

~Other Speakers G-L: Harry Ironside:

In reading the Epistles of the great Apostle to the Gentiles one can hardly help noting his peculiar use of the terms, "my gospel," and "the gospel which I preached." He makes it clear that he did not receive it of men, neither was he taught it by those that were in Christ before him. It came as a distinct revelation from heaven when he received his divinely given commission to the apostolate. Yet when he went up to Jerusalem to see Peter and in brotherly conference laid before him and others of the Twelve the Gospel he preached among the Gentiles, we are told they recognized it as of God, and added nothing to it, but gave to him and to Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, commending them to the grace of God as they continued evangelizing the nations. In fact, a rather definite pact was made, an agreement that Peter should go to the circumcision and Paul to the uncircumcision.

Surely this does not mean, as some have contended, that the Gospel of the circumcision differed in subject matter from the Gospel of the uncircumcision. So to hold is to ignore Paul's own declaration that there is but one Gospel. Was he pronouncing a curse on Peter when he said, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8-9)? He knew no other gospel. The mixture of law and grace taught by some in that day, he declared, was a different gospel but not another.

Why then the distinction between Peter's evangel and his own? The difference was in the manner of approach, not in the body of doctrine. He defines his Gospel as follows: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:1-4). This is exactly what Peter and the rest proclaimed from the beginning, as we have already seen.

Only recently I noticed the statement in print that, while repentance was connected with the Gospel of the circumcision, it had no place in connection with Paul's Gospel of the uncircumcision. Passing strange in the face of his own declarations, which I now propose to examine, for he has told us in no uncertain terms just what position he took on this great subject.

In his own conversion we see repentance illustrated in the clearest possible way. At one moment he was a self-righteous, bigoted Pharisee who actually thought that he ought to do many things contrary to the Name of Jesus of Nazareth. But in another instant all this was altered. He heard the challenging voice from Heaven declaring, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." Broken in spirit, and convicted of sin, he cried out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" It was the question of a sincerely repentant man whose entire attitude was changed when he realized that in opposing the Gospel of the Nazarene he was fighting against God. The depth of the work wrought in his soul was manifest in his new life and behavior. Soon we see him preaching the faith that once he sought to destroy. We have no more definite evidence of repentance anywhere in our Bible.

And his own conversion was the model for all others. That which had become so real to him was what he proclaimed to Jew and Gentile alike in all the years of his ministry. It was not that he invariably used the actual terms "repent" or "repentance." Probably it was oftener that he did not. But his preaching was of the character that was designed to move his hearers to consider their ways, to face their sins before God, to own their lost estate, and so to avail themselves in faith of the divinely given remedy.

When he stood on Mars Hill in Athens, addressing the intelligentsia of the city, he used the very word that we are tracing out. After dwelling on the personality and power of the "unknown God" and man's responsibility to obey His voice, he contrasted the present age with the "times of this ignorance God winked at" by declaring that He "now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). To the Philippian jailer he gave no such message, for the man's whole attitude bespoke the repentance already produced in his soul. Therefore for him, as for every sinner who owns his guilt, the word was simply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." But these proud, supercilious scoffers of the Areopagus were not ready for the message of pure grace. They needed to realize their true state before God. To them the call came, 'Change your minds! Your whole attitude towards these questions is wrong. Repent and heed the voice of God!'

He who would be a wise dealer with souls cannot do better than follow his example. The fallow ground must first be broken up before it is ready for the good seed of the Gospel.

The moral order of all this comes out vividly when the same Apostle meets the little group of John's disciples at Ephesus. He shows that John's baptism of repentance was but the prelude to the full-orbed evangel of the new dispensation. And this principle abides everywhere. (See Acts 19:1-6.)

But more positive witness is yet to be adduced, as to his constant endeavor to bring men to repentance in order that they might be saved. In Acts 20 we read of his calling the elders of Ephesus down to Miletus for a farewell interview. To them he rehearsed the story of his labors among them and of the general character of his ministry. He says, "I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but . . . have taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Imagine anyone declaring in the face of words like these that Paul's message had no place for repentance, and that the call to repent is for the Jew but not for the Gentile!

Paul saw nothing incongruous in linking together repentance and faith and in the order given. A new attitude toward God would lead to personal trust in the Saviour He had provided. He who sees himself in the light of God's infinite holiness can never be at peace again until he finds rest in Christ through believing the Gospel. "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

In his masterly defence before King Agrippa, Paul explains how he met the risen Christ and received from Him the commission to go forth as "a minister and a witness," and he tells how the Lord sent him to the nations "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" (Acts 26:18). This is the model for all Gospel preachers. Our first business is to open men's eyes -- to turn them from darkness to light; for the great majority who need Christ as Saviour, do not realize that need. Alert enough to the main chance, as men say, wide-awake to the things of this life, bent upon acquiring wealth and fame, avidly seeking after the vain pleasures of the world, they rush heedlessly on, caring nothing for the things of supreme importance. They need an awakening message, that which will arouse and alarm, that they may realize something of their guilt and their danger. Till this has been achieved the preacher's sweetest Gospel proclamation will be a matter of supreme indifference; or at the best the prophet of the Lord will be to them, like Ezekiel of old, "as a lovely song" and as one that playeth well upon an instrument.

McCheyne expresses well the experience of thousands in his spiritual song:

"I once was a stranger to grace and to God,
I knew not my danger, I felt not my load;
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,
Jehovah-Tsidkenu was nothing to me."

It was only when free grace awoke him to a sense of his real condition that he was eager to avail himself of the righteousness of God in Christ.

Our Apostle tells the Ephesian elders that, in obedience to the heavenly vision, he had ever followed this order. In Acts 26:20 we read that he "shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance." Is there not some mistake here? None whatever! Can this be the Apostle of grace who so speaks? Unquestionably. Is he not contradicting the very principles he sets forth in Romans and Ephesians? Not at all. He is simply insisting on the importance of the sick man recognizing and acknowledging the incurableness of his terrible disease, so far as human help is concerned, in order that he may cast himself in faith upon the skill of the Great Physician. This is why in the Roman letter he devotes nearly three chapters to the elucidation of man's ruin, before he opens up the truth as to God's remedy. And in Ephesians 2 the order is the same. There is no confusion here. All is perfect harmony.

In fact, the more carefully one studies these two great basic Epistles, the more evident does this become; yet both view the sinner from opposite standpoints, though with no contradiction whatever. In Romans man is seen as alive in the flesh, a guilty culprit, who is without excuse because sinning against light, and who stands exposed to the righteous judgment of God. Whether ignorant heathen as in chapter 1, cultured philosopher as in chapter 2:1-16, or legal-minded Jew as in the balance of the second chapter, there is "no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Nevertheless, God visits man in mercy, lavishing daily evidence of His goodness upon him, all designed to lead to repentance (2:4), but alas, so sordid and sinful is the natural heart that until awakened by the Spirit of God neither His goodness, as here, nor His wrath, as in

Revelation 16:11, will produce repentance. Therefore the need of "the foolishness of preaching." God's truth proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit produces that exercise -- if not resisted -- which results in repentance. This is why the Apostle dwells so definitely on man's lost condition before opening up the glorious Gospel of grace, as in the next part of the Roman Epistle.

In Ephesians man is viewed as morally and spiritually dead; alive enough to the course of this age, but without one pulse beat toward God. From this death condition he is quickened together with Christ, and that altogether apart from human merit. But this new life is imparted, as we know, through the Word, and that Word first slays and then makes alive.

Bunyan's pilgrim was not conscious of the load upon his back until he began to read in the Book. The more he read, the heavier the burden became, until in response to his pitiable plea for deliverance he was directed to the Wicket Gate, which speaks of new birth. Even then he did not find complete deliverance until he beheld the empty cross. Then indeed he could sing:

"Blest cross; blest sepulchre;
Blest rather be the Man who
There was put to shame for me."

To cry, 'Believe! believe!' to men who have no sense of need is folly. None plowed deeper than Paul before urging men to decision for Christ. His example may well be imitated by others who are anxious to see souls saved and established in the truth. In his last letter to Timothy he warns against false teachers, and exhorts the younger preacher not to waste his time arguing with them, but urges him to proclaim the Word faithfully, counting on God to use that Word to produce a change of attitude in his opponents. Note his exhortation, as recorded in 2 Timothy 2:24-26: "The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will." Again we are reminded that repentance is not a meritorious work, as penance is supposed to be, but it is an inward state produced by God's Holy Spirit, and by none else.

Some may object, 'Then you tell men they are commanded to repent, yet you very well know they cannot repent unless God produces that change within which leads them to Himself.' Is this really a valid objection? Is it not equally true of believing? Are not men commanded to "believe the gospel"? Are they not responsible to exercise faith in Christ? Yet we know that faith is the gift of God as certainly as all else connected with salvation.

In what sense is this true? "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." If men refuse to hear the report that He sends to them, they must die in their sins. He has said, "Hear, and your soul shall live." The faithful preaching of the Gospel and the emphatic declaration of man's needy condition are designed to produce "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." If men refuse to heed, if like Israel they "always resist the Holy Ghost," they will be given up to hardness of heart and must be judged accordingly. But if they receive the testimony it will do its own work in their souls, for life is in the Word.

One thing must not be left unsaid -- there is nothing that is more calculated to produce repentance than uplifting Christ and calling upon men to behold Him dying for their sins upon the shameful tree. For nowhere do we get such an understanding of our guilt as in the light of that cross. One may well exclaim,

"O how vile my lost estate,
Since my ransom was so great."

It was when John Newton "saw One hanging on the tree" for him that his proud, haughty will was subdued and he fell adoring at the Saviour's feet. Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The message of the cross will break the hardest heart, if men will but hear it. Alas, it is quite possible to listen with the outward ear and never really hear the Gospel story at all. And it is possible so to tell that story that Christless men will admire and applaud the preacher while rejecting the message. Therefore the need of constant dependence on God that one may preach "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power," in order that the faith of our hearers "should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (I Cor. 2:4-5).

One would not decry human eloquence, for we are told that Apollos was an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures. But we need to remember that eloquence is not power. It is the man whose lips have been touched with a coal of fire from the altar who is prepared to preach in such a way as to bring men to repentance. Paul actually feared that natural ability might get in the way of the Spirit of God, and so he restrained his inherent

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powers of persuasion in order that his hearers might trust in God's word, and not in his personal attractiveness as a public speaker. Like John the Baptist he could say, "He must increase, but I must decrease."