

O That I Could Repent

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

O that I could repent!
With all my idols part;
And to thy gracious eye present
An humble contrite heart!

A heart with grief opprest,
For having griev'd my God;
A troubled heart that cannot rest
Till sprinkled with thy blood!

Jesus on me bestow,
The penitent desire;
With true sincerity of woe
My aching breast inspire;

With softening pity look,
And melt my hardness down;
Strike with thy love's resistless stroke,
And break this heart of stone!

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Elements in a Philosophy of Ministry: Spiritual Maturity

Kevin T. Bauder

Multiple passages of Scripture celebrate spiritual maturity and rebuke immaturity. Two of the most pointed are 1 Corinthians 3:1–4 and Hebrews 5:11–14. In the former text Paul rebukes “carnal” believers who have failed to grow and who must be fed spiritual milk rather than solid food. The writer to the Hebrews employs the same metaphor, equating the use of milk with immaturity and the consumption of solid food with maturity. He also specifies that the mark of maturity is to exhibit sensibilities that are trained through use to distinguish good from bad. In other words, maturity is measured by a capacity for sound judgment.

One of the tests of a successful ministry is that it is advancing the Lord's people to mature adulthood (Eph 4:13). Obviously, the transition from spiritual infancy to spiritual adulthood requires growth. Not surprisingly, the epistles deploy the metaphor of growth to indicate that spiritual progress is expected of both churches (Eph 1:21) and individuals (2 Pet 3:18).

Healthy growth is always incremental. The degrees by which it is measured are often imperceptible. Consequently, measuring growth requires time—lots of it. Gardeners measure growth over weeks. Farmers measure it over months. Parents measure it over years. Unlike these examples, however, spiritual growth never stops. It must be measured over the entire lifespan of a believer.

Fostering growth is not a spectacular activity, and it is not an activity that can be hastened. Indeed, ministries cannot cause growth. All they can do is to arrange the circumstances that permit growth. They can feed, protect, and nurture—and they must do all of these over a process of time. Even then they are not guaranteed results.

The normal Christian life is a life of steady progress over time toward maturity, wisdom, judgment, and sanctification. This vision of sanctification stands opposed to alternative visions that see the Christian gaining holiness in other ways. In some theories, believers simply have to “let go and let God” to experience sanctification. In others, believers become useful to God when they experience some second work of grace or some baptism of the Holy Spirit. In still others, spiritual progress is envisioned as a series of



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quantum leaps, each of which is precipitated by a crisis and evidenced by “going to the altar.”

Churches that are committed to these alternative visions of the Christian life often focus on the importance of the public invitation. Indeed, they may gauge the success of their ministries by the number of decisions that are made during each preaching service. People are expected to make big, crisis decisions over and over again, whether these are decisions to get saved, to get right, or to get busy. Furthermore, the decisions are not considered real unless the individual goes forward in front of the entire congregation.

Of course, the Christian life does include crisis decisions. Trusting Christ as Savior often involves a crisis decision. A crisis may occur in the lives of believers who have indulged in a pattern of sin, and this crisis may precipitate a decision to abandon the sin, seek restoration, and live for God. These crises do happen and sometimes they are necessary.

Crisis decisions, however, remain the exception and not the norm. The goal of a biblical ministry is to see each of the Lord’s people making incremental adjustments whenever the Word is preached and the Spirit convicts. Indeed, a biblical ministry aims to equip people to make such decisions daily and sometimes even hourly during their individual walk with God. Sometimes these adjustments simply involve new understanding. Sometimes they entail seemingly minor course corrections. Only rarely do they result in major changes of direction instantly. Over time, however, the series of small learnings and adjustments will add up to significant change in a believer’s life. Measurable growth will occur.

Certain kinds of ministries can thwart this process of growth or even send it in wrong directions. Some ministries indulge in frothy emotionalism; their goal is to make people feel good about themselves. Other ministries are dominated by rule-driven legalism (and I use that term advisedly), in which Christianity becomes a list of do’s and don’ts. Some revolve around a cheap come-forwardism in which preachers manipulate people for knee-jerk decisions. Some ministries devote themselves to shallow theatricalism, reducing Christianity to a form of amusement and becoming indistinguishable from religious theaters.

In contrast to these approaches, a church that emphasizes maturity will major on the exposition of Scripture so that believers are hearing the voice of God. It will work patiently with its members, encouraging members to exercise their own judgment, but also expecting pastors to “reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim 4:2). It will give people time to weigh biblical teaching and to respond sensitively to the Spirit’s leading in their lives. It will coach the immature in the exercise of sound judgment, and it will be prepared to help them recover after lapses in judgment. A ministry devoted to spiritual maturity will not necessarily expect to

see people making big decisions during every church service. Instead, it will foster an atmosphere in which all members are making little but positive decisions all the time.

Ministries that follow this pattern will have the joy of watching believers grow from spiritual infants to mature saints who have a capacity for sound judgment. This kind of result may not be as obviously exciting as watching lines of people stream toward the “altar” during the invitation. The results that do occur, however—the long string of incremental changes that are the norm for the Christian life—are far more likely to endure.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
