

Are You A Christian?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"Am I a Christian?" Throughout the history of the church three answers have been given to the question, "How am I saved?" One answer says, if I perfectly obey God's commandments God will love me, accept me, and save me. That answer has been soundly rejected as heresy by every branch of the Christian church.

A second answer says, God wants to save me. God has done everything that he can possibly do to save me. He's come to us in Jesus Christ to save us. Christ died for us. But there's one thing we must do. We must accept Christ as our savior. Christ knocks at the door of our heart. He won't open that door. He can't open that door. Only we can open the door and invite Christ in. Our salvation is conditioned upon our acceptance of Christ as our savior. That's a very common answer to the question of how we become a Christian. But no branch of the Christian church has rejected that answer more resolutely than Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. We do not believe that the Bible teaches that our salvation is conditioned upon our acceptance of Christ.

The third answer given to the question, "How do I become a Christian?" We believe that the Bible teaches that God unconditionally loves, accepts, and saves us through what he's done for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God unconditionally saves us. There's absolutely nothing we can do to earn God's grace, love and acceptance. Nothing we can do

will make God love us more than he already does. Nothing we fail to do will make God love us less. God loves and accepts us unconditionally through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's good news.

But Presbyterians are quick to affirm that the Bible teaches that nobody is saved without repentant faith. John the Baptist preached repentance. He proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He urgently exhorted God's people, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." He baptized "with water for repentance." John saw people living on the eve of destruction. It's the last hour, he warns. Can't you see, he says, that you're in the position of a tree that has produced no fruit. It's about to be chopped down and thrown into the fire. Repent while there's still time.

I think of the movie, Apollo 13. The astronauts were returning in their crippled space craft to earth when they realized they were about to enter the earth's atmosphere at the wrong angle. They'd either burn up because of friction or bounce off into outer space like a stone skipping across water. They had to change course or perish. That's what John the Baptist was saying. Space ship Earth is crippled. We're off course. ^{voluntarism, presence, violence, civil discourse} We have to change course as a nation or perish. We have to change course as a church or perish. We have to change course as individuals or we'll perish.

We don't hear much about repentance in the church today. Neil Postman, a journalist, reports that a non-Christian visitor to most Christian worship services might conclude that the

Christian faith has nothing to do with repentance. The non-Christian visitor, he writes, would very likely conclude that "The Christian faith is mainly about celebration and fun and personal growth and five ways to boost (our) self-esteem."

What is repentance? Repentance isn't feeling guilty. Repentance isn't feeling sorry. Repentance isn't fulfilling religious duties like fasting and penitential works. Repentance isn't simply confessing our sins. Asking God to bail us out of some mess we've created for ourselves isn't repentance.

John Calvin believed that, according to the Bible, repentance involves three things: (1) self-denial, (2) mortification of the flesh, and (3) meditating upon the heavenly life. In modern English that means: (1) living for Christ and others, not for ourselves, (2) taking upon ourselves the pain and suffering of the world and accepting it as our own, (3) evaluating our present lives in the perspective of the fact that we're all going to die and appear before the Lord Jesus Christ (Ramey and Johnson).

When the biblical demand for commitment to the poor is replaced by a personal search for happiness the church needs to repent. When the demand to love God and neighbor is replaced by the search for feeling good about one's self we must repent or we'll certainly perish. If we've failed to pray for others we must repent. When we're selfish in assuming that we have a right to live affluent lives in spite of the consequences to others we must repent. When we refuse to tell others about God's grace that comes through Jesus Christ we must repent. Repentance

requires us to do whatever's possible to repair the harm we've done. On a personal level it means returning stolen goods. It requires restoring the reputation of someone we've slandered. It requires paying compensation for injuries we've giving to others.

True repentance brings a heightened sense of our desparate need of God's grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ. Repentance takes courage. Repentance takes persistence. Repentance is hard work. Repentance requires trust in God's powerful grace at work in us. Repentance is easier in a community of faith. I'd even go so far to say that repentance is impossible outside the community of faith where the gracious Word of God is preached, where the sacraments strengthen and assure us of God's grace, and where we're supported and challenged in love.

~~"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."~~ ~~"Prepare~~
the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." "Bear fruit
worthy of repentance." Don't presume to say that you've received
Christ as your personal savior. God is able to raise up
Christians from a pile of stones. Rather demonstrate your
personal relationship with Jesus Christ. May the holy Spirit so
fill us that the life of Jesus may be seen in us and the
remainder of our lives be spent loving and serving him.

Let us pray: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.