

Penance or Repentance?

The Lord Jesus summarized the Christian message in the following words:

"Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46,47).

The Gospel is the glad tidings of salvation to all people everywhere. Forgiveness and peace with God are offered to "all nations". To show His readiness to forgive the vilest sinners, the apostles were commanded to begin their mission in Jerusalem, the dwelling place of His murderers!

Sin can only be forgiven "in His name." There is no other fount where sinners can go to for cleansing. As prophesied in Scripture, it was necessary for Christ to suffer and die on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. The resurrection is the Father's seal of approval on His Son's redemptive work. Christians are forgiven in His name and they have no other message to a lost world but the promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake.

Repentance

Repentance and remission go together. As long as the sinner remains obstinate and without remorse, God will not forgive. Only when the sinner confesses his sin and turns to God, is he pardoned and reconciled.

Repentance is an inner change; the word actually means a change of mind. Yet this inner conversion shows itself outwardly. Genuine sorrow for offending God is often expressed in prayer and fasting. Life is transformed. The selfish becomes generous and kind; the dishonest becomes just and true in his dealings with others. These are the "fruits of repentance" that John the Baptist spoke about (Luke 3:7-14) - the result and proof of true conversion.

The good works that result from repentance are not reckoned as a punishment or a payment of the legal debt owned to God's justice. God forgives gratuitously, freely; God forgives on account of Christ's sacrifice. Remission is in the name of Christ and not on account of anything we do. Our tears do not appease God's wrath but only the blood of Jesus. The repentant does not live a good life to merit forgiveness; he lives a clean and godly life because he is forever grateful to God's forgiving grace!

Penance

Sadly Catholic tradition distorts the biblical concept of repentance. Repentance is substituted by "doing penance" - a punishment inflicted on oneself to atone (make satisfaction) for sin.

To be fair, Catholicism also speaks of penance as an inner attitude - "that disposition of the heart in which we detest and bewail our sins because they were offensive to God." We readily concur that genuine repentance is expressed by sorrow, and such acts as prayer and fasting, and that repentance results in "fruit" - good works that grow out of a changed mind.

The big problem with the Catholic doctrine is the intended *purpose* of such acts: *penance is performed to make satisfaction for sin*, as can be verified from the following citations from official Catholic sources:

- "Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction' for or 'expiate' his sins. This satisfaction is called 'penance.'" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1459).
- Penance "is meant not merely as a safeguard for the new life and as a remedy to weakness, but also as a vindictory punishment for former sins" (Council of Trent, 14:8).
- "Satisfaction or penance is that prayer or other good work which the confessor enjoins on the penitent in expiation of his sins" (Catechism of Pius X, Sacrament of Penance).

Accordingly, even though a person is genuinely contrite and having confessed his sins, he is still required to atone for sin by performing various works of penance in this world and by suffering in purgatory after death. He is not fit to enter heaven until he has made complete satisfaction. The practical effects of the doctrine of "penance" are disturbing:

- *Faith* - the Christian's absolute confidence in the goodness of God and the sufficiency of Christ's blood to cleanse from sin - is substituted by personal sufferings and efforts.
- *Love* - the Christian's obedience to the commandments in response to the love of God, such as helping the poor - is mutated into a punishment! (Almsgiving is a principal form of penance).
- *Hope* - the Christian's joyful expectation to be in the presence of his Saviour - is changed into fear and dread in anticipation of the torments of purgatory.

Back to the Bible! May every one of us truly repents - detesting sin and turning to God, fully confident in his mercy and kindness. Let us trust completely in Christ whose blood cleanses from all sin. Let us love and do good works for no other purpose but to show our gratitude to God's goodness. Let us hope to the end for the grace - God's unmerited favour, our salvation - that is to be brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ.