

Repentance

Most of us are inclined to use words rather loosely, so we might use words like 'remorse' and 'regret' as alternatives to 'repent'. There are a number of different versions of the Bible, as people have tried from time to time to translate the original languages in which the Scriptures were written into English as accurately and as intelligibly as possible. As an old wrinkly, I was brought up on the Authorised Version (AV), *aka* The King James Version, with which I am still most familiar. It is interesting to note that the occurrence of the word 'repent' and its derivatives in the AV runs into three figures, while neither 'remorse' nor 'regret' appear at all. All three words are rooted in sorrow for an action of some kind, so what is it about the word 'repent' that differs from the other two?

Let us imagine an example of a criminal, say, a burglar. He (or she) goes out on a job and gets caught. What does the burglar feel? Why, sorrow, of course! Does he feel regret? Certainly, but not because of his perverse behaviour or out of sympathy for his victim, but because of the impending consequences of his actions. Does he feel remorse? Yes, for just the same reason. Does he repent? Well, we don't know, because repentance requires something more than just sorrow for wrongdoing.

Repentance is undoubtedly sorrow for sin, but it also conveys a turning away from that sin and a firm resolution not to commit it again. 'Remorse' and 'regret' do not carry that extra meaning, which is why they are not found in the Bible. When we are commanded to repent of our sins, we must not only be sorry for having committed them, we also need to turn away from them

and behave differently in the future. The need to feel sorrow for our sins is not easy. We can readily acknowledge that we are sinners as far as our thinking goes, because we are all mentally aware that we have broken God's perfect law. The feeling of deep sorrow for sin, arising from the work of the Holy Spirit, only occurs when we realise what our own personal sins have cost God and His Son to blot them out and to forgive us for our transgressions.

The command for all mankind to repent is not a one off, but occurs throughout the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testament. It was the message of John the Baptist as Christ's forerunner, it was the message preached by Jesus, all twelve disciples preached it, as did Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles. The importance of repentance cannot be overstated.

There is a danger in deferring repentance rather than responding to the call of God when it comes. Firstly, there is no guarantee that any of us will live to see tomorrow. We are not so much in command of our lives that we can be sure that no unforeseen fatal accident will befall us, or that our bodies will not succumb to a fatal stroke, heart attack or some other disease. These hazards are with us continually. Secondly, repentance, being a gift from God, is not something over which we have control. If we turn our backs on an opportunity to repent, we cannot make God offer a second bite at the cherry at our convenience.

Repentance and conversion in the spiritual sense are closely linked. A sea change in our behaviour, turning from self-pleasing to pleasing God – a real U-turn. How vital it is to hear and obey God's heartfelt call to us as proclaimed by the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, "Turn, turn from your sinful ways, for why will you die?"