

History to tapes of Evangelism Council
Books on Evangelism / Church Growth
Reflections on our decision to build a large building
Anticipation of 140th A Free Church Sunday on Jan 24

The Difficulty and Necessity of Repentance (Change)

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 6, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12.

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

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. *Metanoia* literally means change: "to change one's mind", "to adopt another view", "to change one's feelings", "to change one's purpose." When John the Baptist came proclaiming, "Repent" he was calling God's people to change. "Change, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Among the people who came out to hear John were Pharisees. Pharisees were good people... ^{law-} abiding people... moral people. They were community leaders, respected, honored. They were not terrible sinners as people now-a-days judge people to be terrible sinners. They were devoted to the study of God's laws... committed to obeying God's laws. The Pharisees were good people. ^{A lot like Presbyterians -} But John the Baptist came proclaiming to Pharisees, these good people, "Repent, change, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." "Change your minds about people who aren't Pharisees, who don't care that much about God's laws." "Adopt a different view concerning people who don't strictly observe the Law of God." "Change your feelings" especially feelings towards the unchurched.

Some change comes easy. When I was boy my dad taught me how to change the tire. He showed me what to do, but I did the work. I learned how to change a tire. No trouble. Some change is easy. It's easy to change a light bulb. By the way do you know how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb? The answer: "Change!? Why do we need to change?" There's another version. "It only takes one Presbyterian to change a light bulb but it takes about 6 months to go through all the necessary committees before final approval is granted." Many changes that face us are easy changes: changing the clock in the fall and spring, changing our clothes, changing the channels on the t.v. with your remote control. All of these changes are relatively easy. But that's not the kind of change John the Baptist proclaimed to the Pharisees.

Some changes are more difficult for us. The changes that I had to make after I got married were a little more difficult for me. Before I got married I saw no sense whatsoever in

making my bed every morning. For some reason Kay thinks it's important to make our bed every morning before going our way. I had to change. I resisted the change to no avail. Married couples learn to make all kinds of changes in order to preserve their marriages. Some of these changes are more difficult to make than others.

But there's a far more difficult kind of change that God requires of us. God wants us to change our minds about people who are outside the church. God doesn't want us to ignore them. God wants us to change our feelings about people who don't care about God's laws. God doesn't want us to condemn them. God wants his church to change, change our selfish purposes. The purpose of many churches is, primarily, to try to meet the needs of their members. So we design church buildings, we design church worship services that primarily meet the needs of church members. We don't have an eye for how non-churched people see the church.

"If you're outside the church, you've got to adopt our ways, you've got to adopt our language, you've got to learn our language, you've got to learn to like our kind of music." But God wants his people, the church, us, to change our purpose, to change our mind, to change our feelings about those outside. Somebody has said that the church is the one institution which primarily exists for those who ^{do} ~~are~~ not yet know Christ as Lord and Savior and who are not yet members. The reason why we Christians are in the world is to bring others to Christ. The reason why the church is in the world is to carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ. Remember why the Pharisees attacked Jesus? Because Jesus ate and drank with sinners. He ministered, primarily, to those outside the church. His primary purpose was to reach those outside. The primary reason he called disciples was to train them to go out and proclaim the good news to those outside.

God is calling us to repent. God is calling the church to repent. We may or may not have scandalous secrets in our closets to repent up. What we must repent of, however, is our attitude toward those outside the church. We must cease to exist, primarily, to satisfy our own needs, and begin to exist to meet the need of those outside the church - a need that most of them may not even be aware of - their need for Christ and his family. We may, in fact, discover that when

we lose our selves in serving others that our own deepest needs are also met. But when we try to meet our own needs first, we often fail.

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 to the Pharisees. That's what God is saying to us today. We need to change course or perish. We're off course if we don't give our primary emphasis to spiritual and numerical growth. We have to change course as a church or perish.

For years the Presbyterian Church counted on members to have children, get them baptized and nurture them in the church through attendance at Sunday School and worship and youth groups and youth camps. That worked as long as the average couple had four children, stayed married, and the church was, basically, the only show in town. But the culture changed and the church didn't change. Couples stopped having four children, stopped staying married. But the church often complains, "Why we can't we go back to the fifties?" The church has infinitely more competition now than when I was kid. I remember when Sunday evening youth group and worship were the only alternative to going to bed early. Then, in the mid-fifties *The Wonderful World of Disney* aired on Sunday evenings. Know what? I liked Disney better than church.

The church must repent. Change! Recognize that the Gospel has a lot of competition in the modern ^{world} ~~well~~, just as it had in the first century of the Christian era. We must stop complaining about how the culture has changed. We Christians need to change to meet the challenge of change in our culture. Unless the Presbyterian church changes - repents - there won't be a Presbyterian Church for our children and grandchildren. The Presbyterian church must change: must reach out intentionally to those outside the church, ministering to the needs of the community and communicating the life giving gospel of Jesus Christ in new, creative ways.

We must not change the Gospel. The Gospel is unchangeable. God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have life everlasting. We must not water down God's Law. But we must change our minds. Adopt a different attitude towards those outside. We must begin to view the world with the eyes of Jesus Christ who was constantly reaching out to the lost. We must find our voices and learn how to share the gospel with our neighbors. ^{The Gospel ... promise of God ... salvation} Unless we repent - change - we will perish.

When the biblical demand for commitment to the poor is replaced by a personal search for happiness the church needs to change. 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. When we selfishly assume that we have right to live affluent lives in spite of the consequences to others we must change. When we refuse to tell others about God's grace that comes through Jesus Christ we must repent.

The repentance God requires is difficult but necessary. It's easy to learn to change a diaper. It's easy to change a flat tire or a light bulb. But it's most difficult to change our attitudes and minds about those who don't know Christ and the purpose of the church in relationship to them. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Let us pray: Merciful God, you 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.