



Biblical Foundations

Repentance & the Church—part 2

by Jack Spender

In the previous article, we were thinking about the Lord's command to the churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2, 3 NKJV) to repent. Many have written capably and at length on the order and content of the seven letters, but we shall confine our studies to the exhortations about repenting and the specific complaints that the Lord advanced.

Before proceeding, we should call to mind Paul's assertion, "Now all these things . . . are written for our admonition..." (1 Cor. 10:11), and ask whether we agree with that. If we do, then we will see that there is a message that is relevant for the church today.

The Seven Letters

Two of the seven churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, received no mention of repenting. The former was commended for suffering for the Lord's sake; the latter for faithfulness in spite of little strength. But in the other 5 letters, we find 8 references to the word "repent." Let's take a look.

The church at Ephesus (2:1 - 7) had much to be commended for, but had lost its first love. The Lord does not tell them, as we are often exhorted today, to stop focusing on "doing" and be more concerned about "being." Rather, He advises them that genuine repentance and a rekindling of first love would be known by a return to "the first works." A quick check of Acts 19, noting the willingness to sacrifice in the early days of the work, especially vss. 18-20, is instructive. The church had lost warmth and closeness in its relationship to the Lord, and needed to repent.

The church in Pergamum (2:12 - 17) struggled against Satanic activity, even witnessing the martyrdom of one brother. Yet the Lord protests against two forms of false doctrine that led to immorality and idolatry, and censures the church for not dealing with the problem. The church must repent, i.e., "turn around" in their passive tolerance for what the Lord hates.

The church in Thyatira (2:18 - 29) is commended for some excellent qualities, but has turned a blind eye to the roles God has established for His church, allowing a woman to teach and lead people astray

while claiming to be a prophetess. Opportunity for repentance was offered to her and her followers but was not accepted, so the Lord reprimands the church.

The church in Sardis (3:1 - 6) is marked by hypocrisy, having a reputation for life but being known to the Lord for deadness. Its works do not testify of godliness but of lethargy. Repent, says the Lord to the church, by calling to mind your honored heritage, and realizing that the coming of the Lord is at hand.

The church in Laodicea (3:14 - 22) is sunk in materialism, blinded to its true condition. The Lord reminds it that His love and chastening go together, and are calculated to

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lead toward repentance. He then offers a promise of fellowship to any individual that will seek a relationship with Him.

The Problems

Is it not plain that the things about which the Lord protested are not trivial but profoundly important - the heart of what the church is all about? Look again at the list of problems:

- Affection for the person of Christ diminishes.
- Faithfulness to Scripture and truth succumbs to what is popular.
- God-given roles for His people are sacrificed to "modern culture"
- A testimony of the abundant life gives way to mediocrity
- Contentment in the Lord is replaced with pride in worldly possessions

These things are affecting the church today. The adversary seeks to redefine worship as something mechanical and ritualistic, to cool the fervent spirit of fellowship with Christ and among believers. The bold preaching of sound doctrine can give way to sentimental homilies and preoccupation with money and shallow entertainment. Cold formalism with its form of godliness yet devoid of divine power results, as the church models itself after the world's philosophy of "unisex" to make itself more attractive. Thankfully, this is not universal, but it is a growing danger.

(Continued on page 4)

Biblical Foundations

Resisting False Doctrine

by Chuck Gianotti

Studies in Titus —(1:10-16 NASB)
Part 4

Years ago, when I was involved in a new church plant, there was a general feeling among the plant-team that we were leaving behind the old spiritual farm with its hobby-horses and the sacred cows. No more petty doctrinal squabbles, “unique” interpretations or turf wars. We were starting a church that would not waste valuable evangelism time dealing with dissenters or arguers.

Christianized Law

We should have read Titus 1:10 a bit more closely! It didn’t take long before we had our own versions of those people who would try to defile the fellowship. New churches tend to attract wandering Christians who are never satisfied with any church, always hoping the next one will be more “perfect,” to their liking. And there is no shortage of “prophets” looking for opportunities to perpetuate their own doctrinal peculiarities. The local congregation of God’s people cannot escape this fact, no matter how fresh and wonderful the beginning is.

Notice the apostle Paul identifies these kinds of people as “rebellious men.” He calls them “empty talkers and deceivers.” They may have large vocabularies and expound very educated sounding arguments, but their talk is void of spiritual truth and substance. While we should welcome *words* that convey wonderful truths, these men waste *words* on worthless nonsense—repetitive redundancy spoken in vain. They may claim that the glory of God is at stake but nothing spiritual really changes in anybody’s life. It’s as Paul writes elsewhere, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Col 2:23 NASB).

This is especially true of those who “profess to know God” (vs. 16) but are

“those of the circumcision” (vs. 10b). Today, in most of our churches, we don’t have people trying to pull us back to the Mosaic Law, like the Judaizers who relentlessly challenged Paul’s teaching on grace. However, there are many who effectively try to turn Christian truth and practice into a form of law.

Some require baptism in order to be saved. Baptism, to be sure, is a wonderful and important demonstration of outward identification with Christ. But it is not required for regeneration to take place!

For others, the teaching that be-

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lievers can lose their salvation puts them in the camp of the “circumcision” as well. If they were right, then the grace of the gospel of Christ would not really be a gift, because in order to keep it one must meet certain conditions. And if it is not genuinely of grace, then it must be of the law, a Christianized version of the law that says in order for you to be saved, you must keep the Christian law of right behavior. Paul censures the Galatians for this kind of thinking: “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? ... This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal 3:1–3). They were tempted to believe a different gospel (see Gal 1:6-10). Such teaching is anathema!

There are still others who agree that a Christian cannot lose his salvation but they live their lives, and teach others to do so, by a set of Christian rules and laws, rather than by the love of Christ. That alone is sufficient motivation for living the Christian life. They use fear to force conformity,

stressing a code of behavior while neglecting the deeper things of the Christian life, like Christ’s centrality, His pre-eminence, His love and grace. Thus the knowledge of Him and gratitude for His grace that should propel us is overshadowed.

To “those of the circumcision,” though, love and gratitude are not enough—they just can’t understand it. For after all, they argue, what do you do with the Christian who strays from the truth? Indeed there is a place for confrontation, exhortation and at times expulsion. But, too often those are the characteristic attitudes that project

throughout the fellowship which generate fear of non-compliance with the status quo.

What does the apostle John say? “Perfect love casts out all fear” (1 John 4:18). Dealing with erring believers should be motivated by genuine love. The desire

is genuinely to help him or her return to our glorious Lord, from a life of believing the lies of the world, the flesh and the devil, which destroy. There is a world of difference between arguing truth for the sake of winning the argument or being doctrinally correct or to bring conformity versus affirming the truth of the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ and faith in Him for living the way He has ordained for us (Eph 2:10).

So, that is why Paul wrote in verse 9, “...holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” False doctrine, while offering freedom, actually enslaves. Sad it is, though, that in some areas people use sound doctrine to bind Christians, turning beautiful truths into tools for control and manipulation. Such is the fulfillment of “empty words.”

Those “of the circumcision” then are considered to be “rebellious” because their behavior and teaching flatly contradict the grace of God. His truth is given as a grace, a gift, not as a burdensome law. And God will not tolerate such empty, worthless efforts, which

Continued on page 3

Overcoming A Complaining Spirit

by Mary Gianotti

Sitting on the front porch enjoying a beautiful end-of-summer Sunday morning before we left for services, I turned to Philippians 2. I needed to calm my heart and focus on the Lord. The words reminded me of Christ's humility and obedience. I kept reading, "Therefore my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed ... Do all things without complaining ..." (Phil 2: 14 ESV). That's when I felt it - the weight of my sin.

Elder's wives have plenty to grumble and complain about. Much is required of your husband. Often it seems too much. At times we put on pleasant faces when we are with God's people, even when discontentment contaminates our hearts.

We need to be careful that we do not pattern our lives after King Solomon,

whose demise was a slow process over a lifetime. In his younger years he was completely yielded to God but he repeatedly disobeyed God—and eventually his heart was not “fully with Yahweh his God” (1 Kings 11:4).

What God showed me that summer Sunday morning was this: complaining is an offense to God. It is disobedience; it is sin! If I justify it and minimize it like Solomon, it will affect my life as a leader's wife.

Growing older has its joys and privileges, but one of them is not having the luxury to complain. Paul reminds us that there is “one who is at work in us.”

How thankful I am for the Spirit. These days I am depending on Him to remind me, change my attitude and

make me “blameless”—so that I can “shine” for His glory “holding fast the word of life.” (Phil 2:15-16).

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain” (Phil 2:14-16).

How thankful I am for His Word. Without it I would often be oblivious to my disobedience. But, with His Word, my sin is exposed, and I come to the light of the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, our supreme example of walking in the light.



Resisting False Doctrine (continued from page 2)

work to reverse the reason for which He sent His Son, the One “full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14).

Must be silenced

Paul is unequivocal; such rebellious teachers must be silenced (vs. 11a). Their teaching is deceptive; they are like their father the “devil” (John 8:44). This is a violent reaction, akin to Jesus' response to the Pharisees, for in truth, such “Christian” false teachers share the spirit of the Pharisees. Like Jesus, elders must confront such with firm, unbending, aggressive confrontation. This is not a time for giving in to the tendency some have to avoid personal, direct conflict. I remember a church where a visitor stood up at the Lord's Supper and questioned the deity of Christ. An elder immediately arose and firmly asserted that that teaching was wrong and affirmed that Jesus Christ was fully God. There was no allowance for misunderstanding, no trying to discover a “sliver of truth” amidst the error. False teaching was identified and immediately confronted.

Confront the teacher, not just the teaching

It is not just false or worthless teaching that must be addressed. False teachers themselves need to be con-

fronted! Left unchecked, they stir up families and groups on the sly (vs. 11b). Their goal is some sort of profit, not necessarily financial (though judging from many TV evangelists' behavior, money certainly is a big part of false teaching). There are many ways to gain from being a purveyor of false teachings, not the least being a sense of power that comes with persuading others. Paul, in writing to Timothy, expands on this: “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited *and* understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain” (1 Timothy 6:3–5). Here in Paul's letter to Titus, he says, “Reprove them severely” (vs. 13).

False is easy, don't take the easy route

To make his point, Paul quotes a pagan prophet about his own people, the Cretans. The apostle is not making this judgment himself but uses one of

their own to make judgment on the Cretans (presumably the false teachers came from this background). The implication is that holding to the Word of God takes a lot of work. The easy way out is to simply fall into false doctrine. Certainly a gospel that involves works of righteousness appeals more readily to the natural man. It takes strenuous effort to hold firmly to the gospel of grace, as wonderful as it is, because it goes against the natural thinking of man. There must be something, the natural man thinks, which I can do to show that I am worthy. But grace is the free gift to those who recognize they are not, and cannot be, worthy of God's grace.

Let your mind be pure

What is the remedy for Titus and for all Christians (vs. 15)? Be pure in mind, don't make things complicated. Don't fall for clever, complicated schemes of doctrine. Don't allow false teachers to defile your minds. In short, ignore the false teaching, don't let it take root in your life or complicate the Christian life with worthless ways of thinking (14). In the end, what really makes the difference in resisting false teaching is when the whole church joins in with the elders and refuses to be influenced away from grace.



Repentance & the Church *(cont. from page 1)*

Elders: Men Who Take a Stand

What hope does the church have when facing the predicted coming apostasy, or departure from the faith? One fact is sufficient: "Greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world!" (I John 4:4). Victory will come not by imitating the world, but by being different from it—Biblically different.

Let's be practical about this. How can church elders see areas of need for a change of heart (repentance!)? Here are some diagnostic questions arranged in order of the letters considered that may spark discussion and prayer. You can add your own, as obviously, the list could be much longer.

Is the worship characterized by a warm spontaneity that marks the overflowing heart, or is it dull and routine, and critical of participation that is "not proper?" Do the saints love to be together and open their homes to one another and to visitors? Are prayer times well attended, mostly for prayer with enthusiastic praise for specific answers?

Is the teaching time in the church marked by messages that are manifestly the work of men who "labor in the word and doctrine" (I Tim. 5:17) presenting over time the whole counsel of God? Do the elders purpose that the feeding of the flock will eventually touch on all major Bible doctrines and give some acquaintance with all parts of Scripture? Is the church addressed as the "elect of God," "holy and beloved," or is it addressed as a mixed multitude? Are believers encouraged to be daily in the Word with

the family? Are the elders courageous and willing to stand against those "whose mouths must be stopped" because they undermine families (Titus 1:11)?

Is there teaching and modeling by the older believers of the Biblical truths of headship, especially that the men are learning to lead and the women are supporting this work?

Is there heart-warming ministry on the coming of the Lord, and humble unity as all seek the mind of Christ together?

Is the church's approach to finances a good example to families of good stewardship, having a sacrificial involvement in missions - both home and abroad, and a spirit of contentment and thankfulness for what the Lord provides? Do the more mature believers prefer dedication to the assembly and its work rather than to lavish homes, travels and pleasures?

Conclusion

It's a good thing when elders can even begin to inquire if the subject is relevant locally. Coming to personal exercise of heart precedes corporate concern and involves diligent prayer. Small steps can lead to larger ones as elders admit publicly when a particular decision was not wise and even ask forgiveness of the people. If the Spirit convicts about any of these major areas, perhaps in working through Rev. 2 and 3 together, the elders can lead toward repentance.

Beware of making it a complex matter! The Lord loves to forgive, and a simple admission of wrong and a request for help in putting the past away and depending on Him for the new direction being undertaken is sufficient. Experience has shown that rather than lowering esteem for the elders in the eyes of the people, such action increases respect for them, which is just another benefit of the good work of repentance in the church!



From the Q-File

We do well to remind ourselves of Martin Luther's so well stated thesis.

When asked to recant his beliefs, he is reported to have said, "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience." Then he added, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen." He was willing to live ... and die by this.



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