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Phony Repentance by Roger Ellsworth

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.

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