

Revivals And Church History :: Phony Repentance - Roger Ellsworth

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Phony Repentance

One of the major problems of the church today is phony repentance. Multitudes have walked down the aisle, mouthed the right words, and joined the church, only to become what is delicately called inactive members.

All kinds of explanations have been offered for this sad state of affairs. Some attribute the problem to ineptness in follow-up. They argue that these inactive members came to church really wanting to serve the Lord, but no one told them how to go about it, and so they became discouraged and dropped out.

Others say the problem is due to failing to teach new converts about a second level of Christian living. Often people are too old to accept Jesus as Savior but never taught that they must also accept Him as Lord. Many, therefore, have settled down in something of a halfway house. They are not lost, but neither are they living for the Lord. They are, the argument goes, carnal Christians saved but living as unbelievers live.

The common assumption in both of these explanations is that those who have made a profession of faith are genuinely saved. However, very few seem willing to allow the possibility that many of our inactive members may have never truly come to know God at all, that their repentance was superficial and incomplete, and that, therefore, they remain in their sins.

The reluctance to talk about phony conversions is surprising because Scripture has so much to say on the subject. There are, for instance, the teachings of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, He explicitly warned about the danger of being deceived about our standing with God (Matthew 7:21-23). In His parable of the sower, He spoke about the stony ground hearer who receives the word with joy but in whom the word does not take root (13:20-21). In addition, we have clear warnings from Paul (2 Corinthians 13:5), Peter (2 Peter 1:10-11), John (1 John 2:18-19; 5:13), and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:4-6; 10:26-39) on the danger of being deceived about being converted.

We also have several notable examples of spurious conversions. The names of Esau (Heb. 12:16-17), Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:16-20), Simon Magus (8:9-24), and Demas (2 Timothy 4:10) are all inextricably linked to phony repentance. In addition, the Old Testament records the case of Ahab, who, upon hearing Elijah's message of judgment, tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, fasted, and went about mourning (1 Kings 21:27). It also tells us that because of this self humiliation, God delayed sending the promised judgment (vs. 29).

Many would have no doubt that these verses tell us that Ahab, the archenemy of God and godliness, had a genuine conversion experience. Certainly, every child of God would like to see Ahab and Elijah strolling together on heaven's golden streets. Yet even though some of the greatest sinners in history have been plucked out of hell at the very last moment, the evidence is overwhelming that Ahab was not one of them.

Ahab's demonstration of repentance was striking and impressive, but consider for a moment what he did not do. First, he did nothing to repudiate Jezebel or to reduce her evil influence in the kingdom. Second, he took no action to restore Naboth's vineyard to his heirs or next of kin. Third, he did not break with his idols, when he and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, decided to go to war against the Syrians, Ahab consulted with four hundred false prophets (1 Kings 22:6). If Ahab had been truly converted, it is safe to say that he would have addressed each of these situations, but he did not.

We should also consider what Ahab said after the four hundred false prophets assured him of success in the battle against Syria but Jehoshaphat asked to hear from a prophet of the Lord (vs.7, NIV). There was such a prophet, Ahab conceded, but he went on to say, "I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad" (vs. 8). The fact that this prophet, Micaiah, had nothing good to say about Ahab indicates that the king of Israel had not truly repented of his sins, and Ahab's confession of his hatred for a servant of God ought to remove all question about his spiritual condition.

But if Ahab's repentance was not genuine, how are we to explain his tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth, fasting, and mourning? The answer is that these actions were all induced by fear of judgment, not by true sorrow for sin. Ahab kne

w Elijah extremely well by this time. He knew that whatever Elijah said would most certainly come true, and he was distraught because God's judgment was hanging over him and he could not escape it.

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What could possibly be wrong with Ahab's fearing judgment? The Bible says we must all eventually stand before God to give account of ourselves (Romans 14:12; Hebrews 9:27), and it even warns us to fear Him who has the power throw us into hell (Luke 12:5). So at first sight it seems somewhat unfair to criticize Ahab for being motivated by the fear of judgment.

Yet the point we must keep in mind is that the Bible tells us about judgment so we will hate our sin and turn from it. Sin is what leads to judgment. Ahab feared judgment, but he did not hate his sin. He believed the word of God but, as we have noted, would not and did not forsake the sin. He wanted to escape judgment while hanging on to his sin, and that cannot be done.

Because Ahab did not truly hate his sin, he resorted to mere outward rituals to stave off judgment while clinging to sin within his heart. The Lord says it is all right to fast, weep, and mourn as long as these things are done with the whole heart. But if the heart is not broken, there is absolutely no point in someone rending his garments (Joel 2:12-13). Ahab tore his garments, but his heart was the same as ever.

Many today are in exactly the same position. They believe the Word of God, but they will not do what it prescribes. They believe there is a God, and they believe they must someday stand before Him, but they try to prepare for that day by going through the external motions of religion without making a complete break with their sins. How many sit in church each Sunday with the hope that their religious observances will somehow appease God, and all the while they stubbornly refuse to turn from their sins?

But this leaves us with a tricky question. If Ahab's repentance was phony, why did God take note of it and decide to withhold His judgment for a time?

God was simply demonstrating again the greatness of His mercy. The prophet Isaiah tells us judgment is God's strange or unusual act (Isaiah 28:21), which shows us that God receives no pleasure or delight from judgment. His judgment is always a last resort.

By delaying Ahab's judgment, God was also giving comfort to all those who read these pages. If God was good enough to spare for a while someone who had, at best, only partially repented, what will He do for the one who sincerely repents? Matthew Henry puts it like this: "If a pretending partial penitent shall go to his house reprieved, doubtless a sincere penitent shall go to his house justified." But as much as God delights in showing mercy, He will never compromise His Word in order to show mercy. The temporary reprieve given to Ahab did not change one iota. God's promise to judge Ahab and his family. The judgment finally came just as God promised.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree perfectly pictures the blend of God's mercy and judgment. In the parable, God is the owner of the fruitless fig tree. Because He is merciful, He agrees to give the fig tree another year to bear fruit, but at the end of that year of mercy the fig tree is to be cut down. The message is clear. God's mercy is great, but there is an end to it (Luke 13:6-9).

Ours is a time in which people seem to come lightly and easily to Christ. Deep knowledge of sin and sincere sorrow over it are increasingly rare. Churches and preachers are so anxious to gain a following that they willingly accept all professions of faith at face value. How we need to be reminded of Ahab and his phony repentance!

Ahab teaches us two serious and powerful lessons. First, it is possible to go a long way in religion and not be truly converted. Second, true repentance will always evidence itself in a change of attitude toward sin and in changed behavior. May God help each of us who has made a profession of faith to bring these lessons home to our hearts and to make sure that our profession is the genuine article.

end.