

The Book of Acts: The Role of Repentance in Church Renewal

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When John the Baptist, whom God had sent to be the official forerunner of the Messiah to prepare the way for His coming, began his public ministry in the wilderness of Judea and along the shores of the Jordan, the content of his preaching was, briefly stated: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (Mat. 3:2). He baptized and preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Mk. k. 1: 4). And the people who heard John, confessing their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (Mat. 3:6).

When Jesus, the One whose arrival John the Baptist had announced, began His public ministry, He picked up with the work where John had left off. After John was put in prison, Jesus us went into Galilee, proclaiming the Good News of God. "The time has come," He said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News" (Mk. 1:14-15).

It was a call to repentance which both Jesus and His forerunner issued.

Nor is this all. The call to repentance was not just a message to be proclaimed until the kingdom of God might be fully established by the work of Jesus. This call did not cease with the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the forty days following His resurrection, while Jesus instructed His chosen apostles about matters of the kingdom of God and outlined their work for them, the message which he gave them to proclaim might be summed up briefly in these words: This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:46-47).

The content of the proclamation is not essentially new or different. What has changed is that the sufferings, death, and resurrection, which were anticipated in John's and Jesus' ministry, have now occurred. What is new is that now the preaching is to and for all nations. What Jesus had proclaimed in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, His Church is now to proclaim in the whole world. Again it is a call to repentance which Jesus issues and which is to continue for all time and to the end of the world. That means that it is our responsibility and privilege to proclaim this message still today, since the end of the world has not yet come.

In this anniversary year of Martin Luther's birth, the 500th, we also note the importance of a true understanding of repentance, since several of the 95 theses posted on the door of the Castle Church, in Wittenberg, Germany, dealt with repentance and the terrible errors which cause mental anguish and despair when repentance is not properly understood. Martin Luther's early life was a case in point.

Before we begin, then, to discuss the role of repentance in Church renewal as we come to know it in the Book of Acts, let us regress, for a moment to study repentance itself to certify that we are all clear in our understanding of it.

Repentance: What is it?

Unsatisfactory definitions of "repentance" or the word repent, can be extremely damaging. But, where may we turn for a correct definition? What happens, for instance, when we turn to the dictionary for help? *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* says under the word "repent," "to turn from sin out of penitence for past wrongdoings, abandon sinful or unworthy purposes and values, and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life." And then it gives the example from Scripture, "unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 33:3). Other definitions are: to feel regret or contrition for what one has done or omitted to do, to change one's mind about something one has done or said. The *Century Dictionary and Encyclopedia* says: "Repentance is a change of mental and spiritual habit respecting sin, involving a hatred of and sorrow because of it and a hearty and genuine abandonment of it in the conduct of life. *Reader's Digest* made a summary of what repentance is supposed to be when it quoted the words, "repentance is when you are sorry enough not to do it again." *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says: "Repentance or contrition in both Protestant and Catholic

theology, as defined by the Council of Trent, is a grief of mind and detestation of sin committed with the purpose of sinning no more.” It also goes on to say: “Until the time of the Reformation no one ever thought of denying the necessity of contrition for the forgiveness of sin.” However, the Lutheran Church has never denied the need of contrition, or sorrow over sin.

The chief difficulty in understanding the words “repent” and “repentance” lies in man’s ideas, by nature, that he is somehow able to contribute to his salvation. Our sinful nature hears those words “repent” and repentance and immediately thinks that he is supposed to respond, do something, achieve something, cooperate. The problem is compounded by the fact that “repent” and “repentance” do not convey the etymological and literal “change of mind” which the Greek word “*metanoia*” suggests.

Similarly, those who are under the influence of the German language must shake off the German term for repentance and its connotations. The word “*Busse*” and its derivatives raise in our minds the idea of betterment, improvement, and satisfaction. Thus “*Busse*” becomes almost equivalent to expiation or satisfaction. The mildest form of rendering satisfaction demands that satisfaction be rendered by the guilty one. Thus, again, something must be done by the repentant individual. A false interpretation of “repentance” is the result.

Repent simply anglicizes the Latin, “*agite poenitentiam*” of the Vulgate. It is not unusual that to many Christians repent means “do penance.” According to the Roman Catholic conception, repentance embraces three acts: contrition of the heart, confession of the mouth, and satisfaction of the deed. One who desires to repent must first of all rend his heart thoroughly, so that he actually regrets his lapse and is troubled by painful feelings. Furthermore, he must express his regret before God by making a complete confession of his sin and all its particulars before God’s representative, the priest. Finally, by submitting to the penance imposed by the priest he must make reparation for his sin and render satisfaction to God.

In order to arrive at a proper understanding of the terms “repent” and “repentance,” it will be necessary for us to shake off the English definitions that are so commonplace and the German and Latin influences.

The Lord revealed His truth through the medium not of English, German, and Latin, but of the Hebrew and Greek languages. For a correct analysis, therefore, of the words “repent” and “repentance,” we must base our interpretation on the meaning which these words had in the original text of Scripture.

In the April 1978 issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Prof. Richard Balge has an article entitled, “Preaching Repentance and Remission of Sins - With Application to Personal Witnessing.” The paper is based on the words of Luke 24:47: “and repentance and remission of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” In the context of that paper, Prof. Balge does an excellent word study of “*metanoia*.” It would be well worthwhile for us to review that for our topic of discussion today.

“The Bauer lexicon (Arndt-Gingrich) lists 24 verbs and 5 nouns which are compounds with “*meta*.” All in some way reflect the sense of change, removal, reversal, exchange. “*Metanoia*” is translated as “a change of mind, remorse, repentance, turning around, conversion.” “A change of mind’ is literal, but what about the derived meanings? How did our word come to mean those things as it is used in the New Testament?

Kittel’s *Woerterbuch* (Bromily) traces the use of the verb and the noun in Volume IV, pages 975-1008. In classical usage the change of mind was “not restricted to rational self-criticism ... it is often accompanied by lively feelings..., expresses pain or grief at what has happened ... and in this way has an ethical character ... For the Greeks ‘*metanoia*’ never suggests an alteration in the total moral attitude, a profound change in life’s direction, a conversion which affects the whole conduct... (In) the Stoic view...the wise man is above a ‘*metanoia*.’ This would not show him to be in harmony with himself. It would represent him as the victim of error... These ideas do not constitute a bridge to what the New Testament understands by ‘*metanoia*.’”

Before considering “*metanoia*” in the LXX and other Jewish literature, Kittel examines the concept in the Old Testament. “There is in the OT no special tt. for “repentance” or “to repent.” But the concept is by no means absent ... The prophets. . . regarded a common secular term as quite adequate to express the process they had in view, and they thus preferred it in their own usage. This word is “*SHUB*”.... The sense of turning about is perhaps the best general rendering ... The object of return ... is either expressly or contextually Yahweh, only

once (Neh. 9:29) the Torah. The object of turning from evil conduct....previous conduct, evil.... wicked acts...violence. . . idols. . . abomination. . . . Sin in the various terms.

Examples of the use of 'SHUB' on the sense of turning from an object *to* an object are: Isaiah 10:20ff-- Now it will come about in that day that the remnant of Israel.. . will never again rely on. the one who struck them, but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. Jeremiah 3:22f.—“Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness.” ‘Behold, we come to Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God. Surely, the hills are a deception, a tumult on the mountains. Surely, in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.’” Jeremiah 25:5f.—Turn now everyone from the evil of your deeds, and, dwell on the land which the Lord has given to you and to your forefathers forever and ever; and do not go after other gods to serve them and to worship them, and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands, and I will do you no harm.’ Jeremiah 2 6:3-- “ Perhaps they will listen and everyone will turn from his evil way. . . “ Hosea 6:3 -- “Come, let us return to the Lord. Hosea 14:1 -“Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.”

When we get to the LXX the plot thickens. The LXX never uses '*metanoëo*' to render 'SHUB' it uses '*epistrephoo* (-*omai*)' or '*apostrephoo* (-*omai*).' '*Metanoëo*' is used 34 times to translate the niphal of '*NahCHaM*,' "regret". But '*NiCHaM*,' and '*SHUB*,' though they have different basic meanings, both denote movement away from a position previously adopted, and are thus often used as parallels (Jer. 4:2 8; Ex. 32:12); religiously, they can be synonyms, cf. Jer. 8:6... with 31:18ff... The result is that in the LXX '*metanoëo*' and '*epistrephoo*' seem to be related in meaning... '*Metanoëo*' thus approximates to... '*SHUB*,' the OT technical term for religious and ethical conversion" (Kittel IV, 989f). An example of the use of these words in tandem is Acts 3: 1 9 -- '*metanoëelsate oun kal epistrepsate pros to exaleiphtheenat humoon.tas hamartias*.' Act's 26:20 is another.

Kittel further reports that later Greek translations of the Old Testament, Greek apocrypha and pseudepigrapha and Philo turned from '*epistrephoo*' to '*metanoëo*' in rendering '*SHUB*.' '*Metanoia*' is speaking implicitly of a turn from evil to God.

In order to understand the mission of the Apostles in the Book of Acts, let us briefly consider the message which our Lord gave them to preach. In Luke 2 4:47, we are told that Jesus said, "repentance and forgiveness of sins' will be preached in His name to all nations.'

The 'and' joining "repentance and forgiveness of sins" may be a simple conjunctive. In that case, what is to be preached is "repentance, and forgiveness of sins, " two related, but distinct objects of what "will be preached." We have an example of a simple "*kai*" conjunctive joining repentance and forgiveness of sins in Acts 5:31.

“God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.”

In Luke 24:47, Luther treats repentance and forgiveness of sins as Law and Gospel. The Law-Gospel construct in terms of "repentance and forgiveness of sins" is expressed by Luther In "The Keys," 1530: "the key which binds carries forward the work of the Law... In short, the two keys advance and foster the Gospel by simply proclaiming these two things: repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47)" (Am. Ed., 40, 373).

The terms are separated and repentance is treated as something distinct from "forgiveness of sins" in the Formula of Concord (S.D., V, 8): "to repent means nothing else than truly to acknowledge sins, to be heartily sorry for them, and to desist from them." Article XI, pointing to the "all nations", says "as the preaching of repentance, so also the Promise of the Gospel is 'universalis,' that is, it pertains to all men" (F. C., S. D. XI, 28).

In *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* Dr. Walther equates "repentance" in Luke 24:47 with contrition (p.249). So, he also treats repentance and forgiveness of sins as distinct but related concepts. He is reading '*kai*' conjunctive. The church's proclamation to all nations is a proclamation of Law and Gospel. It is

the message for all people, the converted as well as the unconverted. It is a message of God's hatred and wrath over sin, as well as God's gracious promises of forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.

In the Apology (XII, 30) we read: "the sum of the proclamation of the Gospel is to denounce sin, to offer the forgiveness of sins and righteousness for Christ's sake, to grant the Holy Spirit and eternal life, and to lead us as regenerated men to do good. Christ gives this summary of the Gospel in the last chapter of Luke (24:47)." It is evident, here, that "Gospel" is being used in the wider sense, including Law and Gospel.

It is possible to read the 'kai' in 'repentance and, forgiveness of sins' as an exegetical 'kai.' The phrase would then be translated: "repentance, that is forgiveness of sins." The understanding, here, is quite obvious that, repentance is more than just contrition following a preaching of God's Law. It also includes the turning in faith to the Savior from sin for forgiveness and eternal life. It is a synonym for "conversion." That is something which only the Word of God could effect. The preaching of "repentance, that is, the forgiveness of sins, is then the means of grace to bestow remission of sins. Each term stands for the Gospel.

That understanding of the 'kai' reminds us that the object of preaching for John, Jesus, and His apostles is always, in the last analysis, the message of Christ, the Savior. "Repentance" is sometimes a word that summarizes the whole proclamation. Then it includes also "forgiveness of sins." "Forgiveness of sins" is a term that sometimes summarizes the whole proclamation. Then it, too, includes repentance. The object of the church's preaching is always the Gospel, no matter how that Gospel is summarized.

We should also remember that both repentance and forgiveness of sins are God's work. Today, there are many false prophets proclaiming that repentance is man's work. That he has the ability within himself to bring this about. More will be said of this later, but the Scriptures are clear. There is no room for synergism in repentance or in conversion. "God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior, that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to, Israel." (Acts 5:31). "Those who oppose Him He must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (II Tim , 2:2 5). Let that suffice for now. Whenever we speak of repentance or conversion, we are speaking of things which only God can effect.

Prof. John P. Meyer's dogmatics notes summarize what has been developed exegetically. We read: "The transition of a man from the state of sin into the state of faith is variously designated in Scripture as: Repentance - Regeneration - Illumination. The term most commonly used is Conversion. Repentance describes the change properly, the other expressions are metaphorical. Repentance is a change of heart in which a person regrets his sinfulness and through faith embraces the grace of God. Repentance has a double aspect. a) it involves 1) terrors of conscience over sin (contrition). On the fact cf. Mk. 1:15; Acts 8: 22; 2 Cor. 12:21. 2) Faith as its, principal element. a) On the fact cf. Lk 15:7, 10; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 16:31 b) This faith follows contrition (logically, not temporally). b): No other element ever being mentioned, 1) These two emotions may be said to constitute repentance. 2) A new obedience in good works is the fruit of repentance cf. Mt. 3:11; Acts 26:20... repentance of a sinner is the work of God. 1) it is the aim of God's calling. Cf. Luke 2 4:4 7; Acts 17:3 0; 20:21; 26:2 0. 2) it is directly called a work of God. Cf. Acts 5:3 1; and 11:18. 3) The means for repentance are the means of grace. Cf. Luke 24:47...Exhortations to repent are Gospel invitations, effecting themselves what they call for. 1) They presuppose and declare man's utter sinfulness. In so far they have the effect of Law... 2) Their purpose is: not to condemn', but to rescue ... cf Acts 2:3 8; 3:19.

In Edward Koehler's *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (p. 135) we have a good, clear, concise definition of repentance "Repentance is more than a ritual observance or an outward confession; it is something that takes place in the heart. The term, which is the translation of a Greek word meaning 'change of mind,' is used in a narrower and in a wider sense. Whenever it is used together with 'faith' (Acts 20:2 1) and 'believe' (Mark 2:17), it usually includes both, sorrow over, sin and faith in the forgiveness of sins. Sorrow over sin is the response and reaction of, the heart to the voice of the Law; faith is the response and reaction of the heart to the voice of the Gospel. The Augsburg Confession (Article XII) describes repentance thus: "Now repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin; the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, and believes that, for Christ's

sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers from its terrors. The good works are bound to follow which are the fruit of repentance.” Strictly speaking, conversion takes place the moment a person trusts in Christ for the remission of sins. Sorrow over sin is a prerequisite of this faith, and good works are the fruit of this faith.

Let us now study the Book of Acts, where we see, the apostles carrying out the mission, which our Lord had given them to do, with the message, which He had given them to proclaim, “repentance and forgiveness, of sins.” (Luke 24:17) and the blessed results, which are the Lord blessings on the apostles’ labors.

The Preaching of Repentance in the Book of Acts: Church Growth Recorded

We have studied the message which our Lord gave His apostles to proclaim, repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations (Luke 24:47). In the Book of Acts we see His faithful apostles conveying this message to the world following the Day of Pentecost, faithfully carrying out the Lord’s instructions. Again and again throughout the Book of Acts, we note the blessed results of the apostles’ preaching, souls won for the kingdom of God. “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (2:47). “But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand” (4:4). - Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (5:14). We could go on and on citing examples of the Lord’s blessings on the apostles’ labors. The Church showed remarkable growth, because the Lord was blessing the message He had given His apostles to proclaim.

Let us now go on a brief tour through the Book of Acts to see the role that repentance plays in the renewal, or growth, of the early Christian Church.

As we begin, we note that the word “repent” is used five times in the Book of Acts, and the word repentance is used six times. There are certainly more occasions than that mentioned in the Book of Acts, when church growth was experienced. That does not mean, however, that this growth was accomplished through other means than through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins, the means of grace, the proclamation of Law and Gospel and the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. We must remember that Luke had already explained to Theophilus in his former book, the Gospel of St. Luke, the instructions which our Lord had given to His apostles prior to His ascension concerning the message they were to proclaim (Luke 24:47). Also, when the apostles went about their task of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins, it was not always necessary to say those very words, because the message they proclaimed had already effected those things in the hearts of their hearers. The preaching of Law and Gospel, wherever church growth was experienced, was in all cases evident. If not it was self-understood from the examples where the preaching of repentance and remission of sins was clearly the message proclaimed. Where this message was proclaimed, souls were won.

The Book of Acts concerns itself primarily with the ministries of two apostles, Peter (chapters 1-12) and Paul (chapters 13-28). Faithful preaching of “repentance and forgiveness of sins” is evident in their ministries.

We are all familiar with the story of Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9-25). He had been brought to faith and was baptized through the faithful preaching of Philip. When Simon later saw that the apostles could bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost by the imposition of hands, he offered to buy this gift for a price. Then Peter answered: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps He will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin” (Acts 3:20-23). The heart of Simon, the love of his heart, the thoughts of his heart, were tangled in the meshes of a fearful sin. His heart was not right in the sight of God. In this respect, he must change, desist from the evil desires of his heart, “repent of this wickedness.” If ever those thoughts arise in his

heart again, he must shudder at the very idea, and battle his own heart with all his might. That is repentance, a resolute opposition to sin. In repentance the sinner abandons the sinful thoughts, lusts, and desires of the heart.

But this is viewing repentance from one certain angle only. Here, it means nothing more than to truly acknowledge, sins, to be heartily sorry for them, and to desist from them. In this instance, “repent” is a call for contrition. It is a proclamation of God’s Law. And God’s Law is the power to bring contrition to fruition.

The church’s proclamation to the world is one of Law and Gospel. Both are necessary, The Law of God brings man to the knowledge of his sinfulness, his total depravity, and his total inability to do anything to rectify the situation before God. Contrition follows the preaching of the Law. Contrition plows the hard soil of the human heart so that the seed of the Gospel can be sown into it and bear the fruit of faith. If a farmer could sow his wheat and raise and reap his crops without plowing his fields, he would surely do so. But under the conditions that generally prevail, this cannot be done. Plowing is a necessary prerequisite of sowing and reaping. Even so with the contrition of the heart, contrition is the necessary prerequisite of faith.

The Book of Acts also presents repentance from another angle. All we have heard, thus far, is that in repentance a sinner abandons the sinful thoughts, lusts, and desire of heart. But this heart, certainly, is not to remain unoccupied. What is to take the place of the sin in the heart?

When Paul on his way to Jerusalem left elders at Ephesus he assured them that he had proclaimed to them the Gospel without compromise. “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that will be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:20-21). In repentance faith in our Savior is kindled in the heart.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter delivered his powerful sermon to the assembled multitude. He had charged the people with committing the most terrible crime conceivable. They had deliberately killed the very Messiah whom God had sent, and whom they might easily have recognized by the mighty signs and wonders which He had done before their eyes. He told them that God, in spite of their sinfulness, would not allow His plans to be interrupted. Although they rejected their Savior, God established Him by raising Him from the dead and elevating Him to the seat at His right hand. “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do’?” (Acts 2:37). Then Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all men whom the Lord our God will call...Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:38-41). What was it that gave these despairing people the courage to turn to the very Jesus whom they had crucified and to appeal for help to Him? The Word of the Gospel did which Peter proclaimed to them for this very purpose.

One point of the story is of special interest for our discussion today. How does Peter formulate his invitation to faith? He said “Repent.” These people were troubled in their innermost hearts. The charge of being murderers, not common murder but murderers of Christ; the knowledge of having opposed God’s plans not in some insignificant detail, but at the very point in which all His plans come to a head, the salvation of the human race; the conviction that they had had no valid excuse, in fact, no excuse whatsoever, since they had been blessed by God with special revelation from God through His prophets since the Fall concerning His plans. All this shocked the people and filled their consciences and hearts with terror. Now it was not Peter’s intention to: terrify them any longer, let alone to drive them to despair, He saw no pleasure in what he had to do, wield the hammer of God’s Law. His aim was only to prepare them for something else that had yet to tell them, the Gospel. It was Peter’s aim to help them out of their misery, to calm their terrified hearts. What does he then tell them? “Repent.” The Word in his mouth carried the Gospel invitation that they place confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone could provide the remedy for their sinfulness with His forgiveness. The One they had crucified had done everything that was necessary for them through His perfect life and His innocent sufferings and death. His resurrection from the dead was God’s guarantee of that.

Although there is no repentance without contrition, and the terror of an agonizing conscience is a necessary, preparatory part of repentance, yet the principal part, which in the last analysis constitutes repentance, is faith. By their deep-felt remorse Peter's hearers had not been brought one hair's breadth closer to the Savior. But by faith they embraced Him and appropriated His grace.

This is the message that Jesus gave His disciples to effect repentance; by bringing people to faith through the preaching of the Gospel. In this case, "Gospel" stands for the whole counsel of God, both Law and Gospel, the hammer of the Law and the sweet comfort of the Gospel. And Peter's proclamation on Pentecost brought forth fruit. Three thousand souls were securely resting in the Savior's arms.

When Paul and Silas had been cast into prison in Philippi, an earthquake took place, shaking the very foundations of the prison. The doors were thrown open and every prisoner's chains were released. It was God who spoke through the earthquake, and the keeper of the prison grasped God's thundering message to him. He was filled with fear and ready to take his own life when Paul called out to him "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" He came trembling at their feet, and asked "Men, what must I do to be saved?" The Law had already terrified the conscience of the jailer. He was well aware of his sinfulness in holding prisoner the messengers of God. Therefore his heart had been prepared for the Gospel. And Paul and Silas simply invited him to receive the comfort which the Gospel bestows. They replied: "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-you and your household. Then they spoke the Word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds then immediately he and all his family were baptized... and the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God" (Acts 16:31-34). Paul and Silas announced the Word of the Gospel to produce saving faith. And the Word of God proved its power as faith sprang up in a despairing heart.

This was Paul's method of procedure in all of his mission endeavors. When trying to gain admission to the hearts of the unconverted, who were also ignorant of the Old Testament Scriptures, he based his Law-preaching on his listener's consciousness of the inscribed Law of God in their hearts. He points out the abomination of idolatry to the people of Lystra by reminding them that the living God, who made heaven and earth and all that they contain, did not leave himself without witness. "He has shown kindness by giving rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17). On Areopagus Paul exposed the folly of idolatry to the scholarly thinkers of the time. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else...Therefore since we are His offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the Man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:24-31). Paul preached the Law to the unconverted and struck terror into their hearts by testifying to them that the very things by which they hoped to gain favor with God were an abomination to Him, bringing down upon themselves His terrible wrath.

When, on the other hand, Paul was dealing with Jews, who were fully acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures he aroused their consciences through references to the Law spoken by God's Old Testament prophets. "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when He said through Isaiah the prophet 'Go to this people and say, You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears and have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them'" (Acts 28:25-27).

In every case, the Law was essentially the same, and, so was its effect. It testified to sinners their sin and guilt and their utter inability to help themselves. It was not an enjoyable message for Paul to proclaim. But it was a necessary one. So he did despite threats on his life, beatings, stonings, shipwreck, prison cells, and even

death. Some were crushed to the heart by the hammer blows of God's Law, others resisted due to the hardness of their sinful hearts.

For the success of their mission endeavors, whether large crowds were converted and baptized or single souls were won for the kingdom, neither Peter nor Paul would accept the least amount of credit. They knew that the souls won for the kingdom of God through their preaching were totally God's doing through His message of Law and Gospel, Hence, Paul declared: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Rom. 1:16). "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works., so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:8-10) Peter added his "Amen" to those words with his own: "And the God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen, (1 Pet. 5:10-11). The power to convert was not in themselves, it was in the Word!

Contrition was God's doing. Repentance was God's doing. Faith was God's doing. Saints in heaven are God's doing. Acts 5:31 says "God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. Acts 11: 13 reads: "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life.'" Could man's participation or cooperation ever be the causes of contrition and faith? No! For those things, God alone deserves the glory!

In every instance, repentance, which is God's gift has as its goal or purpose that the repentant sinner receive God's gifts of grace: forgiveness of sins, peace with God, salvation, life eternal. Peter and Paul proclaimed to sinners that were troubled on account of their sins the Gospel of forgiveness; and careless and falsely secure sinners they startled with the preaching of the Law, in order to prepare them for the Gospel and repentance. And it worked. But only because this message had God's power and blessing.

The Role of Repentance in Church Renewal Today

The Book of Acts records for us the ministries of Jesus' apostles as they faithfully carry His message of "repentance and forgiveness of sins" to the world. The Book of Acts, of course, is a continuation of the story of the Christ of the Gospels, and how the Word of the Lord spread throughout the then known world in spite of tensions and conflicts. It closes significantly with the words of Paul, the great missionary apostle, to the Jews in Rome: "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen" (Acts 28:23). One commentator has called the Book of Acts "the Authorized Missionary Manual of the Lord Par Excellence." (Robert H, Glover, *The Bible Basis for Missions*, p. 26)

All of the Bible is God's salvation history, the revelation of His earnest purpose for the salvation of all mankind. All of the Bible is God's salvation history, both the Old and New Testaments. The God who "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4) did not begin to have that earnest desire at some later point in time. The purpose of His will was there before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). It was the Savior Himself who, beginning with Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms—in other words the entire Old Testament Scriptures—opened the minds of his first disciples. He wanted them to see "What was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Luke 24: 27) And for what purpose? So that "repentance and remission of sins might be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24: 47).

The apostles faithfully proclaimed the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, to the converted as well as the unconverted. Paul declared the sinfulness of men and the grace of God to large gatherings as well as single listeners. "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they may turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus....For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts. 20: 20-21, 27). Teaching the saving doctrine was his chief business and he tells us, his successors in the ministry, that this must be our chief business. For "how can they call on the One they have not believed

in? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Rom 10:14, 17). Paul, by Christ’s command, proclaimed to the Jews and Gentiles “that they should repent and turn to God” (Acts 26:20). “This Word, the Word of the Law and the Word of the Gospel, church has in the recorded Word of the Apostles, and when the Church preaches this Word, which is God’s own word and pronounces God’s own verdict concerning ‘sin’ and ‘forgiveness of sins’, men learn to know what repentance is” (*Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1* p. 66).

The only prescribed “method” for Church growth in the proclamation of a message, “repentance and forgiveness of sins”. It is to proclaim both Law and Gospel to the people who are already within our Savior’s arms as well as to those who know nothing of him. It is to proclaim the wrath of God toward sin and the grace of God in Christ. Both the thunder of God’s Law must be proclaimed and the sweet sound of the Gospel must be announced before true conversion occurs. Whenever contrition and faith, which are effected-by the Holy Ghost through the Law and Gospel, are wanting, no true conversion has taken place. Where they are found, we must say that the Holy Ghost has wrought a genuine conversion.

As long as men fail to realize that their sins merit eternal damnation and as long as they trust in their own goodness for eternal salvation, they have no interest in the forgiveness of sins obtained by Christ for the condemned sinner. The only effective way of dealing with sinful man is therefore to preach first repentance and then forgiveness of sins, just as Christ commanded his apostles to do. “Only the sinner whom this has brought to a knowledge of his deserved condemnation will in faith accept the remission of sins offered in the Gospel. Whoever refuses to preach the Law prevents the Gospel, or Christ, in His redemption, from taking effect (*Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II*, p. 236.) To tell a man who has no realization that he is lost, that he may be saved through faith in Christ, means nothing to him, however true and blessed the fact is of itself. Luther wrote: “Where sin and God’s wrath are not known or felt, men cannot come to repentance, or to the forgiveness of sin. Therefore, Christ, too, and the apostles began with the preaching of repentance, thereby confirming the preaching of the Law. And for this reason the law had to precede this Priest Christ, and Moses and his priests had to impress it deeply on his people in order to prepare them for Christ” (*What Luther Says, Vol. III*, p. 1212) We do no one a favor, whether converted or unconverted, if we fail to regularly proclaim God’s Law. And we only want to preach God’s Law, not man’s law,, which says, “Do the best you can, and God will accept you.” God’s Law declares: “The soul who sins is the one who will die.” (Ezekiel 18:4) The preacher of repentance must go into particulars with people, exposing those sins especially of which they are clearly guilty, which they wish to exclude from their confession and want to live in. “Surely that is not the way to help your people repent, if you become a dumb dog, that will not bark even if it could. It has been well said: ‘Wait not until you are backed by numbers. The fewer the voices on the side of truth, the louder and more emphatic should be your own.’ ...Preacher, God has given you a hammer wherewith to make little ones out of big ones of this world. He gave you a flaming torch. Are you setting the world on fire? Or have you lost your punch? Are you getting old or weak or both? Have you none of the stuff of which heroes, such men as John the Baptist and Luther were made? Are you like unto old Eli, who could only weakly remonstrate against coarse sin?” (*The Abiding Word, Vol. II*, p. 268) The self-righteousness of man, their lack of contrition, is ever the chief obstacle of Christ and of the Gospel. No one can come to faith in God’s mercy who has not, to quote Luther, “tasted terror and trembling” and learned to despair of making himself right with God. It is only the broken heart that God can and will comfort, heal, assure of His grace.

But just as wrong, if not worse, is the preacher who fails to offer the comfort of the Gospel to those terrified by the Law. When we fail to direct those who are terrified and ask, “What must I do to be saved?” to trust God’s promise. If we would set down all sorts of conditions for them to meet, we would be preaching Law when we should be preaching Gospel. That man is doing what he can to confuse souls, to lead them either into the pit of despair or into pharisaic pride. If the Word is to bring its divine power to bear on a human soul, one thing is absolutely indispensable: it must be taught purely and applied properly. We cannot scare people into heaven by literally, scaring the hell out of them. But we proclaim the Law of God only to prepare them for the

Gospel and the comfort the Gospel bestows. The preaching of repentance is not to condemn, but to rescue. It is to crush the sinner so that grace can do its saving work. It is the necessary prerequisite to faith.

The object of preaching for Christ's apostles, in the last analysis, is always the message of Christ the Savior. "For the Gospel and Christ were never ordained and given for the purpose of terrifying and condemning, but of comforting and cheering those who are terrified and timid" (Trig. 955, Sol. Decl., V, 12) It is announcing to the sinner the Gospel invitation: "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "Repent, and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38), "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that the times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19). It is proclaiming Christ crucified and raised again for our justification. It is announcing God's unconditional promise of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. May this be the message that we enjoy preaching, the message of comfort and hope.

The repentance and faith, which the Word of God call for, are effected through the same Word. This Word has the power to bring forth contrition and faith because it is God's Law and God's Gospel. It is the Means of Grace, aiming for and resulting in the forgiveness of sins. It directs all people away from themselves. and their own resources to Christ. May we continue to direct the troubled and contrite hearers of His Word to His cross, the empty tomb, His victory, His peace.

This message of Law and Gospel is a message that we need to hear as long as we live. The Old Adam will always be struggling to gain the upper hand, and self-righteousness and sinful pride will always be ready to take over. To the falsely secure, God says, "if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Cor. 10:12) There is no such Scriptural teaching as "once saved, always saved". That is a diabolical error, and must be treated as such.

Natural man finds it offensive that he can do nothing to help himself. Sinful pride rebels at the thought that Christ's merit gained on the cross is the only thing that can save the sinner. Man always wants to add some performance of his own. But to allow any thought of human merit to stand next to Christ's merit is to destroy the whole message of salvation by grace alone. It makes no difference how great or how small the amount of human "merit" added is. The addition of human performance spoils God's gracious plan of salvation.

There is a great deal of support in our day for the thought that to be a Christian there is something that man can and must do. He must give himself to Christ. He must surrender. He must choose. He must make a decision for Christ. Those are things which only the power of God can bring about.

Certainly, the idea that man can cooperate in any way toward his salvation is to make the Gospel a non-gospel. Man is "dead in transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1) From a dead person no response can be expected. A spiritually dead person cannot make a spiritual decision to follow Christ. That is impossible!

Yet, the world's people are constantly bombarded by synergistic ideas from proclaimed evangelists. On TV, radio, in books, mailings, discussions at work, people are told that they must surrender to Christ, decide to follow him, achieve something, earn God's favor, win their salvation, come to the front and make their decision. The teachings of any number of TV evangelists, some very well-known, could be labeled as "decision theology". Although some proclaim some very beautiful, Scriptural truths, even that Jesus is the only Savior from sin, yet they are leading people away from Christ if they profess that he can cooperate in any way in his salvation. Listen to some quotes from Billy Graham's publication in 1977 *How To Be Born Again*. "A man's will is really the man's self... What his will does, he does. Your part then is simply to put your will over on God's side, making up your mind that you will believe what he says in the Bible" (p. 159). "Biblical repentance is the fuel which is used to propel our life with God at the controls. Until we utilize that fuel, we are earthbound, tied down by our own ego, our pride, our troubles and guilt" (p. 160). "Faith is trust, an act of commitment, in which I open the door of my heart to Him" (p. 160).

Recently, I received a newsletter in the mail entitled "The Win Arn Growth Report." It stated: "We are now in the third year of what will probably be a ten-year change cycle in the thinking of pastors concerning evangelism. The change counters around the traditional evangelism methods and their relationship to the growth of the local church... The evangelism programmers measured their success of their methods primarily, if

not exclusively, on their success in eliciting a verbal “yes”. As a result, the question asked thousands of times over the past 25 years has been: “How many decisions were made tonight?” During the past three years, growing numbers of pastors have begun to question this “bottom line”. But because communication between local churches is extremely limited, few pastors realized that many of their colleagues had the same misgivings...One study was on the results of the “Here’s Life, America—I Found It” campaign by Campus Crusade. The other researched a Billy Graham crusade in Seattle. Both studies found a dramatic loss in the “fruit that remained” between the decisions recorded and the disciples and active church members made. I was amazed by the constant response of pastors: “I experienced this, but didn’t know it was happening in other churches, too.”

We correctly view the Word and Sacraments as Means of Grace, as the tools which the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of our listeners. If decision theology were correct, then our whole situation would have to be altered. Then we would not be putting our whole trust in the Means of Grace to effect repentance and faith. Then we would be salesmen, trying to convince people to buy our product. Then we would be pleading, begging, persuading people to use the ability within themselves to effect the necessary repentance and faith. And then we would have to accept the responsibility whenever someone did not heed our advice.

Although many years have gone by, the message of the Reformation is needed today more than ever; by grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone. Martin Luther, in his explanation to the Third Article correctly states: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel.”

Finally, those who were coerced into a man-wrought decision find that their faith does not hold up under pressure. It has no solid foundation. It was built on sinking sand, not the sure Words and promises of God.

To us, the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, are the only means through which immortal souls are brought to faith and salvation. To us they are not mere signs or symbols, but vehicles and channels whereby the Holy Spirit offers and assures His grace to man. Think of the power we have for building the church of God, a power which others fail to use fully and properly because their reason puts a human qualification upon the very means which the Holy Spirit uses to build His church.

What a comfort it is to know that the power to convert is in the Word. “So is My Word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which I sent it” (Is. 55:11). With that assurance and that promise, as we near another Advent season, speak boldly from the pulpit and in personal witnessing, confident of God’s power and blessing, “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)