is of special interest to note what Jesus preached in his opening sermons. We read in Mark 1:14, 'Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"'. Or, as Matthew puts it, 'From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"' (*Matt. 4:17*).

Later, when Jesus sent out his twelve apostles two by two on their preaching tour, he gave them the same message to proclaim, namely, that 'men should repent' (*Mark 6:12*); and Luke records that, after his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name to all the nations (*Luke 24:47*).

In the Acts of the Apostles we find the Christian missionaries carrying out this commission. Thus, on the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd assembled in Jerusalem, 'Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins' (*Acts 2:38*). Later, Paul told the Ephesians that the message of his preaching was 'repentance

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towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ' (*Acts 20:21*). Throughout the New Testament we find the same call to repentance and promise of forgiveness through Christ. This is the Christian gospel – the gospel of forgiveness – and repentance is the gateway.

Repentance means a turning towards God. Everybody needs to repent because none of us honours God as we should. Almost everyone believes in God, but few honour him as God, or hallow his name in thought and life. Even the best of us do not do this as we should and that is why we need forgiveness if we are to be acquitted in the judgment of God. Quite apart from the many wrong acts and thoughts which we fall into, we all come short of the most obvious obligation of acknowledging God and being properly thankful to the God whose existence we admit. We need to repent and be forgiven if we are to escape the judgment of God and be restored to his fellowship. The Christian message is that there is forgiveness for those who will turn towards God. God in his love has provided the way of forgiveness through the death of our Saviour, who bore our sins in his body on the cross.

Since God-forgetfulness is the radical sin of mankind, repentance and forgiveness is the only message that meets the situation. We may take this New Testament message of repentance and forgiveness as the yardstick, to measure and test what is being preached in our pulpits, or is being taught by our missionaries, or what we ourselves believe. For example, what place do repentance and forgiveness have in the message of our churches? Or in our books of theology? How prominent is the message of repentance and forgiveness in our modern religious literature? This is the test; but is a test which many books fail.

We may not be aware that we need to repent and be forgiven. But the basic sin which makes salvation by our merits impossible is our failure to love and honour God with

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all our heart, as we ought to since he is our Creator. Jesus said, 'You cannot serve God and mammon' (*Matt. 6:24*) and yet most of us are endeavouring to do this. Not that we wish to serve mammon entirely, but we want to serve God *and* mammon. But this is impossible, for God is the true and holy God and we must honour him and serve him absolutely and completely, or we do not honour him or serve him at all. In this matter each of us needs to be daily repentant and daily seek God's forgiveness.

The call for repentance in response to the gospel of forgiveness has always been the keynote of every great Christian revival. Repentance depends on our realization of who God is – the true and living God – and the recognition that we cannot serve him so long as we have other objectives – whether happiness or security or whatever it is – existing in our minds as objectives to be sought for in their own right, alongside the objective of serving God. Because we all have these insignificant objectives which are not directly related to the mind of God, we need to repent and be forgiven.

The message of repentance is out of favour in many Christian circles these days. A symptom of this is the opinion that a person may find God in any of the great religions of the world. At the Commonwealth Day Service, held on March 11, 1991 in Westminster Abbey, London, in the presence of the Queen and the Prince of Wales, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist leaders read or chanted from the sacred texts of their faiths. This is the culmination of influences long in existence among the churches. A leading missionary speaker at the Anglican Toronto Congress in 1963 put Islam, Buddhism and other heathen religions alongside Christianity as being true reflections of God's revelation of himself. I quote from his address:

We should be able to insist that God was speaking in that cave on the hill outside Mecca (that is, to Mohammed),

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that God brought illumination to the man who once sat under the bo tree (that is, to Buddha).

He went on:

God speaks to me in my newspaper as well as in the Bible, he seeks me out in the theatre, in the novel, in art, as well as in the Holy Communion.

This modern view, which blurs the uniqueness of relationship with Jesus Christ as the way of salvation, is not confined to the Protestant denominations but is affirmed by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. In the Declaration on non-Christian religions, paragraph 3, the Second Vatican Council stated:

Muslims adore the one God, living and subsisting in himself, merciful and all powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to his inscrutable decrees just as Abraham . . . submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God they revere him as a prophet.

This statement leaves no room for the message of repentance and forgiveness. The Muslims appear to be on the right track, only needing to go further, rather than to turn round and obtain forgiveness for following a false religion. The statement blurs the sharp distinction between a man-made religion, which puts Mohammed on a higher level than the Son of God, and the religion of the Bible, which teaches that God became man in order to provide the only way of salvation for men. The Council's view fits in with modern ideas but it is diametrically opposed to the words of Jesus, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me' (*John 14:6*), and 'no one knows the Father save the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal him' (*Matt. 11:27*).

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The Second Vatican Council repeated its teaching in the Constitution of the Church published in November 1964, paragraph 16:

The plan of salvation also includes . . . the Moslems . . .

and it goes on:

. . . those also can attain to salvation who strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.

By these words the Council affirms that the sincere pagan who knows nothing of Christ may be saved by striving to do what is right. The message of Buddha to his disciples was, 'Strive without ceasing'. This is not the Christian message which is 'repent and believe the gospel' – the gospel of forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ. This modern message omits the call for repentance and the offer of forgiveness, for where is the place of forgiveness if people can be saved by striving to follow their own conscience?

A religion of salvation by striving is self-centred and tends to pride; but salvation through forgiveness glorifies God for his grace, and leads to humility. Salvation through merit which results from successful striving and salvation through forgiveness have nothing in common. During past centuries the Roman Catholic Church held both these doctrines in an uneasy union and taught that forgiveness was obtained through the sacraments, and that to use the sacraments was an act of merit. But in the statements of the Second Vatican Council, the need of forgiveness is but mentioned and merit alone is the way of salvation. God's grace has been cheapened. Christ's death has become merely a preliminary not requiring mention, instead of being the very centre of salvation – as in the early church, when Peter told the rulers of Jerusalem, 'In none other is there salvation, neither is

there any other name under heaven wherein we must be saved' than the name of Jesus Christ (*Acts 4:12*).

Jesus is God's answer to man's sin, to man's neglect and dishonouring of his Creator. To be saved we must be united to Jesus, by acknowledging him as Lord. No sinner can be saved merely by striving. There must be a complete about-turn, a repentance, a return to God and an asking for and obtaining of forgiveness, which comes through being made one with Christ.

Tested by this unchanging message of the Bible, many modern theologies come short of the truth. Let us see to it that we ourselves are repentant, and base our hope of salvation, not on our own strivings or the quality of our life, but only on God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.