

The Other Half of the U-turn of Repentance, a Response to ThTh 48

Colleagues,

Michael Hoy, veteran Sabbathology guru, sent in today's piece. It's Mike's addendum—"support" he calls it (well, sortuv)—to my ThTh #48 offering last week. It's "the rest of the U-turn of repentance, the really good stuff." Mike's stuff offered here is indeed good stuff. Early this year Mike moved to St. Louis from a deanship at Capital University in Ohio. He's now pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran congregation here in town. He's also the dean of our local St. Louis "School of Theology." Mike's add-on to my U-turn of last week demonstrates his gifts for both of those jobs.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

"The X-tra Ingredient for Palatable Penitence-Enjoyable Even-for a Ninevite Nation"

This article follows and supports Ed Schroeder's insightful topic last week, "Repentance: Coping with God the Critic." Let me summarize some of his main points: The Amoses of our day—the "public soul-searchers"—have not placed the God of Amos into the equation of the tragedies, a God who holds his creation accountable. The events of recent times suggest that America is a nation with a God-problem. Just because many don't (or can't) use such God-language in our pluralist secular culture doesn't mean that God is not acting critically.

So what is required of us is repentance, “a ‘fessing up to the truth of the critic’s critique and making a U-turn,” even though the track-record for such national acts of contrition is not encouraging. (Keep in mind that it is not necessarily the sins of the present actors that leads to these present tragedies, but God’s “visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation.”) Using the “Crossings” model of Diagnosis/Law/Criticism, we have the **behavioral** problem in our acts of evil; the **heart** problem of a worn, weary, and wary sickness that leads to these behavioral problems; and a **god** problem in that God is holding us accountable as a nation lest we repent. Can Daniel Schorr et al. bring that kind of “Abrahamic faith” diagnosis to bear on our problem today? And will America repent?

I wonder whether the poor track-record of repentance from nations to which the Hebrew prophets (like Amos and Jonah) appealed might be traceable to the fact that their repentance rarely got to the root of the God problem. That’s not the prophet’s fault, but the tendency for us is to skirt that deep a diagnosis. Perhaps we may recognize the behavioral problem. Most ethicists or reformers are willing to go that far, though that is hardly theological ethics/reformation. And my guess is that media-types like Daniel Schorr et al. do help us, to some extent, see that problem. Perhaps among some, even most Christian-types, there can be a recognition of the heart-problem. But rarely—and this I believe is Ed’s point—do people plummet that far.

Ed has given us the first half of the U-Turn. Now Ed has set me up to give you the last half of the U-Turn. My guess is that he would have done that himself this week, but since I e-mailed him about the lacuna of “what does the gospel of Jesus the Christ have to do with all this?” he gave the assignment of completing the U-Turn to me.

Essentially what I indicated to Ed is that “the U-turn becomes palatable (even enjoyable) when Jesus the Christ frees us from the radical criticism. Otherwise, America may repent of its actions, but not to the Critic.” That needs some unpacking; and before I can say how the U-turn becomes “palatable, even enjoyable,” I will want to say a little more about our problem in making U-turns.

1. “America may repent of its actions.” The Amos-types we have today may lead to some changes in this regard—to get people to change their behaviors (actions). In fact, their solutions are all too often geared toward that kind of quick-fix, for example, the cry for “better gun control laws” or “better parenting” so that incidents like Littleton don’t happen again; or perhaps even the calls for relief for Oklahoma tornado victims. Those solutions may put a bandaid on the problem, but they will not resolve it once and for all. Still, they are the easiest to talk about in the public square. And I don’t mean to disparage them. They are works that help people. Christians and non-Christians can join in that kind of civil righteousness. But it just doesn’t get to the heart of the problem—and that is what many, if not most, ethicists and reformers (including the so-called theological types) miss.
2. Repenting of the actions. There is still another solution that doesn’t really resolve the problem, and this one is common among Christians, perhaps because way too much of Christian preaching (unfortunately, unfaithfully) takes this short-cut on the U-Turn. The short-cut is when Christians think they need to look at some of their motives and attitudes for the kinds of bad behaviors they do. Then, the solution is projected: change the motives and attitudes. Maybe Jesus even gets cited as an example.

Or maybe the Spirit gets cited as a source for changing those attitudes. The end result is a soul-searching moralism. But the problem in its fullest dimension is not resolved. And the real fruits about why Jesus had to die are wasted.

3. Repenting to the Critic. This is the problem in its fullest, and this is where Ed left us last time. And there is no solution that we have to resolve it—no resources of our own. But that is where the real “good news” begins.

Now, on to the really good stuff.

1. The X-tra Ingredient for Palatable Penitence. The palatable-ness of penitence, while it does in fact become palatable for us (read below), must first meet the palate of God. In the public square, on Golgotha outside Jerusalem, up the road from later-day Kosovo, the kind of gusto that will satisfy the problem at the God-level is met through the public crucifixion of Jesus the Christ—public also as “King of the Jews” in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. In Jesus’ teachings, he would also use the illustration of Jonah (Matthew 12:39-41), not so much for Jonah’s proclamations per se, but for Jonah’s three days in the belly of the great fish as symbolic of his three days in the belly of the earth, from which he emerged with a gigantic U-turn, an act signifying that “something greater than Jonah is here!” (vs. 41) That U-turn is his act to take along all who have been swallowed up in the criticism of the Critic, to bring them out into a new era of hope and promise.
2. Enjoyable Even. Because God’s palate is satisfied with the U-turn of this One-Greater-than-Jonah, we get to go along for the ride in Christ’s U-turn. Our hearts find delight and liberation in the source of Christ’s victory over the divine criticism. We don’t go through life wondering

warily how this is all going to end. We get, even now, a foretaste of the ending by faith! That ought to put a spark into our hearts, to satisfy our deepest longings, because we are counted among those for whom the Great Repentance in Christ has claimed “among the thousands of those who love me.”

3. for a Ninevite Nation. Those who have faith in the Promise-Greater-than-Jonah can be the agents of U-turning our nation, helping our nation to see possibilities beyond evil and tragedy, helping our nation to hope again. In fact, there is a public place for this, in our nation, among the community of those who gather around the palatable, enjoyable table of our Lord who has died and has been raised, and who themselves turn around, in the spirit of forgiveness and love, and (undercover) bring that pleasure and good will to the nation. There is, then, a message of hope for us to bring to the Ninevite Nation, whether or not Schorr does—and, in fact, that message is broadcast to a wide audience every feast day of the Great U-Turn. Remember that Nineveh repented, and was saved. Remember also, from Ed’s article last time, that Suleiman went home. God hears the repentant cries of his people on behalf of others. The nation may benefit from our own cries. But imagine how much more it will benefit from enjoying the taste of forgiveness!

Michael Hoy
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