

215 *We've been brainwashed by the church!*

After my last pontification, my friend 'John' gave me some more feedback. He was concerned, I think, at my statement that, 'God's central **message** is love and acceptance; God's **mission** is to defeat evil and restore relationships; God's **method** is to overcome evil with good.'

His first response was, 'the tenor of scripture puts repentance before restoration through Jesus' salvation', which I take to mean that we need first to concentrate (with unbelievers?) on sin before we can meaningfully talk about restoration.

But one of the problems, which I've exercised before,^[26,27] is the currently accepted meaning of 'repentance': *to feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin* (OED). So it's about me and what I do wrong and how I feel about it.

That is **not** the meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*, which most Bibles translate as 'repentance'.

I've just finished Tom Wright's *Hebrews for Everyone*, and his definition of repentance has it as 'turning back'. So yes, it's turning away from sin, but it's about turning back to God, to a person, and he also points to it being 'linked to the idea of return from exile' – more of a focus on God's rescue rather than on me, my sin, and my sorrow.

John also said 'Jesus criticises the church for not repenting – of sin, immorality etc.', which made me think of the first chapters of Revelation, and as I'm just about to start Wright's *Revelation for Everyone*, I scanned Revelation (and then the whole NT) for 'repent...'.

Yes, the Bible does sometimes talk of turning away from 'doing wrong', but not always, and there's also a strong strand of wrong *teaching* being the key issue... which brings me to my title.

My friend also commented that 'Christians also need to always be repenting', and my thought then was 'what kind of repenting?' and this is where I think we've been brainwashed by the church.

How about this prayer of confession at Communion? It was my introduction to the faith as a student in 1968:

Almighty God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
maker of all things, judge of all men:
We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness,
which we from time to time most grievously have committed,
by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine Majesty,
provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.
We do earnestly repent,
and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings;
the remembrance of them is grievous unto us,
the burden of them is intolerable.
Have mercy upon us,
have mercy upon us, most merciful Father;
for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,

forgive us all that is past;
and grant that we may ever hereafter
serve and please thee in newness of life,
to the honor and glory or thy Name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

OK, the Communion service goes on to emphasize Jesus' loving sacrifice for us, but what a start when you come to church to deepen your relationship with this loving God!

This prayer has been used for well over *three hundred years*, so the OED's definition of 'repentance' comes not from the Bible but from the Prayer Book!

Few people use this 1662 prayer now, but maybe service leaders should check that we're praying something more metanoia-like (i.e. biblical), emphasizing that it's only by God's work of grace that we can 'turn back'.

As the prostitute quoted by Philip Yancey on page 1 of *What's so amazing about grace?* says, 'Church! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse!'

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