

Missionary Repentance

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“[Jesus] it is whom God has exalted with his own right hand as leader and savior, to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to all this, and so is the Holy Spirit given by God to those who are obedient to him.” (Acts 5:31-32)

“The moment of evangelism is one of repentance.” — Kosuke Koyama

It is important, at the beginning, to say what “missionary repentance” is *not*. It is not repentance for the missionary nature of the Gospel. “That the world may believe” (John 17:21) remains the ultimate purpose of witness to the love of God for the world revealed in Jesus. One has not grasped the basics of Christian discipleship if one denies to one’s neighbors the chance to hear the disciple say: “We cannot possibly give up speaking of things we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20, NEB).

Neither is missionary repentance the acknowledgment of the sins of people called missionaries who have preached the Gospel in places far from their homes. Doubtless they, like the rest of us, committed some sins in the course of even their most faithful attempt to share the faith in far off lands, especially as some too easily donned the cloaks of colonialism. But “foreign” missionaries are in no way special candidates for repentance.

The implicit meaning of the term is: *repentance is integral to the integrity of Gospel witness*. An unrepentant witness to the Gospel resembles “genuine artificial leather” — a product that some manufacturers have the nerve to market as though their customers can’t recognize an “oxymoron” when they see it.

Genuine Sin, Genuine Repentance, and Genuine Witness

Almost every careful reader of the New Testament has favorite characters among the people whose stories are recorded there. If we were to take a vote, my guess is that Simon Peter would win the election. Why do so many of us find in him a perennially attractive Christian person? We probably are not much impressed with his intellect. Paul wins on that count. Nor do we love Peter because of his confession of Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi. We honor him for that inspiration, but we *love* him because, like us, he was so vulnerable to sins large and small and because he was more vulnerable yet to repentance. Peter inspires our hope that we, too, can recover from even our most colossal sins.

Fifty years ago Erich Auerbach wrote a book, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, in which he contrasts the pictures of human beings in Roman and Greek classics with the picture in the New Testament. In the classics, the “ordinary” folk of the age were almost invisible. They were certainly not candidates for heroic status. Quite different is their literary portrayal in the Gospels and Acts. In

Simon Peter, in particular, Auerbach finds a version of the heroic quite unprecedented in the time:

[The story] takes place entirely among everyday men and women of the common people; anything of the sort could be thought in antique terms only as farce or comedy. Yet why is it neither of these? Why does it arouse in us the most serious and most significant sympathy? Because it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historian of antiquity set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people. All this applies not only to Peter's denial but also to every other occurrence which is related in the New Testament. Every one of them is concerned with the same question, the same conflict with which very human being is basically confronted and which therefore remains infinite and eternally pending... What we see here is a world which on the one hand is entirely real, average, identifiable as to place, time, and circumstances, but which on the other hand is shaken in its very foundations, is transforming and renewing itself before our eyes. (pp. 37-38)

Reinhold Niebuhr used to say that "the only empirically verifiable concept in the Christian message is its doctrine, 'all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.'" Behind this very claim lie Bible stories of real people, their real sins, and their real repentance. The writer of the First Letter of John was reflecting the post-resurrection experience of the first disciples when he wrote, "If we claim to be sinless, we are self-deceived and strangers to the truth. If we confess our sins, he is just, and may be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every kind of wrong." (1:8-9).

Peter and Paul were both powerful examples of the missionary principle: *Only recovering sinners need apply*. In a passage in Lloyd Douglas' novel, *The Robe*, Simon Peter and a centurion exchange confessions: "I betrayed him," says the one. "But I crucified him," says the other. We can all identify with both confessions in the realization that even the best of us is capable of some awful collaboration with evil. With the innocent we wish we could identify, but the company of the guilty is where we are really at home.

All of this is relevant to the witness we call "personal evangelism." Many faithful Gospel-witnesses know that no testimony to the grave of God will be effective if infected with a wisp of self-righteousness or the suggestion: "We Christians are better than you sinners." The relative success of Alcoholics Anonymous inheres in the opposite spirit. "My name is _____, and I am an alcoholic, but by the help of that 'higher power' a recovering one." Close here is a definition of evangelism, a favorite of many: 'Evangelism is one beggar telling another where to find bread.'

"We" sinners, as well as you and I?

Kosuke Koyama is a Japanese Christian who served as a missionary from the Kyodan to Thailand and then as a theological professor in New Zealand and New York. From his own experience with adherents of various Asian and Western religions, he believes that "the moment of evangelism is one of repentance." But his experience as a survivor of the World War II bombings of Tokyo prepared him to extend the meaning

of evangelism beyond the repentance required of individuals to the repentance required of groups, nations, and institutions that shape personal life and consciousness in every country on earth. Koyama says that he will never forget the words of the pastor of his local church in the church membership class that included twelve-year-old Koyama. The year was 1942. In those first months of the Pacific War, the pastor said to the class: "You must remember that the God of Jesus Christ loves Americans as well as the Japanese." In context, it was an astonishing witness, the like of which was landing some Japanese Christians in jail.

Years later, says Koyama, the people of Japan had a chance to be astonished at something else in Christianity. In 1946, with the war over, a group of prominent American theologians met together in what became known as the "The Calhoun Commission." In a published statement, its members raised this question: Was the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki necessary for winning the war? Most Americans had not questioned this terrible ending to the conflict, and in early 1946 American government officials were publicly defending "the Bomb" with political-military arguments that are still orthodox for a majority of Americans. The Calhoun Commission was among the first Christian voices to raise the question of whether these final devastations of two Japanese cities were really required for inducing the Japanese government to surrender. We may have to be publicly repentant for this event, said the Commission, as an excess of collective violence.

The debate on this matter, this half-century later, persists in both countries. The polls in Japan in the 1990s still show a majority of its people believing that the Hiroshima bomb was "kicking a dead horse." Americans, in general, have little doubt about the necessity and justice of the bomb — as was demonstrated in 1995, when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington sought to open up the debate in its display of the famous *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the bomb. Veterans and Congress muffled the effort, cutting back on the Smithsonian attempt to present two sides of the controversy.

Koyama's sadness over this tortured history has much to do with his view of the slow growth of Christianity in contemporary Japan. "The publicity given the Calhoun Commission in 1946 was very slight," he recollects. "And that was a shame. Had the Japanese people become aware that a group of prominent American Christian leaders had dared to raise public question about Hiroshima, I think that many would have said to each other: 'So there are some leaders in the churches of America who dare to criticize their own government and to show sorrow for some of the actions of their powerful nation. If *that* is what it may mean to be Christian, we should give Christianity our serious attention.'

But few people in Japan knew of the Calhoun Commission report. Few in America knew of it. Indeed, only too few American Christians hear the phrase "national repentance" and connect it with the evangelical mission of the church. What a new thought it is for the majority of Protestant Christians and their pastors in the United States: "Unless we are willing to repent of our national sins as well as for our personal sins, we cannot make a full, authentic witness to the Gospel of Jesus." When was the last time someone reading these words spoke or heard something like them on Sunday morning from a pulpit?

To suggest a link between personal and collective repentance is not to decide the historical controversy over whether the atomic bomb was the right and necessary way

to end World War II. It is to suggest that Christians are among those Americans who should at least be hospitable to discussion of the question. We have it from the lips of Jesus that his followers are to be “salt of the earth and light of the world.” That we should strive to exhibit such light and light salt in our personal lives as may attract others to the faith we profess, almost goes without saying. That we are called to be salty, bright confessors of the sins that infuse the history of our country — that does need saying, for it is seldom said. It is a hard enough saying in the ears of many a member of the churches; it is harder yet for unabashed nationalists who admire Stephen Decatur’s famous toast: “To my country: may she ever be right, but right or wrong, my country.”

I am a Presbyterian minister, and I know the propensity of the majority of members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to give short shrift to the sins of America and to denominational effort to ponder those sins. We had a striking, depressing example of this propensity in the deliberations of the General Assembly of June, 1998. A standing committee brought in a recommendation that a day in the denominational calendar previously known as “Hiroshima Day (August 6) be retitled, “Day of Remembrance,” a change that would widen the invitation to memory to include all those on both sides who suffered in the Pacific War. In the floor debate on this motion, two commissioners, veterans of the war, rose to protest that any commemoration of August 6 would cast doubt on the cause and the courage of Americans who fought the war. A substitute motion soon carried the Assembly: Next year there will be no August 6 on the formal calendar of the Presbyterian Church in America. No one in the debate rose to suggest that the cause of the Gospel in Japan might have a relationship to the express willingness of this denomination to remember the terrors of that war.

I must add that this is an especially hard thought for the writer of this essay, for as a 1946 draftee into the Army of the United States, I have reason to ponder the possibility that the atomic bomb cut short the possibility of my having to join an army whose generals were planning to begin the invasion of Japan on November 1, 1945. My government has long said to soldiers like me that my life was saved by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. What if it was not so? Both intellectual and spiritual integrity may require that, these many years later, I at least consider the question.

The candidates for such questions, of course, are legion. Everything from our national treatment of Native and African Americans to the facts alleged to support our policies in Central America in the 1980s to our current unwillingness to become members of an International Criminal Court cry out for an American church whose leaders will at least bring to public attention some *question* about these matters, and some deliberation about wherein the salt of repentance might well be more truly injected into this country’s public forums.

Back in the 1960s, when Martin Luther King, Jr. and his companions in the Civil Rights Movement were challenging the conscience of America to narrow the gap between our democratic rhetoric and some of our still-undemocratic laws, many Protestant ministers in the South found themselves pondering the long history of slavery and segregation in their region. Some began for the first time to review that history in sermons and in discussion groups in ways not always complimentary to our southern ancestors. During this period Governor Ross Barnett of Mississippi complained that southern-born critics of the South were thieves and robbers: they were stealing dignity and honor from the ancestors. One southern Presbyterian minister

who qualified for this distinction was the Rev. Robert Walkup, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Starkville, Mississippi. In the midst of the state's great upset over agitators of Civil Rights demonstrators and two murders in nearby Oxford, Walkup preached to his own troubled all-white congregation a sermon in which he reflected on how his own grandfather, "the best man I ever knew," had reacted to the lynching of a black man. The community knew full well the identity of the murderer, but no one in the legal system expected to prosecute him. What did it mean? Walkup asked. "It means *sin*, that's what it means! It was wrong! And my grandfather was the best man I ever knew! He didn't say a *word*. He didn't do a *thing*! I'm his grandson, and I'm paying for that sin and the sins of others who were silent."

Governor Ross Barnett was right: Those Christians who look back on history and tell the story of the past in ways that deprive ancestors of their reputation for *innocence*, are a threat, not only to conventional history, but to those who take comfort in the conventions. There is much in American history — and the history of every nation on earth — about which Christians should not take comfort. From that history we should derive occasion for more explicit repentance.

Anyone who attempts such historically-tutored repentance will enter into some of the experience of the Hebrew prophets. They did not specialize in congratulating the sons and daughters of Moses for their record of righteousness over the centuries. From Amos to Jeremiah, the prophets were mostly unpopular critics of Israel's collective sins; and like as not, they never commanded the adulation of a majority of their contemporaries. We do not cherish the memory of these outspoken preachers, however, simply because they were morally and historically true-to-the-facts. We remember them because they proclaimed *hope* for collective moral and historical *reformation* of a whole people whenever they cried: "Repent!" A call for repentance assumes that mercy, forgiveness, and renewal of life wait in the wings while moral judgment holds center-stage. No one can rightly accuse the prophets of being moralistic. One and all, they are revivalistic. They are forerunners and predecessors of One whose first public words ended with the invitation: "Repent, and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Toward moral-historical honesty that will commend the Gospel gifts of repentance

Our time is awash with histories for which much repentance, personal and collective, is in order. We are about to leave the most violent century in human history, and one of our dread "gifts" to the twenty-first century is our technical and political capacity for mass murder, whose current hundred-year total approaches 150,000,000. Any Christian who hopes to contribute to the containment (not to speak of the elimination) of this propensity for organized murder has much thinking to do about *collective* repentance. The theological and practical point I have tried to maintain here is that, for this coming era, the integrity of Gospel-preaching will derive in no small measure from the integrity of Gospel-repentance, and that in collective as well as personal expressions.

The divorce of personal and collective moral health is not only a danger to the health of society as a whole; it is a danger to the health of a Christian church charged with preaching the Gospel to all nations, beginning with our own nation. Like the prophets, we should be sick and tired of pretenses to personal religion divorced from social justice, social truth, and social history. Such divorce is a form of "cheap grace,"

which permits us to hate the personal “sins that made Thee mourn” without hating the sins of a society in which all its members are implicated.

To be sure, identifying those personal and social “works” that are “meet for repentance” will call for hard reflection. Another form of cheap grace is blanket confession of the sins of our society without empirical detail or identification of our own personal responsibility for the same. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of course, made the phrase “cheap grace” famous with his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. One reason we rightly celebrate his life is his willingness to risk it on behalf of delivering Germany from the scourge of Nazism. There in prison in 1944, he wrote a poem, “Night Thoughts in Tegel,” in which he confessed his own and his colleagues’ implication in the sins of the Nazi regime.

We saw the lie raise its head,
And we did not honor the truth.
We saw the brethern in direst need
And feared only our own death.

We come before thee as men,
As confessors of our sins.

Among the perpetrators of great evil by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer and many a fellow prisoner were among the least guilty of Germans. But as we know from the lives of the saints, they are saintly in their awareness of their own sins, and they are open about confessing the same. Are not Simon Peter and Saul of Tarsus our precedents here? In politics as well as in personal life, have not all really sinned and come really short of the glory of God? In both democracies and dictatorships, leaders devise evil with the connivance — active or passive — of their constituents. Great social evil requires great social collusion, and it is in hope for a more moral future that one should ask, “How could I, how could we, have ‘seen the lie raise its head’ and forthwith have honored the truth?”

That sort of moral courage is profoundly different from both the easy confession “we all went wrong” and the defense “the leaders and decisionmakers are more guilty.” In most cases, there is truth in both claims, as surely one must say of the Nazi-time in Germany. But hovering here is the danger given a certain scholarly status in the recent book by Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. The thesis of the book is that, for the massacre of the Jews, Adolf Hitler and his henchmen drew upon a strain of evil in German culture that Goldhagen named “eliminationist anti-semitism.” A hundred thousand or so soldiers and special police may have carried out the murders, but they did so in service of an “ideal” that Germans in general shared. In this respect Germans of the 1930s were not “normal people.” They were caught in the web of a culture that sanctioned the death of all Jews.

The most powerful recent response to the Goldhagen book has come from Jewish historians who stand aghast at both the historical and moral fault of his basic theory. The great majority of Germans *were* “normal people,” and the great horror of the Holocaust was that so many people, so normal in so many ways, could be active or passive collaborators in the event. Furthermore, say these historians, assigning to Germans the status of an “abnormal people” lets the rest of the world “off the hook”

of blame for this and many other historical atrocities. The dangerous corollary of the Goldhagen thesis is that nothing like the Holocaust could happen in most other nations of the world. The thesis, in a word that the prophet Jeremiah supplies, “dresses my people’s wound but skin-deep only” (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11).

As American Christians, we can be grateful to God for those Germans, like Bonhoeffer, who stood up against Hitler in the 1930s and who suffered the consequences. And we can be grateful that they were deeply conscious of the imperfections of their courage and witness to the Gospel. Who among us can plead innocent of similar imperfections? Who among us can be sure that we live in a country in which no evils of the same sort will ever occur? And who among us can be sure that we would be in the forefront of resisters of those evils? We Christians *can* be sure that in the Holy Spirit God invites us all to “repent and believe the Gospel,” and that, when we pray as the Lord taught us, for forgiveness and deliverance from temptation and evil, our prayers will be answered, and our neighbors might yet be astonished at the reality of our repentance.