

Repent is an Event

I never fail to be grieved at the amount of people who profess Christianity, but can never point to a conversion experience. They assume that Christianity is like capitalism or socialism, a kind of religious system that you happen to be born into, and as you grow up you increasingly embrace it. For them being a Christian is like being a citizen of a country – it's something you are by birth, and then increasingly live out in practice.

It's due to this idea that we have what I call cultural Christianity. This is not Biblical, New Testament Christianity, alive with the power of God and displaying Christ as the only way; this is a form of morality that happens to include some Christian concepts in it. It does not battle against false doctrine, or against sin, or against worldliness. It has only some vague ideas about being upright, nice people, and it feels that a once-a-week appearance at church pretty much proves that we are such nice people. Cultural Christianity really makes no impact on society, and for the most part, does not try to. Cultural Christianity is nice, lazy, leave-me-alone religion. Cultural Christianity is a toothless tiger.

The reason for this epidemic of cultural Christianity is that the church has, due to various factors, stopped teaching that conversion is an act done at some point in time. Though sanctification is a process, the Christian life is described as beginning with a new birth. Therefore, becoming a Christian is not something you are at physical birth by virtue of having Christian parents and because you were born into a 'Christian' home, and you do not openly disagree with the Christian faith, and you attend church fairly often – this does not make you a Christian. There must be the event that begins it – the event of regeneration, the experience of conversion. In other words – 'repent' is an event.

Now as soon as we begin speaking about the event known as being born again, or being saved, or being regenerated, we receive a number of objections. The first objection that comes along is that people say: if someone is born into a Christian home and undergoes some church ritual or rituals as a baby – is that not the New Testament version of circumcision? Surely then, that person is part of the new covenant, and therefore they are Christians.

Now this objection makes a number of mistakes. Firstly, it wrongly equates circumcision with salvation. When the Israelites circumcised their children, they were confirming that they were part of the Old Covenant. They were including their children as part of the congregation of Israel, under the Law. But here is the problem – many Israelites, who were obviously all circumcised, were not believers. For example, the sons of Eli the high priest – Hophni and Phineas.

I Samuel 2:12 tells us: "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the LORD."

So here are two young men, obviously circumcised, but not saved, not believers. They did not know the Lord. Circumcision did not make a Jew into a saved believer. This is further evident by the fact that Abraham became a believer before he was circumcised.

Paul uses this very fact to show that salvation was by an act of faith not by circumcision:

“Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: (Rom 4:9-11)

Paul is clear that Abraham’s circumcision was a seal of the righteousness which he already has because of his faith in God.

The fact that salvation was not imparted by circumcision is also clear by God’s commands to the Jews like:

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked. (Deu 10:16)

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings. (Jer 4:4)

Clearly, the Lord was saying that circumcision of the heart was something quite different to circumcision of the flesh. So circumcision did not save anyone’s soul, as evidenced by the fact that many circumcised Jews were unsaved, Abraham was saved before it, and God made a difference between circumcision of heart and flesh.

So what did circumcision mean to a Jew? It simply meant that he was being brought into the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant also could not impart righteousness, it could only demonstrate righteousness. The Law was simply the contract, the terms of agreement between the Jew and His God. The contract could not make him righteous, only faith in God’s provided atonement could save him. The Law certainly pointed to that, but it did not make anyone righteous. The Old Covenant did not save anyone. So a Jew by circumcision was made part of it, bound to keep its laws – not to achieve righteousness, but to obey God’s terms of agreement with them as a nation. **Personal salvation of each Jew was to be by faith in God’s promises.** If this was not so, then when the Old Testament refers to some Jews as righteous and just and to others as wicked, it becomes meaningless. So, the first mistake is to think that circumcision provided salvation to a Jewish child – it clearly did not.

Secondly, it is an error to think that circumcision has a New Testament counterpart in anything but salvation itself. The Bible never calls anything the New Testament version of circumcision except salvation itself. The Bible never says that baptism is the New Testament version of circumcision, nothing of the sort; it was theologians who came up with that, and tradition that has carried it. In fact, the Bible is clear that circumcision in the new covenant is a circumcision of the heart – which means it is salvation.

“In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses ;”(Col 2:11-13)

Now Paul tells us that believers have been circumcised without hands – in other words a spiritual circumcision. How? In putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, i.e. the death of Christ. He links Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, and mentions baptism, which like Romans 6, is a reference to the Spirit baptising us into the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, the moment we receive Christ by faith. So New Testament circumcision is the act of regeneration, being made alive with Christ – having his law now written on our heart. And so we do enter into the New Covenant by circumcision, but it is the circumcision of repentant faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour. And that is the third error with such thinking, it misses the point that salvation is by faith. You cannot impart salvation to someone else. God never delegated that authority to Jewish parents, and He has not given it to us today. Salvation is always by personal faith in Christ once a human reaches an age of understanding. If they die before that age, it is my understanding of various Scriptures that God’s sovereign grace saves them and gives them eternal life.

The second objection that arises when we speak about repentance as an event is that we are promoting mysticism. Mysticism is the focus on experience, on supernatural experience, as the test of truth. In other words, because you have experienced something, it becomes true. There is a lot of that going on today. Weird, unbiblical things are reported in Christian circles, and then proclaimed to be from God. People say, “But I experienced it – so it must be true”. Now such things are clearly in error, as we use the Bible as our final authority. But it is a wrong reaction to react to people who make experiences their stock and trade by pretending that salvation itself is not an experience. When we react to other groups instead of focusing on the Word, we will tend to go to the opposite end of the spectrum. So, now you have people claiming that terms like born-again, ‘saved’, ‘converted’ are somehow the terminology of a fringe movement – the words used by only particular denominations that focus on experience and supernatural manifestation. How sad. The terms born-again, saved, converted are biblical terms. Jesus Himself coined the term born-again. Both Peter and Paul speak of being a believer as a new birth – being regenerated. ‘Saved’ is used so frequently by the apostle Paul, it is hard to believe anyone would believe that it is not a Biblical reference to salvation. The fact is conversion is an experience. I understand perfectly, that it is to be followed by a lifetime of obedience. I know well that the Bible teaches you cannot simply claim to have prayed a prayer or gone forward during an invitation, and then live like the devil and base your supposed assurance on that ‘event’. But false conversion does not disprove the point that true conversion is an event.

Just consider all the words used to describe the act of becoming a believer – they all suggest an event. Justified – a legal term refers to a verdict whereby God, the Judge, declares us not guilty. Would you call a judicial verdict an event or a process? Clearly a court judgement is handed down on a particular day, at a particular time – it is an event. Of course born-again refers to an event. Though pregnancy is a process, and

though a child's growth afterwards is a process, their actual birth is an event. That is why you have a birthday, it happened on a day. You were not born over the period of a month or a year and your mother is rejoicing over that fact. Birth is an event. Conversion clearly speaks of an event. When Jesus converted Paul, He called on Him to show others salvation too, so that they could also be converted:

“To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.” (Act 26:18)

Those are clearly acts of turning from one to the other – repent is an event. Redeemed speaks of an event. There was a particular point at which the price was paid to buy you out of the slave-market of sin. Redemption was a financial transaction – it was an event.

Likewise forgiven – forgiveness is a cancellation of debt. In your own experience, if someone comes to you and asks your forgiveness, do you reply, “Well, I shall begin the process of forgiving you from this moment forward”. The person will give you a puzzled look and walk away sorry that they even asked. Of course forgiveness is an event. When we come to God for forgiveness in Christ, there is the event of being forgiven for all our sins and made His child.

So, to the one who accuses us of mysticism when we say that repent is an event, we reply – that is a red herring. You are trying to distract from the main point by using the excesses and false teaching of others. What others are doing wrong does not change what is right. Salvation must begin with an event – the day that you repent and by faith ask Jesus Christ to be your Saviour and Lord. It then begins a process of becoming more like Him. But trying to be like Him before that initial day of salvation is like a snake trying to fly.

The third objection that comes our way when we talk about repentance being an event is that we are promoting ‘decisionism’ or Finneyism. By this they refer to the mode of ministry introduced by Charles Finney, and now enlarged upon many times over by modern Christians. It is the thinking that salvation is all a matter of human reasoning and willpower. If you can effectively persuade a man in his mind and change his mind, he is then saved. The issue of God drawing the sinner and of the Spirit having to open his eyes is absent from decisionism. Everything is about getting a person, by whatever means, to make a decision. And therefore, it doesn't seem to matter to such people if the means are incompatible with the decision they are trying to get everyone to make. Thumping punk rockers, zany comedians, smoke and light laser shows, suggestive dancers, jugglers, clowns, - nothing seems to be beyond those who are trying to get people to make a decision, or sign a card, or raise their hand, or whatever the case may be. Since they believe salvation is essentially an act of the human flesh, it only makes sense to them to appeal to the human flesh to get them to decide to accept Christ.

But to accuse us of ‘decisionism’ when we call for the preaching of repentance and conversion as an event is a straw man. It is setting up this stuffed man called decisionism, and then when we call for salvation to be preached as an event, to kick it down. The difference between decisionism and true Biblical repentance is like night

and day. Salvation is of the Lord – it is a work of God. But it is nevertheless a work of God in time, like all of God's works; it must happen at some point in our linear timeline. The error of decisionism is not that they call on people to get saved as an event; the error of decisionism is how and why they do it. They focus on fleshly methods, because they believe that there is no work of God really involved in conversion. That's the critical error, not the fact that they are calling on people to be saved as an event. That's a Biblical call, as seen throughout the book of Acts. So decisionism is wrong because it is man-centred, it gives man the glory for converting himself, and for convincing sinners himself. It creates false converts, and very often does not call for a life in keeping with repentance. But to use the errors of decisionism to try and pretend that salvation is not an event is another red herring – it is using the errors of others to try and distract from the truths.

The truth is – to repent is an event. This is nowhere as clear as in the book of Acts. Going through the book we have a clear pattern of salvation as an event in people's lives, where they turn from sin to God, and the process of sanctification begins.

It begins in chapter 2. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preaches a sermon to the on-looking Jews, who are bewildered by the disciples miraculously speaking other known languages. At the end of his sermon, the Bible says: *"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?"* They are crying out to hear what they must do to change the situation. What was Peter's reply? Did he say, "Well, I know that you are all fine, circumcised Jews who have obeyed the 10 commandments. You're believers just like us. If you come to church and pay some tithes, expect eternal life – after all, you're children of the covenant"? Did he say, "What do you mean 'what must we do'. There's nothing for you to do! There isn't some decision or thing you must do – God does all the saving! Now go home and stop asking me irrelevant questions!"? Did he say "There's nothing for you to do – this is not some theatrical performance where you now come and make some sort of pledge! Just carry on with what you are doing, and in time we'll find out if you are saved or not"? No, he did not say any of those things. The Bible says:

"Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Act 2:37-38)

Peter says they, adult, religious Jews, must repent and then (as the Greek tenses suggest), they must be baptised because of the remission of their sins. This is clearly event-oriented language. They must repent. They must then be baptised to show that this event has taken place. The remission of sins, which was not true of them previously, would now be true of them. If Peter did not believe there is a particular day of salvation; if Peter did not believe that you get saved as an event, then he was using very misleading language.

This is not an isolated incident. In Acts 4, we have people responding to Peter's next sermon.

"Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand." (Act 4:4)

Of course, only the willingly ignorant would call the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus anything less than an event. One day, he is on the road to persecute Christians, the same day, he becomes one. This was not a process – it was an event. Time would fail us to mention all the occurrences of ‘and they believed’ in the book of Acts. Suffice it to say, the New Testament knows nothing of people who are born Christians, or made Christians by virtue of their parent Christianity. The Bible never describes God as having grandchildren. He only has children. Each individual must come to personal repentant faith to be saved. This is captured in Paul’s reply to the Philippian jailer. We read it in Acts 16:3-31:

“And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (Act 16:30-31)

By the way, Paul was telling the jailer that all his house must also believe – not that if he believed, somehow his family would also be saved. We know this because of verse 32 and 33:

“And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway.” (Act 16:32-33)

Why would Paul bother preaching the word to the rest of the jailer’s family if they were too young to understand and to repent and believe for themselves? The fact is, the jailer’s family was probably made up of older children or teenagers at the youngest.

The jailer asked Paul how the event of being saved could take place. Paul replied by telling him that the event called ‘repent’ had to take place – he had to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

To repent is an event. It’s a turning from one thing to another. It’s an intellectual turn. You turn from your own ideas and philosophies about life. You turn from your own view of who God is and who Jesus is, and how God ought to run the world, and what is right and what is wrong. You turn from your own ideas about how you are really a good person who deserves heaven. And then you turn to God’s truth and embrace and believe all that He says about Himself and life and judgement and sin and yourself. It’s also an emotional turn. You turn from rejoicing and loving sin and to loving God and holiness. You turn from weeping over others not honouring you to weeping over others not honouring God. Repentance is not only emotions, but real repentance will certainly have emotion. There will be an inner hatred of sin, a repulsion toward the old life, and a longing to be new. Your desires have turned to no longer want sin, but to want Christ.

It is also a volitional turn. There is a change of the will. You desire to no longer follow your own lusts, and live life for yourself, under your own control. You turn to Christ in His death and resurrection to forgive you of your sin and to give you a new life and a new heart and a new power to follow and obey Him. And while we will grow to increasingly love what is right and hate what is wrong, the fact is it begins on a particular day – the day we repent and receive Christ by faith.

I shudder to think of the hundreds of thousands, if not millions of religious persons who are not truly saved. They cling to their tradition, to their family history, to their culture, to their church affiliation. They know there has never been a day or a time in their lives when they repented of sin, and asked Christ to be their Saviour and Merciful Lord. But they do not want to be called by certain nick-names or be classified as happy-clappy or as fanatical or whatever else people might throw at them. So they just follow the crowd, and feel that since no one has ever confronted them on the need for the event of repentance to take place, they don't bother about it. This is a tragedy of eternal proportions. And it was predicted by Christ. He said:

“Enter by the narrow gate: for the gate is wide, and way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many: For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”
(Mat 7:13-14)

To repent is an event. Do not let anyone persuade you otherwise with smooth words. Each and every human being who comes to an age of understanding and accountability needs to have personally repented and by faith received Christ as Lord and Saviour to be truly a Christian. It does not come any other way. Each one of us has a physical birthday which we recall. If you cannot recall the day, or at least the period when your spiritual birthday occurred, - the day you were born again by the Spirit of God to become a child of God – you need to do that, even today.

2 Cor 6:2 says: “...behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”