

National Repentance #5. (I wish it were the last one.)

Colleagues,

It's been a month. Also a month since ThTh touched the repentance word for the USA. You've seen some of the ping-pong that's elicited. Not yet passed on to you is dissent from some of our own "brightest and best" from the days of Seminex, and later, Crossings. You can understand why. To wit:

1. "I agree with those who think you sound too much like a Falwell of the left."
2. "How sure are you that the liberal Democratic platform is the only one that can square with belonging to the promising tradition?"
3. "Interpreting particular contemporary events as signs from God strikes me as audacious, and superfluous."
4. "I believe my 'left-hand' judgments proceed as surely from love of others and thirst for (civil) righteousness as you think yours do, even though they come out very different."
5. "Do you preach repentance at funerals, Ed, in the decisive way you are now preaching it to a nation?"

Seems to me that—

1. The only thing "leftist" about ThTh 170 and 172, was my proposal to view Sept 11 and the days following as coming from the left-hand of God. God saying: Read my lips. Especially the message from the left-side of my mouth.
2. The "lib.Dem. platform" and its Repub. alternate are two foxes apparently running in opposite directions. But their tails are tied together. Neither shows any signals of

comprehending even God's own leftist action, let alone anything about the promise resting in God's other hand. *[One critic in last week's ThTh 173 asked if I'd have called for repentance had Clinton been president. What that critic didn't notice is that I did NOT call for Pres. Bush to repent. Rather I urged him to call the nation, usn's, to repent, since God has put him in that "bully pulpit." For the record: In recent USA presidential elections I've voted for 3rd party candidates.]*

3. As Amos protests, "I'm not a prophet, but the Lord showed me . . ." I've had no vision. I just happened to have a Bible in hand when the TV was turned on. Once more, thought clearly not a prophet, I take some comfort in the fact that the real prophets were also charged with audacity and superfluity.
4. The issue is not at all who has any claim to "love of others and thirst for civil righteousness." It's about the Word of God. Does God say such and so, or not? What do the following texts mean for us in the USA? Look 'em up. Deut.32:39. Ezekiel 3:18. Amos 3:1-8: 4:6ff. Isaiah 5:24-30; 10:5-12; 30:12-14. And it's not just the Hebrew scriptures. Read the words of Jesus cited in the next line.
5. Preach repentance at funerals? Jesus did. Luke 13:1-5.

Summa: Granted, I might be wrong. But Jesus, we trust, was not. At stake is hearing the Word of God. For personal devotions these days, I'm praying the Seven Penitential Psalms: 6, 22, 32, 38, 51, 102 and 130. When the words "I" and "me" surface, I add on "we" and "us." They fit.

Some have chided me "where's the Gospel, Ed, in what you're saying?" ThTh #170, the first in this series, acknowledged that in its concluding sentences: "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.”

The RSL Gospel appointed for Sept.30 (Luke 16:19-31) concluded the same way, didn't it, with “Abraham” too affirming the sequence, namely, the sequence of our “hearing.” In Hades [too late!] the Rich Man learned: “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced by SOMEONE [aka the Crucified One] rising from the dead.” No surprise, the same Jesus who tells the Rich Man/Lazarus parable initiates his ministry—according to St. Mark—proposing the same sequence, “The crunch moment is now. King God is at the door. Therefore repent and trust the Good News.” (Mk 1:15)

Leonhard Goppelt, my New Testament teacher of 50 yrs ago, showed students that Jesus gave two different calls for repentance in the Gospels. One was a “condemning” call to repentance, the other a “saving” call to repentance. The Pharisees & scribes, the “good guys,” got the first one. The down-and-outers got the second one. It's not that the down-and-outers were really “good guys” below the surface. No, both groups were sinners. But with a twist. The former were sinners “in fact,” but not “in truth.” They denied it. “We have no need of repentance.” The latter were sinners “in fact AND in truth.” No denial about their “fact.” “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Both were called to “turn around,” one to turn around from denied sinfulness, the other from despairing sinfulness. The call to sinners-in-denial was not, is not, Good News (See Jesus's acid words, his last words to them, in the entire chapter of Matthew 23). The call to the others was indeed Gospel. “Come unto me” Jesus never mixed them up, said Goppelt, but “properly distinguished.” [That has a familiar ring!] Which group comes closest to us in the USA TODAY? Well, then

AND NOW A VOICE FROM THE PAST – 10-PLUS YEARS AGO

Ten years ago—in the EASTER 1991 issue of the CROSSINGS newsletter (#21)—Bob Bertram had a short piece titled “SS is for Suleiman and Saddam.” Bob linked Luther’s treatise of 1529 “War against the Turk” to our [USA] need for national repentance vis-a-vis Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. Yes, it was the EASTER issue! Bob’s drumbeat for repentance a decade ago is even more compelling now. For many of you, and for me too, Bob’s a “church father.” Read on.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

SS is for Suleiman and Saddam

Both of them, Suleiman the Magnificent and Saddam Hussein, have prompted Christians to be just dying for a change. I mean, these two dictators have prompted Christians to repent, Easter style. No thanks to these tyrants themselves but to the God who has used them against us, there have been believers who have gotten the message, have capitalized on the crisis by just dying for a change – repenting – and so have parlayed the threat into a victory.

First, Suleiman the Magnificent. Back in the days of the Reformation, Suleiman and his invincible Muslim armies – European Christians called them “the Turks” – had been encroaching upon Christian Europe from the southeast, leaving a hideous trail of atrocities, and were now threatening the very gates of Vienna. Martin Luther incurred bitter criticism when he declared that God was “visiting our sin upon us by means of this

scourge," even though Luther eventually agreed that Christendom had no choice but to defend itself against the approaching menace. In fact, Luther went his critics one better. He proposed a practical strategy for defeating Suleiman: repent. Christendom, Luther pointed out, currently had TWO enemies, of whom Suleiman was but one, the other, the more daunting enemy being God. If the truly brave Christians would repent, even if they were only a tiny remnant, all of Europe might yet be spared. For then there would be no longer God, but merely Suleiman to contend with. Suleiman, by the way, suddenly had to drop everything and return to pressing business at home.

For us today Suleiman's tyrannical equivalent is Saddam Hussein. But who's afraid of Saddam anymore? Haven't we won the war? So what's to repent? Ah, yes, comes the reminder, but have we won the peace? Are the Iraqis at peace? The Kuwaitis? The Palestinians? The Israelis? Are we? All around us, now that the bills are coming due, the bills also for unfinished war back home, people are seeing signs of "Saddam's revenge," if out of the ashes. Then does that mean we never should have entered the war? Not necessarily. It seems that finally we had no choice. Then was THAT the judgment upon us: the only way left for doing right was to do evil, irreparable harm, even to our own children? Or if we do think (as many of us did at first) that we should have gone more slowly, would even that have exempted us from repenting? Maybe Saddam's worst revenge is that by being so obviously in need of repentance himself he has successfully blinded us to our own need of it, still.

What is wrong with this kind of talk is not that it is untrue but that it is only half true. The other half of it is that repentance, while it is something we've got to do, is far better than that: it is also something we GET to do, thanks to the risen Lord. Repentance never did mean being afraid of Saddam, anymore than it meant being afraid of the tempest or of the

multitude. That is the old way of fearing. The new fearing means God-fearing, fearing the only One the loss of whose grace would be the loss of everything. But to fear THAT One already implies how amazing we know that grace to be. What is more, in that case fearing is only the beginning. It is just dying for a CHANGE. And the change is resurrection with Christ, starting here and now. There actually are such liberated God-fearers among us, Marys and Magdalenes and Salomes and Simons, who brave that new kind of fearing and that kind of Eastering. What they dare to do is not just "Pray for Peace" but "Repent for Peace," Christ being risen. Imagine the consequences for Europe, also for the Middle East, even for the Middle West. Imagine the laughter!

P.S. Just received from one of you after this ThTh 174 was put together:

["Terrorism and Repentance: The Response of Faith"](#)

BreakPoint with Charles Colson

Commentary #010927 – 9/27/2001

I think he's got it. GO and see.