

Repentance and Reconciliation

I am going to speak on the subject of repentance and reconciliation. Repentance by Christians, by our churches for sins against the Jewish people and the reconciliation that it leads to between Jews and Gentiles, which itself has several levels of application. At the beginning I want to make clear the difference between theological change and repentance. Both are needed. The theological change is change in our understanding of the Jewish people and their place in God's plans. But repentance is when the change of mind descends into the heart and becomes a change of the heart.

The first level of repentance that needs to happen is a repentance for anti-semitism in general. At this level we are talking about anti-semitism, which is a form, an expression of racism. It is not something that Christians alone are responsible for. In many of our churches statements have been made to repudiate anti-semitism, and so I am not spending a lot of time on this first stage, before we go on to the two stages that are specifically Christian.

The second stage of repentance the change concerns replacement theology, i.e. rejecting or abandoning the theology which said that God has rejected the Jewish people. This position was the attitude of Christians and the church for many centuries.

The false idea that God rejected the Jews because the Jewish people rejected Jesus.

Replacement teaching stated that God rejected the Jewish people. It is closely related therefore to the idea that the Jewish people are in some way an accursed people, that it is right to hold them in contempt, that the Jewish people should live in a humiliated condition because of their „guilt“ from the past. This thinking led, at an official level, to many forms of oppression; and at a popular level, it led to much violence. So with the sins committed against the Jewish people in the past as a result of this replacement teaching, there is an element of official responsibility, insofar as the acts against the Jews resulted from official decisions: whether of church authority or of kings and governments.

There was another element in Christian sins against the Jews that was more popular: the behaviour of the mobs, manifesting violent hatred. But there was also a church responsibility for this, because the replacement teaching in some way gave a permission or a licence for this violence.

With this second stage, there enters a specifically Christian element, a theological element, because the false idea at the heart of it, that God rejected the Jewish people, is a theological idea. It is a falsehood about God. This false idea that fuelled anti-semitism, anti Judaism. This is one reason why I moved on quickly from the first level of anti-semitism to the second stage concerning replacement teaching. Because at the level of Christian and church responsibility, the anti-semitism we are dealing with especially came from the false idea that God had rejected the Jewish people.

The third stage is something that there has been much less discussion about than the first two. The third stage of Christian repentance in relation to the Jewish people concerns what we might call the suppression or the loss of the Jewish church. By this I refer to the decisions in the first centuries of the church that Jewish believers in Jesus had to abandon all Jewish practice and reject any Jewish identity. These decisions had very serious implications.

I came to see the need for this third stage through encountering the Messianic Jews. The Messianic Jews are Jews who believe in Jesus and who do so precisely as Jews. They say the first believers in Jesus (or Yeshua as they say) were Jews (the twelve, Mary, James, Paul, Barnabas and Stephen). They did not have to abandon their Jewishness when they accepted Jesus as Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the World. So the Messianic Jews today are saying: when we Jews today become believers in Jesus, why should we have to stop being Jewish? That is a difficult question for Gentile believers to answer.

The very existence of the Messianic Jews poses us with this challenge: what happened to the Jewish church of the beginnings? What we find in effect was a combination of being marginalized and being outlawed. A key date here was 325 A.D., when the Council of Nicea was held. The Council itself did not make any statement relating to the Jews, but when the Council was gathered, the Emperor Constantine passed a law requiring the whole church throughout the world to celebrate Easter according to a non-Jewish calculation. In effect, this decision made the continuation of any Jewish expression impossible within the communion of the church of the nations.

The third level of repentance, therefore, corresponds to another level of sin, that was the exclusion of a visible Jewish expression from within the communion of the Church.

This third level is probably the root cause of the other two levels within the Church. For if there had been a visible Jewish presence within the church, it would have been impossible to have a replacement theology, and to have contempt for everything Jewish.

When I say a visible Jewish presence was prohibited within the Church, I am choosing my words very carefully, because it is an exaggeration to say that everything Jewish was excluded from the Church. The Church accepted the Old Testament as part of the Scriptures, and rejected the teaching of Marcion calling for a rejection of the Old Testament. Of course the New Testament is also almost entirely Jewish, and there continued to be many prayers and rites in the Church's worship that were of Jewish origin or reflected Jewish influence. What was prohibited was for Jews who were believers in Jesus to practice anything that was distinctively Jewish.

These are the three necessary phases of repentance. But as I said earlier there is the element of theological change and there is the element of heart change. Both are needed. In terms of what has happened in the last 30-40 years, there has been quite a lot of Christian change at the first level of theological change, especially as a result of reflection on the Holocaust. In a way, the Holocaust has forced an examination of conscience on the churches, especially in Europe. And so we find that most churches have officially repudiated anti-semitism, and some, together with many theologians, have repudiated replacement teaching.

For myself, as a Catholic, I can thank God for the change that happened in the teaching of the Catholic church, because it is clear since the documents of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, that replacement teaching has been abandoned and it is recognized that the Covenant of God with the people of Israel has not been revoked.

At the third level we have mentioned, the repression and loss of a Jewish expression of the church is a question that is not yet really on the agenda of most theologians, and therefore it hasn't entered the agenda of our churches either.

These remarks about change are just made at a theological level. But as I have said, we need not only a theological change, we need heart change. At the level of repentance, of the heart change, much less has happened in our churches. So for all of us who belong to the churches that have officially moved away from replacement teaching, there is a big challenge as to how we can move from this theological acknowledgement to a real repentance of the heart. It is good when our churches issue statements repudiating replacement teaching. It is good when churches say God's covenant with the Jewish people has never been revoked. But these church declarations often do not do a lot to change the attitudes of the people in our churches and of the people in our nations.

Of course, where we meet Christians who are still preaching replacement, we have to show them that this is not the teaching of the New Testament. But I think our biggest task is to promote a real repentance, a repentance that will lead to changed mentalities among the ordinary people. There is a lot of evidence to show that the attitudes of many people in our churches have not changed that much in their negativity towards the Jewish people.

Repentance means a change of heart. This means that in place of contempt for the Jewish people there would be a giving of honour. In place of rejection, there would be acceptance and welcome. In place of a prohibition of any Jewish identity in the church, there would be an honouring of Jewish believers in Yeshua.

I want to talk a little bit more about repentance and what it might mean in practice. I see two major approaches being recommended in some Christian circles. The first is what is called „identificational repentance“. One of the people particularly teaching identificational repentance is John Dawson, originally from New Zealand, but who now lives in the U.S.A. (his wife is American). He has recently been chosen as the next world-wide leader of YWAM.

John Dawson has been led over many years into the ministry of reconciliation: reconciliation between all kinds of human groups in conflict. However, John Dawson has come to recognize that the Jewish-Gentile reconciliation issue is the root theological issue for all forms of reconciliation. But as is, perhaps, characteristic of YWAM, John Dawson's teaching is very practical. He is constantly holding seminars in places of conflict. And in the teaching he has developed, he says: „You have to go back to the historical roots. Wherever there is prejudice, wherever there is hatred, there are reasons and you have to go back to the root causes of the conflict, if there is truly to be healing and reconciliation. If you do not go back to the roots, there will not be an end to the hatred and prejudice, only lulls and intervals. There is no other way to deal with historical conflicts.

Many people think that if you look the other way, time will heal. We have seen many examples in recent times showing that this is not true. Time alone does not heal. It does not get rid of the hatred. It just goes underground, it may not be so visible. The recent conflicts in former Yugoslavia show this very clearly. So the old history is repeated, and the conflicts of the past are re-lived. And in fact, they get deeper. There are new reasons for the hatred, new horror stories to tell about the other side. So it is essential to go back to the origins and identify where the conflict began.

But John Dawson says, it is then important to confess the sins of one's own tribe, of one's own people. This is where he speaks of identification. He refers to various biblical passages that speak of the identification of leaders not only with the people of the present but also with their forefathers, identifying with the sins of previous generations, with the sins of the ancestors. So, for example, in Jeremiah 3,25 it says: „we and our fathers have sinned“. We also find repentance like this in the 9th chapters of Nehemiah and Daniel. The whole of Nehemiah 9 is a confession of sin. The beginning speaks about the fathers: „But they and our fathers acted presumptuously, and stiffened their necks and did not obey thy commandments.“ (9,16). Near the end of the chapter it is clear that Nehemiah is identifying with his ancestors: „Thou hast been just in all that has come

upon us, for thou hast dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly." (9:33) You will find the same in Daniel Chapter 9. And there are other passages as well.

So there is a repentance for the sins of the past that requires us to identify with our people. And here identification is related to identity. There isn't time here to develop an understanding of identification very deeply, but what is important to grasp is that our salvation, our redemption has come about through an act of identification, the identification of Jesus himself. Jesus, who was sinless, identified with all sinners.

First, I think, Jesus identified with the sins of His own people. The roots of this go back to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, who suffers for the sins of His people. But Jesus's act of identification was expressed in a particular way in His baptism by John the Baptist. The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance, so when Jesus comes to His cousin, John, and tells him „I want you to baptize me“, John's reaction is to protest. „I can't do that“ he says. „That's the wrong way round. It ought to be you baptizing me.“ (Matt 3). Jesus says: no! „Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.“ (Mt 3,15).

I think this is an area where we need to pray and study and think more deeply. But I am convinced that John Dawson is right in insisting that a basic addressing of the roots of each conflict requires us to identify with our forefathers (and foremothers, of course). This takes us out of a position of arrogance, of regarding ourselves as superior to our ancestors, as though we would never have done such terrible things.

This identificational repentance is closely linked to intercession. It is grappling with spiritual realities. It is breaking down spiritual barriers. I think it is important for us to understand the difference between being spiritual representatives and governmental representatives. I'll explain what I mean by this. Identificational repentance involves a statement made before God: „we and our fathers have sinned.“ But it also involves making a statement to the people we have hated and fought throughout the centuries. It involves an invitation to them to accept our confession. Now this is where there is a difference between people expressing a repentance for their church, tribe or nation who are simply acting out of a conviction by the Holy Spirit and those doing so in an official capacity representing their church or nation. The former is what I mean by spiritual representation, the latter governmental representation. Spiritual representation is very necessary, and without it happening first, it is not very likely that anything will happen at a governmental level.

Sometimes pastors and leaders are worried if people take things on themselves without being appointed. A problem often arises from a lack of wisdom. But if people believe that God is calling them to stand in the gap and confess the sins of their forefathers before God, we should encourage this. But this spiritual representation is something that is essentially private. I don't mean that it has to be something totally secret. Therefore it might be the activity of a group. Some of you may feel called to represent previous generation of Hungarians. This is very important.

But we have to be careful about publicity. This is often where the enemy gets in to cause trouble. If people who do not have any official position feel called to do something, they should not publicize it in a big way. What matters first is the confession before God and then the confession before the injured party. But if a private group does this and then they hold a press conference to tell the world what they have done, this invites the response: who do you think you are? You do not represent anybody. The answer is: do not hold a press conference. We should be content with our obedience before the Lord.

Governmental representation is totally different. This is where people officially represent their churches or their nations. When they make a statement about their acts of confession and reconciliation, there needs to be publicity. If the Prime Minister of Hungary or the Archbishop of

Esztergom makes a confession of past evils and they don't hold a press conference, they would be stupid! The whole point of the governmental confession is that they do have the authority and position to make a statement on behalf of those they represent. These people need to know what has been said on their behalf.

Finally, on the subject of confession of past sins I want to mention the recent initiative of Pope John Paul II., calling for a repentance by Catholics for past sins, by both leaders and people. This is historically very significant, as it has never happened before in the long history of the Catholic Church. I believe that this initiative is bound to have major spiritual repercussions, precisely because confession and repentance produce change at the spiritual level. After the pope called for such confession, he asked for this question of repentance for sins of the past to be more deeply studied. As a result, the Pope's International Theological Commission issued a statement in March 2000, entitled **Memory and Reconciliation**. A key concept in this document is the purification of memories.

I see this important teaching as complementary to John Dawson's teaching on identificational repentance. It is not exactly the same as John Dawson's teaching, but it represents another dimension of what is needed. It is also a dimension that is relatively easy for people to understand. In all situations of conflict there are memories that are handed down from one generation to the next. You can see this very clearly in places like Northern Ireland, where even children of 6, 7 and 8 years of age know which side they are on, and who their enemies are. These false, distorted memories are passed on from one generation to the next. What the Pope is saying is that the conflicts cannot be ended without a purification of these memories.

This means that we have to look at our histories, the way that past conflicts are understood and taught in our history books and classes. The purification of memories means separating out falsehood from the truth. It means calling what is good, good and what is evil, evil. The evil, whether it is done by our side or by the other side. But our responsibility is for our side.

Therefore, for the issue of Jewish-Christian relations, the Christians bear the responsibility for all the misrepresentation, the myths, the violence, the negative images, and the negative humour: for everything anti-Jewish that happened and whose memories are still alive today. John Dawson's teaching focuses on going back to the original source of the conflict. That is necessary. The purification of memories called for by the Pope focuses attention on what in the history has been handed down through the generations.

We have to go back and examine ourselves and our histories. We have to ask: what in this is true and what is false? With what is false, we have to say: „This was false! This was evil!“ This is difficult, because we all have our myths to which we are attached. We do not like having our myths purified. Our big task is the repentance, the heart change! It faces us with the challenge of how the Holy Spirit changes the hearts of people. Church statements are not going to achieve very much if there is no work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the people. Nonetheless church statements that uphold the Jewish people do have their importance. They remove the legitimacy for the prejudice and the hatred.