

Great Revivalists On Repentance

I have heard numerous speakers, who rarely if ever preach Biblical repentance messages to the unsaved and to believers, claim to be longing for revivals like the great preachers Whitefield, Finney, Moody, Spurgeon, Evan Roberts and Billy Graham experienced. So let us examine some of the things these great revivalists preached about repentance.

John Calvin

John Calvin linked faith to repentance at conversion when he said:

*“Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith. For since pardon and forgiveness are offered through the preaching of the gospel in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the Kingdom of God, surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance... Yet, when we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to birth; but we mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God’s grace.”*¹

George Whitefield

George Whitefield was used by God in the 1700’s in preaching the Gospel to multitudes of unsaved churchgoers and non-churchgoers in the Great Awakening and other revivals. Among many other things, he placed a heavy emphasis on repentance. Here is an example of a part of the type of messages on repentance he preached regularly during these revivals:

*“Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. – Luke 3:3 ...Repentance **denotes an abhorrence of evil and forsaking of it.***

THE NATURE OF REPENTANCE

*It is hatred of sin. It is not just confessing yourselves to be sinners, it is not merely knowing your condition to be sad and deplorable. This is in vain so long as you continue in your sins. It is the forsaking of sin. Resolve to leave all your sinful lusts and pleasures. Abhor, renounce, forsake your old sinful course of life and serve God in holiness and righteousness the rest of your life. If you lament and bewail past sins and do not forsake them, your repentance is in vain; you are mocking God and deceiving your own soul.”*²

Here Whitefield is mixing teaching on repentance at conversion and the resulting post-conversion fruits of repentance.

¹ John Calvin, “Institutes of Christian Religion” Book 3, Chapter 3, Points 1 and 2.

² “Whitefield’s Sermon Outlines”, selected and edited by Sheldon B. Quincer, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1956, pages 67-68.

Charles Finney's explosive comments on repentance

The modern evangelist and teacher, Winkey Pratney wrote the following about Charles Finney, the 19th century preacher:

*"Few writings or ministries have impressed me as much over the years as those of that giant of revival, Charles G. Finney...Finney was a holy ignitionist, or more properly a spiritual arsonist, a man with a message that burned through the religious dead wood and secular darkness of his time...Like his Lord, he shocked and shook saint and sinner alike. He was radical in everything from his methods, message and motives to the unclerical clothes he preached in; and he was criticised for almost everything except being dull, tame, or boring."*³ Finney stressed:

*"The individual who truly repents not only sees sin as detestable, vile, and worthy of abhorrence but he hates it in his heart. A person may see sin to be hurtful and abominable and still love it, desire it, and cling to it. But when he truly repents, he wholeheartedly abhors and renounces it..."*⁴

D. L. Moody

D.L. Moody (1837-1899) was one of the most successful evangelists in the history of the church. On the front cover of Moody's biography, his son claimed about _____ people were converted under Moody's ministry. Here is a part of a sermon on Luke 14:19 by Moody in his later years. It relates to the excuses unbelievers all make to justify them not turning to Jesus Christ: *"The gospel in this parable is represented as a feast, and there was an invitation extended to these three men to come to the feast. 'And they all with one consent began to make excuse.' It does not say that they had an excuse, but they made excuse – (they) manufactured one for the occasion. Now, I venture to say that if I should go down among the congregation here tonight every man that has not accepted this invitation would be ready with an excuse. You have all got excuses. You would have one right on the end of your tongue. You would be ready to meet me the moment I got to you. If I met that excuse, then you would get another and you would hide behind that... The longer I live, the more I am convinced that the reason men do not come to Christ is because they do not want to give up sin. That is the trouble. It is not their intellectual difficulties. It is quite popular for people to say that they have got intellectual difficulties; but if they would tell the honest truth it is some darling sin that they are holding on to. They are not willing to give up the harlot; they are not willing to give up gambling; they are not willing to give up the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. That is the trouble. It is not their intellectual difficulties as much as it is their darling sin."*⁵

Charles Spurgeon

Charles Spurgeon was a great revivalist preacher. The Metropolitan Tabernacle, the local church in England which Spurgeon pastored grew to over 6,000 people while he was the leader.

Acts 5:31 says: ***"Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins"***. When preaching on this verse, Spurgeon said:

³ Charles Finney, "Crystal Christianity", Whitaker House, Springdale, 1985, page 5.

⁴ Ibid, pages 20, 24 and 27.

⁵ D. L. Moody, "Great Pulpitt Masters", Volume 1, Fleming H. Revell, New York, 1949, with an introduction by Charles R. Erdman, pages 237-240.

*“Repentance and forgiveness are riveted together by the eternal purpose of God. What God has joined together let no man put asunder. Repentance must go with remission. You will understand this if you give it some thought. It cannot be that pardon of sin should be given to an impenitent sinner. This would only confirm him in his evil ways and teach him to think little of evil. If the Lord were to say, ‘You love sin and live in it, and you are going on from bad to worse, but all the same, I forgive you,’ this would proclaim a horrible license for iniquity...It is not a true repentance which does not come of faith in Jesus. It is not a true faith in Jesus which is not colored with repentance. Faith and repentance like Siamese twins are vitally joined together...Faith and repentance are but two spokes in the same wheel, two handles of the same plow. Repentance has been well described as a heart broken for sin and from sin...It is a change of mind of the most thorough and radical sort.”*⁶

Charles Spurgeon emphasised that true repentance is inspired by the Holy Spirit through God’s grace. But Spurgeon also attacked the unbiblical foolish notion that new believers cannot repent through the power of the Holy Spirit but must have the Holy Spirit or Jesus Christ repent for them: *“Repentance of sin is as truly the work of grace as the making of an atonement by which sin is blotted out. Salvation, from first to last, is of grace alone. Do not misunderstand me. It is not the Holy Spirit who repents. He has never done anything for which He should repent. If he could repent, it would not help us. We ourselves must repent of our own sin, or we are not saved from its power. It is not the Lord Jesus Christ who repents. What should he repent of? We ourselves repent with the full consent of every faculty of our mind. The will, the affections, and the emotions all work together most heartily in the blessed act of repentance for sin. And yet, at the back of all which is our personal act, there is a secret holy influence which melts the heart, gives contrition, and produces a complete change.”*⁷

The main emphases of Evan Roberts’ preaching

In the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905, at least 100,000 Welsh people were converted. Only about one-quarter of these had backslidden when a survey was done a few years later.⁸ One of the main leaders of the Welsh Revival was Evan Roberts. Roberts said: *“The prophecy of Joel is being fulfilled. There the Lord says, ‘I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh’ (Joel 2:28). If that is so, all flesh must be prepared to receive. (You desire an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in your city? You do well. But remember, four conditions must be observed. They are essential:*

*1. **The past must be clear,** every sin confessed to God, any wrong to man must be put right. (Have you forgiven everybody – everybody? If not, don’t expect forgiveness for your sins. Better offend ten thousand friends than grieve the Spirit of God – or quench Him.) 2. **Everything doubtful** must be removed once and for all out of our lives. (Is there anything in your life you cannot decide whether it is good or evil? Away with it. There must not be a trace of a cloud between you and God.) 3. **Obedience,** prompt, implicit, unquestioning, **to the Spirit of God.** (At whatever cost do what the Holy Spirit prompts without hesitation or fear.) 4. **Public confession of Christ.** (Multitudes are guilty of long and loud profession. **Confession of Christ as Lord** is of recent date.”⁹*

Billy Graham stresses repentance as a necessity

The great evangelist Billy Graham preaches repentance as a necessary prerequisite in order to be born again, as his following words indicate:

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, “All of Grace”, Whitaker House, Springdale, 1983, pages 99, 103 and 104.

⁷ Ibid, page 105-106.

⁸ J. Edwin Orr, “The Flaming Tongue”, Moody Press, Chicago, 1973, page 28.

⁹ Winkie Pratney, “Revival”, Whitaker House, Springdale, 1983, pages 180-181.

“How to Become Born again

First, realize that you are a sinner in God’s eyes... We have all broken the Law of God, and we all deserve nothing but God’s judgement and wrath...

Second, realize that God loves you and sent his Son to die for you. You deserve to die for your sins, but Christ died in your place.

Third, repent of your sins. Repentance comes from a Greek word meaning ‘a change of mind.’ It means that I admit I am a sinner, and that I feel sorry for the fact I have sinned. But repentance also means I actually turn my back on my sins – I reject them – and determine by God’s grace to live as He wants me to live. Jesus said, ‘unless you repent, you will all likewise perish’ (Luke 13:3). Repentance involves a willingness to leave sin behind, and turn my life over to Jesus Christ as Lord of my life. We see ourselves as God sees us and we pray, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ (Luke 18:13).

Fourth, come by faith and trust to Christ. Salvation, the bible tells us, is a free gift.”¹⁰

The emphasis on repentance among early Pentecostals

The early Pentecostals had a very strong emphasis on repenting of sin, unbelief and wrong attitudes to God and Christ. Frank Bartleman was a participant in the Azuza Street Pentecostal outpouring in Los Angeles. He is representative of the original Pentecostals when he said, “I received from God early in 1905 the following keynote to revival: ‘The depth of revival will be determined exactly by the depth of the spirit of repentance.’”¹¹ How different from this are many modern compromising Western Pentecostals!

Study Question

1. List the main points which each of the revivalists Whitefield, Finney, Moody, Spurgeon, Evan Roberts and Billy Graham spoke about repentance.

¹⁰ Billy Graham, “The Holy Spirit”, Collins, London, 1979, page 59.

¹¹ Frank Bartleman, “Azuza Street”, Logos International, Plainfield, N.J., 1980, page 19.