

The Church Must First Repent - J. Edwin Orr

From the book of the same title, published in 1937

"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent." (Revelation 3:19)

The occurrence of the word "Repent" in the messages to the Seven Churches is truly remarkable. The word "Repentance" -- in the mind of the average Christian--is connected with sinners and not with professing Christians. And yet the word used throughout the New Testament in the presentation of the Gospel message to sinners is exactly the same word repeated by our Lord in His messages to the Seven Churches.

The word "Repent" occurs over seven times in these seven messages. It is omitted from two of them--Smyrna, the poor, persecuted Church--for a church in persecution is generally a purified one, and Philadelphia, the loyal Church, the Church that had kept the faith. The noun "metanoia" (repentance) is defined variously as a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of attitude, or a change of direction.

With this information borne in mind, let us examine the uses of the verb in the Revelation.

1. In the first message, Ephesus is described as an energetic church, patiently laboring for God, and perfectly sound in doctrine. "I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I

have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent..."

2. The (third) message to Pergamos complains of their eating of meat sacrificed to idols, of fornication committed, and of the holding of the hated doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. "Repent!"

3. Thyatira is likewise rebuked in the fourth message. And again repentance is urged.

4. The dying Church of Sardis is again commanded to repent.

5. And Laodicea is urged to repent as well.

Before we come to the application of these messages, it is appropriate that we should consider the nature of the word "Church" for the simple reason that many people repudiate it as applying to a really Christian Church. "Ekklesia" the word used, may be interpreted "assembly" or "gathering of called-out ones", or "convention " in the best sense of the word (being convened). It occurs more than a hundred times in the New Testament, and is always translated "Church" with the exception of the instances regarding the Civic Assembly in Ephesus.

In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, the word Ekklesia is used along with the Greek for Synagogue to translate the Hebrew Kahal, which fact throws further light on the subject. For Kahal is used variously in the Old Testament to denote a called-out assembly of Israel or of a tribe, or an assembly gathered out for worship.

So whether we use the word "Church" to denote the general professing Church, or the actual Church of believers, there are lessons to be learned. It is when we study the message to the Church of the Laodiceans that we find our message. The condition of the Laodicean Church fits our present-day state in Christendom exactly.

"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked...As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me"

Can this be made to apply to the spiritual condition of believers ? Let us see. First of all, Laodicea was an ekklesia, a gathered-out assembly for worship. Secondly, it is suggested that this church was in a peculiar relationship with the Lord, because of the words : "All whom I hold dear, I reprove and chastise."

"For whom the Lord loveth," says the writer of Hebrews, " He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons, for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not ? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons."

Which makes me think that the rebuke given Laodicea may be fairly applied to believers. Lukewarmness, self-satisfaction., halfheartedness, backsliding, formalism, indifference, self righteousness, greed for gold, worldliness, pride, self-deception, spiritual destitution, blindness and lack of vision, easily-seen-through--these are the characteristics of Laodicea, and these are the characteristics abounding to-day.

What would anyone think of an individual who possessed all these characteristics ...surely the greatest backslider living! But examine the position collectively. Are there any lukewarm Christians in your church ?

Any self-satisfied ?
Any indifferent ?
Any self-righteous ?
Any backsliding?
Any formalistic ?
Any half-hearted ?
Any greedy after lucre ?
Any worldly ?
Any proud ?
Any self-deceived ?
Any spiritually destitute ?
Any without vision ?
Any shameless ?

Put together they look rather bad. If the majority of your church members share a majority of these indications of spiritual poverty, then your church is a Laodicean church. And if the majority of churches in your district are thus backslidden, then everything said to Laodicea applies to your neighbourhood. What would you do with an individual Christian who was thus backslidden in heart and life ? You would first pray for him. You would seek to show him his need. You would seek to make him concerned about his need. You would point out to him the life more abundant. You would tell him that Calvary means power, and that Christ will restore.

All that has been said about individuals applies with equal force to the larger groups in which individual Christians find themselves a place. The life of the majority of churches and societies is sub-normal, stunted in growth, paralysed instead of powerful. What is the trouble ? It is just general backsliding. The author was once told by an agnostic: "I think I would be a Christian [if it were not] for the Christians." Another man, of communistic views, is reported having said to a parson: "I have a regard for your Jesus, but I am sure I see no connection between Him and the life of your church." Churches, and all other groups of Christians, are

just like individuals--either they are growing in grace or else they are backsliding. Such backsliding is often a vicious circle, for spiritual poverty produces worldliness, and worldliness brings greater spiritual poverty.

Little by little, the church loses its grip on essential things, becomes a social club, goes to sleep or flies off at a tangent. All over the world we find sleeping churches, and all round them are the gospel-starved masses. Instead of performing the first thing of importance, evangelising the masses, they are engaged in a bewildering variety of pastimes-- anything but the real thing. It has pleased the Lord to intervene at times to bring back His people to a more normal life. This is called revival. Revival, it must be noted, is solely the concern of believers, and is not an evangelistic campaign as many seem to think, although such a gospel effort may be the outcome of revival among Christians.

The greatest need of the churches today is revival.

Revival is of course a matter for individuals as well as churches--and in such cases, it is often called 'full surrender', or 'a clean heart', or 'victory over sin',--the term is not of such vast importance provided we recognise that the experience is simply the forsaking of a subnormal experience for the normal Christian life. This is individual revival. Returning to the words of Scripture, we find the message of the Lord blunt and powerful. " I counsel thee..." There is no mistaking what the Lord thinks of that Church. His denunciation; "You say that you stand in need of nothing " is met by an offer of pure gold instead of dross, clothing instead of shame, ointment to cure the blindness.

Again...repentance ! What does it mean? Be in earnest, and change your warped mind, change your backslidden heart, change your wrong attitude, change your contrary direction. Repent ! The next exhortation is one of mixed tenderness and urgency; "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in and

sup with him, and he with Me." This plea, preached so often with effect to unregenerate sinners, would be even more effective with believers in the Church.

It is the Lord Christ Who stands outside the door of the Laodicean Church. He is patiently, tenderly knocking. Few hear Him, and many of those that do are too busy with other things to open the door. And those that are eager to open the door are often hindered by others who stand in the way. Still He is knocking. To the individual, there is wonderful comfort. Christ does not say, " If you persuade all the rest to let Me in----" but rather " If any man hear My voice" Individual responsibility is as great regarding revival as regarding salvation. Letting Christ into the heart means revival for the individual who does it.

If "revival is the reception by the church of life abundant," revival is also reception by the individual of the life abundant. Revival has always begun through the obedience of individuals. Four young men, together with individuals scattered throughout the Province, prayed down the Ulster Revival Of 1859. Evan Roberts and other individual servants of God prayed down the Welsh Revival Of 1904. God lit little fires here and there, in individual homes, and when they became numerous the place went on fire. Andrew Gih, listening to a plea made by Paget Wilkes, in Shanghai, did not wait until the rest of China was moved. He opened his heart to revival, and God has been using him as a revivalist ever since. Instances could be multiplied.

"If any man hear My voice, I will come in and sup with him, and he with Me." Revival must begin somewhere. It must begin in some heart. Who knows but it might start with You ? Many Christians are waiting for a collective stirring...something which will be labeled "revival" right away. God is waiting for individual stirrings, and He is waiting for you. Get the perspective right. "If any man..."

The Church will be moved when its members are moved. Who will be one of Revival's advance guard? And so the fact remains, revival is the greatest need of both individual and Church. We must not regard revival as some supernatural occurrence which we cannot understand. Revival for the individual is simply deeper blessing. Revival in the Church is simply deeper blessing. And deeper blessing is the reward for growth in grace. One finds that certain groups of Christians and certain schools of thought put forward their own formula for revival. It is our strong conviction that God's truth is always simple--it has nothing complicated about it. The Lord stirs up His people in many mysterious ways, but the fact remains, He has promised revival to those who ask, to those who will pay the price.

Thus we see the greatest tragedy of all--this paralysing, deadly backsliding is wholly unnecessary, wholly uncalled for. At any time, an individual or a church may receive "blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

Sin is very deceptive. The backslider or backsliding Church makes all the excuses possible for the deplorable state of backsliding and powerlessness. There may be a noticeable amount of energy--that is all part of the pretence. Backsliders see so few better than themselves that they begin to feel secure--they lull themselves to sleep, and snore so loudly that they cannot hear the call "Awake." But many individuals feel a sense of disappointment and failure. Their hearts are hungry for deeper blessing. Many more pretend that their lives are all right, when they are not all right. They are more dangerous than conscious backsliders, for they are always praying for blessing upon 'somebody else', ignoring their own greater need.

Pretence and disappointment-disappointment and pretence. This is the condition of multitudes of starved Christians. The author has been privileged to witness God's power manifested in many genuine revivals--and it has always been noticed that those who are disappointed

get a glimpse of new hope...those who pretend get shown up. "Search me, O God, and know my heart : try me, and know my thoughts ; see if there be any wicked way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting."

The important thing to remember is repentance is the prelude to revival.
The Church must first Repent.