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REPENTANCE

The modern Christian world tends to discount the importance of doctrine because it only creates confusion. The confusion, of course, results from the many opinions of men as to what this doctrine really is. The Restoration Movement has once again called attention to the importance of the doctrine of Christ, Who placed emphasis upon the fact that, "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me" (John 7:16). When He taught, men were astonished at His doctrine because of the authority with which He taught (see Matthew 7:36-37; John 7:15).

Paul was thankful because the Roman Saints had obeyed the doctrine and had thus become the servants of righteousness (see Romans 6:17-18). He told Timothy that if he would take heed and continue "unto the doctrine," he would "both save thyself and them that hear thee" (1 Timothy 4:16). He warned the Galatians against any being, angel or man, who would teach any other doctrine (see Galatians 1:7-9) and predicted the time when men would not endure sound doctrine but heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears (see 2 Timothy 4:3). John warned that if men did not abide in the doctrine of Christ, they would not have God. He explained, "He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son" (2 John 1:9). Thus, we see that Christ and the apostles after Him placed great emphasis on the doctrine.

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

In the oft-quoted Hebrew letter, we find enumerated six of the principles of the doctrine of Christ (Hebrews 6:1-2). This is the purpose of Christ and His doctrine. The principles here enumerated are elementary; they form the basis of growth. But if we always stay right there and never go beyond, we will never reach the goal.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCTRINE

The principles of the doctrine of Christ must be constantly operative within our lives if we are to move toward Him at all.

Many teachers have used the analogy of a "gospel ladder" to explain the principles. Instead of the gospel ladder, let us think of the illustration of a great tree. When it is small, its roots are tiny, and there are not too many of them. However, as it grows upward, it does so in proportion to the growth of these roots. If the tree grows out of proportion to the roots, it is unstable; it will not stand the test of wind and storm and will fall. The roots serve two purposes for this tree: They gather strength and food so that the tree may grow, and they furnish the stability that keeps the tree standing against all forces of destruction. So it is with the principles of the doctrine of Christ. Repentance, faith, baptism, and the other principles reach out and bring into our lives the power of God, which in turn helps us grow. However, unless these principles themselves grow and become strong within us, our growth is unstable; and we will fall when faced with the crises of life.

The six principles, as we know them, fall into three natural divisions which cover the scope of man's relationships both here and in eternity. The first two, repentance and faith, are moral principles. To a great extent, these are things which are personal. I must repent as an individual. I must have faith within me. The next two, baptism and the laying on of hands, are sacramental. In these, man recognizes his need of covenanting with and receiving help from God. A man makes his allegiance with God through these principles or ordinances. He accepts in his life the Church and the authorized representatives of God. He thus reaches out past self to God and the Christian society. The last two principles are "eschatological" (having to do with immortality or life after death). As man responds to these principles, he reaches out beyond the span of mortal life and lives with the sense of immortality, seeking eternal life with God. Only as man lives with the sense of eternal values can he move on to perfection.

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

Webster says that repentance is “to feel pain or sorrow on account of something done or left undone—a change from past evil.” Paul tells that repentance is motivated by godly sorrow which demands a change in our lives (see 2 Corinthians 7:9-10). He indicates that worldly sorrow is not enough. This is typified by the example of a boy who gets caught swearing and has his mouth washed with soap. He is truly sorry, but mostly because he got caught and was punished. Such sorrow does not inspire change. Only as men are challenged by their love of God and the sense of their great need can they be moved to change from the evil of their lives.

True repentance is not satisfied by merely ceasing to do evil. Repentance inspired by godly sorrow does not work by self-pity or self-condemnation but rather by the challenge of learning to do well. It is in this sense that Isaiah said, “Wash ye; make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well” (Isaiah 1:16-17). When Judas recognized the wickedness of his betrayal of Christ, he was made truly sorry for that which he had done. However, he was not made sorry to the point of doing well. In a moment of self-pity and condemnation, he took his own life.

Without doubt, Peter also sorrowed much when he recognized the wickedness of his three-time denial of discipleship. The crowing of the cock brought this realization and must have filled his life with remorse for that which he had done. The difference between Judas and Peter can be called repentance. Judas hanged himself in his sin. Peter, sorrowing with a godly sorrow, went forth to rectify that which he had done and became one of the greatest of the witnesses for Jesus.

Ezekiel commanded, “Cast away from you all your transgressions . . . and make you a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:31). Here again we have embodied the idea of not only ceasing to do evil but of entering into a new way of life. This change might be *from* something done or *to* something left undone. The Kingdom languishes because of what men *do* and especially because of that which they *fail to do*. In his chastisement of the Saints as they were being driven out of Independence, God spoke of their transgressions: “They have not learned to be obedient . . . and do not impart of their substance” (D&C 102:2b). Men need to repent of the things they leave undone; because of the godly sorrow they feel, they will cease this “not doing” and through obedience to Christ will “make a new heart and a new spirit.”

Any consideration of repentance demands a consideration of what sin is and what transgression is. Sin is manifest in many ways; but basically it is rebellion against God and His way of life (or the way of life He has planned for man). This rebellion may be expressed as we move in the opposite direction to the divine purpose of life, as we move in the right direction but with less speed than if we used our full potential, and as we stand in the way or retard the progress of another. Sin is more than an act of a moment; it is a way of life. Inasmuch as repentance is a change from evil to good, we see a process. It is not a thing of a moment but of a lifetime.

WHY IS REPENTANCE NECESSARY?

We must repent that we might live. Jesus admonished, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3). Since repentance is the adjustment of man’s way of life to Christ’s way of life, repentance is necessary if man is to return to God. James said, “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye doubleminded” (James 4:8). Without having repentance, man cannot draw nigh to God and must stay forever separate from the source of all good, love, and mercy.

HOW CAN REPENTANCE WORK IN MY LIFE?

Basic to repentance in any life is recognition of the need for repenting. This is not an easy matter. It is natural for the sinner to defend himself. While most men do not sin willfully, many rationalize themselves into thinking they are not sinners. The fact is that sin blinds us. Somehow we must see ourselves for what we are and what we could be in relationship to Christ. There must come to us the conviction that God’s way is best. Paul recognized this as he said, “For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but to perform that which is good I find not, only in Christ” (Romans 7:19). Our repentance cannot be successful without divine

power. We thus need to bring ourselves into constant association with Christ—in thinking, acting, and speaking. In such association we find strength. If we love Him enough, this association will help us become like Him. To the extent that the Spirit of Christ dwells in us, sin must depart—for the two are not compatible. Thus, the process of repentance begins.

Repentance must be continuous. We must be aware of the danger of returning to the former way of life. As we drive sin from our lives, we must fill them with the joy of good works.

Repentance is more than ceasing to do evil. It is even more than learning to do well. It becomes complete when we come into obedience with all the Lord's commandments—when, having availed ourselves of all the help He offers, we have adjusted our lives to His way of life and moved toward the abundant life.

F. Henry Edwards wrote that repentance comes from the heart and becomes an upward change in the direction of a man's life—and it occurs because that man has met God, has felt God's rightful claim on his life, and has given to God the place which is His due. Repentance is a change of mind based on a change of heart and issuing in a changed way of living.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is doctrine important?
2. What scriptural evidence do we have that Christ believed and taught doctrine?
3. What is repentance?
4. Why is repentance necessary?
5. What are the basic elements of repentance?
6. How can repentance be a working factor in our daily lives?