

Column

Over 30 years ago I attended a theological conference held at a church in Pensacola, Fla. At one session a learned man – I can't remember now his name – spoke on the subject of Christian faith.

His observations were timely and Biblical, yet one woman in attendance did not think he had said enough. In the question and answer session which followed, she took him to task for not saying anything about repentance.

What really stands out in my mind was his response: “Madam, one cannot say everything every time.

Of course, he was right. There has to be focus in any form of discourse. Otherwise, it would be like a man firing a round of birdshot at a wall. The pellets would cover the wall, but strike no central target.

On the other hand, this woman also had a point: one can scarcely speak of faith without speaking of repentance. They are sides of the same coin.

You might be asking, how so? Well, in this way. Faith is turning toward something. With Christian faith, it is turning towards and walking into the outstretched arms of Jesus, putting your full confidence in Him and giving Him your total loyalty and allegiance.

But, in order to do that – of necessity – a person has to turn away from something else. In Christian parlance, that is: sin, the world and the devil.

Picture a man walking along a road. He is pursuing wrong goals and engaging in destructive practices. Then, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, he comes to his senses and wants to go home . . . back to God. What must he do? Keep walking in the direction he is going? Certainly not. He must make an about-turn and begin walking in the opposite direction. This is repentance.

Ancient Israel was often called by her prophets to repentance. Usually, the “wrong road” they were on involved the sin of idolatry. Instead of serving Yahweh with their whole heart, they had gone and served the gods of the nations around them.

Often what made it clear they had strayed were times of trouble. For example, an army of locust had devastated all the foliage . . . or rains necessary for crops to produce had not come . . . or – more distressing still -- pagan armies were headed in their direction.

What was the prophet's prescription? Without exception, it was to repent. If they would turn back to God, He would turn back to them, heal their land and restore their lost fortunes.

In view of the apostasy, violence, discord and blatant disregard for God's law in our own land, might not this same prescription be needed today?

But, where do we begin? The only place we can: with ourselves. Let us turn from the times we have remained silent in the face of some evil, of the times we have let the culture and not the Christ direct our thinking on some social issue, of the times when we have proved wayward in the calling God gave us at our baptism.

Faith, yes, but also repentance is needed in our nation today.

We beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desire of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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