

Coping with Terror—the Missing “R” Word

Colleagues,

It may be too soon to post this to you. Maybe it shouldn't ever be posted at all. I'm not clear on this. So trepidation goes along with this posting.

One “R” word—better, one “re-” word—has been missing in what I've heard from our leaders and media voices about the disasters of Sept. 11 so far. Granted it's only the second day after the cataclysm as I write this. More words and pictures will continue to surfeit us. Maybe the missing “re-” word will surface. To wit, the word “repentance.” Even if our public interpreters don't use that “re-” word, we Christians would do well to put it into the public discussion, wouldn't we?

President Bush offers “re-solve” and “re-assurance” as our government goes after those “re-sponsible.” Somewhere, we're told, a “re-turn” address will show up to identify the villains. And then “re-prisal, re-tribution” will follow. Lots of “re-” words, but not repentance.

But what if one of the names on that return address is “God?” For me too, that sounds crazy at first. Even worse, cruel, uncaring, supercilious, just awful. But in the Bible, those with ears to hear—seldom ever the majority—did hear God's voice, God's call-to-repentance voice, when all hell broke loose in public life as the walls came tumbling down and the butchers entered the city. See the Amos citation below, as one example.

Seeing God in the equation in no way exonerates the villains. Not at all do they come out “good guys.” They are murderers bent

on villainy, for which they too will pay, says God. Yet God appropriates them as his agents—using, as Luther occasionally said, one sinner to punish another sinner.

Isaiah 10 is one classic text about this. “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger... Against a godless nation [Israel!] I send him, and against the people of my wrath [Israel] I command him.” The king of Assyria, of course, doesn’t know that he is God’s agent. He thinks he’s in charge in his own campaign of world conquest. But the Big Screen shows that he’s being used, even as he fills the streets of Jerusalem with blood. The Big Screen also shows that when God’s done using him, he will get his own just deserts. “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mt. Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride.” The subsequent scenario for Assyria is not pretty. Even so Isaiah calls Israel to repentance.

Is there any help here for us after Tuesday—for our repentance? Yes, but there are barricades between us and that help. Fed, as we Americans are, on the folk piety of “God bless America,” (the only God-mention I heard from our elected representatives on day #1), repentance is just not on the agenda. To mention it now sounds subversive, unpatriotic, siding with the enemy. In wartime, that’s treason. Even President Bush’s Biblical words from Psalm 23 at the close of the first day—though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me—didn’t sound much like repentance. The premise for the verse quoted is that THIS Lord really is confessed as “our shepherd.” Is that true in any serious sense in our American culture? Would that Bush, evangelical Christian as he is, had cited the classic line from the previous Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why?” Granted, that is a cry of despair, but it does send the right question to the right addressee. And for that question there IS an answer from that addressee: “Why? You

have been weighed and found wanting. Ergo, repent." That's not God's entire answer, of course, nor yet a good-news answer, but it starts at the right place.

Repentance, of course, begins with contrition, a "mea culpa" 'fessing up to our wrongness and God's rightness in dealing with us accordingly. That, of course, entails faith in God, trusting God, as we face up, 'fess up, to his own rightful reprisal. Repentance admits that we have a "god-problem." But where do our public figures ever signal that America has any God-problem? With reference to God, Alfred Newman articulates the faith of America: "What, me worry?"

Worry there is aplenty, sure, but not about God. In our American folk piety it's an automatic given: we can count on God to bless America. God's our buddy. One of you readers calls this the "Rotary Club religion" of America, which all too often, sad to say, comes from Sunday pulpits as well. There's no place for repentance in a theology that God only blesses America. Repentance is a response to the opposite, God the critic and our encounters with the rod of God's anger.

But could God really be the return address for Tuesday's airline missiles? God sending terrorists to perpetrate massacre? All those innocent people? Thousands of them? If we think only of the terrorists, then the "re-" word retribution is at the top of the list. And we continue to hear it from the head honchos. But if God IS in the mix too, if (ala Isaiah) the terrorists are the "rod of God's anger," then the other "re-" word is the only appropriate one. Even in the face of the chaos that immobilizes us and what we've heard to cope with it.

What we've "heard" is the key. Have we heard God assessing (not blessing) America at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001? None of the first day interpreters I listened to

gave any signal that they had heard such a word from God. Perhaps the knee-jerk singing of "God Bless America" by Congress members that first day did signal something. But what? Mega-despair? A mini-prayer? Maxi-bewilderment? But it surely was no clear call for repentance. Even so, if we never find out who the human agents were for the disaster, the divine message need not stay hidden. [Dis-aster, by the way, is an eerie term for Tuesday. The word means "bad star." Originally linked, I believe to a bad horoscope. Four bad stars slammed out of the sky on Tuesday.]

But how could the USA possibly be a candidate for God's judgment, a rogue nation? Granted, other peoples say that. Most likely the agents for Tuesday's apocalypse say so too. But they're simply wrong, we say. We are by definition NOT a rogue nation. There are noble explanations for all (well, most all) of our national behavior. For us it's incomprehensible that we genuinely are candidates for repentance. Unless we get illumination from the Word of God and get the eyes to see and the ears to hear. But that vision, that hearing, doesn't come from the financial district of Manhattan or the Pentagon. We've been getting "other gospels" for a long time from those stations.

Yet how could God pinpoint it more clearly by knocking down those two WTC transmission towers and putting a big hole in the one on the Potomac? The messages coming from those "towers" (is ancient Babel analogous?) are money and military, fundamental "M & M's" of our national way of life. How can you get to repentance, even hear of repentance, from those loudspeakers? But they are now rubble—and the mega-numbers previously coming from them about our economic and military might are now corpse-counts. Doesn't that ironically turn them into voices for repentance?

But repentance is tough. Repentance is hard to do even for one person. It's like dying, says Jesus, like crucifixion. No one in their right mind would do it, unless . . . Unless the alternative were even worse. As it is. But that conviction takes faith. And for that repenters need help so that it becomes a repentance unto life, and not a repentance unto despair. According to the Word of God such help is available.

But how might a nation repent? How national repentance would unfold is hard, well nigh impossible, to imagine. Will any nation, CAN any nation admit to being a rogue nation by God's own evaluation? Luther confronted the question in 1529 as Suleiman the Magnificent with his 600 thousand (sic!) troops stood outside the gates of Vienna that year, having just scorch-earthed their way through the Balkans to this Eastern outpost of Western Christian Europe. Luther called for all of Christian Europe to repent. But realist that he was, he didn't actually expect it would happen, so he proposed a Plan B—vicarious repentance, surrogate repentance, some minimal few doing it and many benefitting. Consequently he encouraged whoever would listen to repent and perhaps God would acknowledge that as the repentance of all. There was Biblical precedent for that—remember Abraham pleading for Sodom. Then too, God had once acknowledged a vicarious “atonement” as good for all, so vicarious “repentance” might work too, also on the scene of world politics.

Luther's 1529 essay was titled “On War against the Turks.” [It gets a bit macabre when you remember that “Turks” meant Muslims in 1529 and then look at today's world scene.] Luther called his readers to realize that there were TWO enemies confronting so-called “Christian” Europe outside the gates of Vienna in 1529. One was Suleiman and his 600K soldiers. The other enemy was God. The two were in cahoots as God was using Suleiman as “the rod of his anger” against the phony Christianity of so-called Christian

Europe. Though allies, these two different enemies required two different strategies. The only way to cope when God's the enemy is repentance. Fighting is nonsense, and if done, is guaranteed suicide. Repentance dissolves God's enmity.

Coping with the God-enemy by repentance brings major benefits for confronting the other enemy, said Brother Martin. Upon our repentance, he claimed, Suleiman's power will be weakened. He will lose his Big Gun. He will cease to be the rod of God's anger, since God responds graciously to repenting people. 'Course we'll still have Suleiman and his 600K out there. But then they are at least theoretically beatable, bereft as they then will be of their divine ally. Without that ally they are just human.

That was the theological rationale for his "military" strategy. So he called "Christian Europe" to repent for its phony Christianity, even though he was not sanguine that many would do so. He knew that on the "Turkish" issue in 1529 he was a voice crying in the wilderness. Some even called him traitor. Nevertheless he encouraged the faithful few, the remnant, to repent, reminding them of the Biblical precedent (and promise) that vicarious repentance "works." There are no statistics about responses to Luther's call for repentance. But someone, someones, must have done so. Maybe just Luther, Katie and the kids around the supper table. For this much is in the history books: Suleiman and his 600K turned around and went home, never attacking Vienna. Europe was saved.

And now a word from Amos 4:

(God speaking) I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return [=same Hebrew word for "repentance"] to me, says the LORD.

And the litany continues:

*I withheld the rain from you...
I struck you with blight and mildew...
I sent among you a pestilence...
I overthrew some of you...*

*With this verse-by-verse refrain:
Yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.*

*And with this closure:
Therefore . . . prepare to meet your God, O Israel.*

This is not Gospel. It is a call to repentance. But without saying yes to this we never get to the Gospel. Better said, the Gospel never gets to us.

And in the promise of such repentance and of such Gospel for our own nation in agony,

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder