

Legacy of the Pandemic?

Most people in America (certainly those who go to church) have decided, at some point, to read through the *New Testament* (the *Old Testament* probably not), but relatively few get through it – it is simply too confusing, too disjointed, seemingly out of touch, let's name it for what it commonly seems, booooring, not really significant or meaningful. “To the extent it is relevant (and it probably has some good thoughts in it) I look to the preacher as responsible for pulling them out and preaching them. I gave it a good shot!”

If the Coronavirus Pandemic has highlighted anything (not that many will notice), the church is even less relevant and necessary than we had thought – shuttered for 3+ months and few even notice. Now back open in “stages” (whatever that means): returning to much smaller crowds, shorter services, leaving some to watch poor on-line “services” and others simply waiting until it is “safe” to return (ignoring the fact that most churches offer enough space to double-social distance with room left over).

The majority of those who, in the past, attended sacramentally-focus churches have found they will not keel over and die if they do not partake of the sacraments for long periods of time (not that they really believed this anyway), the hip church attenders can listen to the worship music on their iPhones (after all, isn't “worship” all about singing repetitive verses over and over again?). Yes, the church “habit,” already weak, has been broken for many people. “I have to decide if I should, need or want to go back – I really don't see the great point.” You are not alone; multitudes of people are not desperately waiting for churches to reopen!

If churches had a great purpose in the recent past, many can't see it looking back. “I am saved – I have been baptized. I believe in Jesus. I do the best I can to be a good person. God loves everyone and I am confident I meet his criteria for eternal life – from attending church in the past I know this is true and I don't need to hear the same thing again and again and again! God is good, but church, like the *Bible*, is most of the time repetitive and booooring. I don't see the need – I can just rest on Sunday or do something fun.”

Interestingly, reading 15 minutes into the *New Testament* will highlight the reason it is currently believed “the church is irrelevant” and the antidote to the church's seeming 11th Hour possibly becoming its Midnight. This is not the 1st time the church has been on life-support and had to be miraculously revived – the pattern has been played out at differing levels of sickness, time and again, in the past when:

- People en masse sensed a strong need of God and flocked to the Church,
- Shepherds were miraculously raised up to guide these folks and
- The Church again became the center of relevance in society.

And then the cycle repeats itself: little by little, very slowly; people divide into religious packs – liberal vs. conservative, best described, in the *Bible*, 500 years before Jesus ; highlighting the church's condition at that point, later in Jesus' day and exactly the same today as it has been a number of times in history since Jesus – a dead religion proclaiming contradictorily and equally wrongly:

“All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” [the religious liberal] or “Where is the God of justice” [the self-righteous religious conservative]. ^{Malachi 2:17}

Less than 15 Minutes – Is It Possible to “Get It” (THE Point) in 15 Minutes? Let’s Just See!

First, let’s be realistic. In 15 minutes we can probably only read, say, the first 3½ to 4 chapters of *Matthew*. It isn’t unreasonable, though, that Jesus, very early in the *New Testament*, would give us guidance on His foundational teaching. But if we are reading a red-letter *Bible* (with Jesus’ words in red), we can quickly see there are less than 100 words spoken by Jesus in the first 4 chapters of *Matthew* – the 15-Minute Test appears increasingly impossible (I like it when God is challenged with the impossible!). Maybe if we expand the challenge and read 3 more chapters – 15, or so, more minutes (to include Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, His longest “sermon” in the *Bible*) there is some possibility of making the point; but 15 minutes, less than 100 words of Jesus, is there any hope?

Yet, in fact, all we need is 15 minutes and a little less than 4 chapters to very clearly reveal that today’s church is not teaching as Jesus did (because we are now wiser than Him?). In fact, it IS crystal clear, within these 15 minutes, and less than 100 words of Jesus, that the modern church is pretty close to 180° degrees off in their teaching.

So, set your alarm for 15 minutes and start reading:

Matthew Chapter 1: The genealogy and birth of Jesus show the *New Testament* and Jesus’ continuity with the *Old Testament* demonstrating this is no new religion, but the necessary conclusion and fulfillment of the OT narrative. The OT is the initial account of the Jewish (God’s chosen) people. The NT is the conclusion of this record based on the saving work of Jesus – the Messiah (Savior) for which historical Jews have been anticipating for thousands of years.

Chapter 2: A VERY brief overview of the first 30 years of Jesus’ life, again showing He is the long-awaited One prophesied in the OT. Getting nervous we aren’t going to accomplish our 15-minute goal? Hold on.

Chapter 3: The ministry of John the Baptist including the baptism of Jesus by John, also linking to OT prophesy.

Chapter 4 (first two-thirds) – The Temptation of Jesus, showing:

- a. Like Adam and Eve (and us), Jesus faced similar challenges yet, unlike Adam and Eve (and us), He successfully overcame satan’s temptations.
- b. His victory in overcoming these temptations was based on His referring to and depending on God’s Word (“it is written”) while Adam and Eve disregarded God’s Word and, as a result, failed – the clear lesson to us that, if the Word of God is necessary for Jesus it certainly is required for us as we face daily trials and temptations! Strike One: The church has minimized and largely abandoned the Word of God in preaching. It is almost as if the Bible is thought of as an embarrassment and liability best played down if we want to “attract” people. For example, one of the current best known “Christian” preachers explains “Why I Stopped Saying ‘The Bible Says’ When I Preach.”

And finally, we arrive at Jesus’ first recorded public word “Repent.” “I know and have done that, of course!” the conservative professing Christian will confidently claim – while the liberal confessing Christian will simply assume, somehow, they have done this.

What our 15-minute test highlights is that this first-word command is almost universally overlooked today in spite of the fact that:

“From that time on [not a one-time occurrence, in “passing” – this is what He preached “from that time on”] Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’” showing:

i. If this is Jesus’ “from that time on” proclaimed message, why do modern-day preachers increasingly preach it less and less (if at all)? They will tell you that “People don’t like to hear ‘Repent.’” We are in the Self-Esteem Age. As such, today’s fashion is to present a soft and confirming message. Strike Two: The church has abandoned CLEARLY basing their teachings on “Repent,” denying Jesus’ model that this must continue “From that time on” by the Church until He returns!

ii. Repentance, according to Jesus, is not a one-time event as so often thought and taught, rather it is a crucial new mind-set all authentic Christians must develop to successfully overcome the issues of life we face all the time. Jesus is here setting us up for all that follows (and precedes) in the *Bible*; His (all NT) teachings showing us how we must repent and how we can accomplish these repentances – if we expect to understand what we read and are taught we must keep “Repent!” in mind as we read and are taught God’s Word.

For in the End

ALL growth and maturity (spiritual, physical and otherwise) is built on repentance (a change to Better). Personal trainers, motivational speakers, coaches . . . all those who seek to show how to be better are telling us how we need to change to Better – any wonder, then, why so many have abandoned the Church as their preaching becomes more and more “I’m OK – You’re OK,” effectively anti-repentance. How long would any physical trainer or motivational speaker attract an audience if their core message is: “You don’t need to do anything to improve and be Better”? Obviously not long. That so many churches teaching an anemic message have lasted as long as they have is a great mystery!

iii. And Jesus, here, tells us the reason for repentance – “the kingdom of heaven is near,” another top theme of the *Bible*. We simply do not have the luxury of ignoring the finality of what is rapidly approaching for all of us, our eternal destiny! Strike Three: There is very little urgency in today’s church preaching!

And the many “Repents” of the *Bible* are not long-faced negative actions, but Grace-enabled actions always and only “for your own good.” Deu 10:13

Like a great personal trainer, motivational speaker or coach (only at an infinitely higher level), EVERY *Bible* repentance is for OUR good, not things we do “to please God.” Like any good parent (only again at a much higher level) God is pleased when we are living lives in which we are doing “the right things” – that which is for our good. “Repent!,” the good personal trainers, motivational speakers, coaches, parents . . . Christ tells, show and aids us in so we are the best we can possibly be (with God adding His Grace so what is previously impossible becomes possible).

So, Mission Accomplished!

Jesus, within 15 minutes of the beginning of the New Testament, provides the key for reading and understanding both the *New* and *Old Testaments*:

- The many repentances dictated by God, ALL of which are “for your own good.” There is not a single instance in the *Bible* for which anyone need apologize or be ashamed of Jesus’ Gospel (based on “Repent!”) – as many pastors today seem to be doing.

- God’s promised Grace (through the leading and guidance of His indwelling Holy Spirit) to accomplish His mandated repentances and the conditions for our taking and benefiting from these many Graces.
- How others we read about in the *Bible* did or did not repent and the resulting consequences.

Caution: Don’t try “Repent” without Grace for, without it, it is impossible to do what God requires for eternal salvation.

Heeding Jesus’ initial and on-going “Repent!” is the key to unlocking His offered salvation (being “born again,” sanctification, from being born again until we die, and finally achieving “glorification” at death),

The authentic Christian is looking for ways to be significantly better now – improvement (secular or Christian) that ONLY happens to the extent we Repent and do so rightly. That is God’s message in His ONLY written Word to man – His loving instructions for initial and on-going repenting because the end is near!

No, the Gospel is NOT “I repented and was saved” (the short-circuited message of the conservative) or “God accepts us as we are” (the perpetual liberal mantra and error). God’s message, His *Bible*, is a story from the beginning of creation to man’s “fall” (spiritual death) in the 3rd chapter of the *Bible* culminating as He creates a new and final heavens and earth at the end of *Revelation* – everything between is Jesus’ instruction of who, what, where, when and why we must repent in our personal “fight of faith” – our personal temporal purpose of earthly life to secure an eternal place with God in the new heavens and earth. Among the *Bible*’s many warnings about false “gospels” we are forewarned:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. ^{2Tim3:1-5}

In other words, they have no desire or thought they need to Repent even though the Gospel (including its vital faith accompanying actions of Repent!) is the Power of God necessary for our salvation – this will be THE teaching of a faithful Church!

A Short Test

As a short test that “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,” is a necessary key to understanding God’s Word we can simply read Jesus’ great *Sermon on the Mount* that follows in *Matthew 5-7* and see how “Repent” makes much better sense of this important part of the *Bible*. Chapter 5 **The Beatitudes** show us the “fruit” of true (*Bible* outlined) repentance, the goals of what are to be achieved by “Repent”:

- That we must be careful to continue on as salt and light in the world – what our repentance will demonstrate to the world and
- How we must repent from the many “it has been said” and what we “have heard” EVEN in many faithless churches!

Chapter 6 highlights:

- Our repenting from being like what we see in religious hypocrites and
- How we must repent from the commonly accepted seeking and serving the false god of Money with the associated promise, in this repentance, that God will GIVE us EVERYTHING we need for life (neither a faith, repentance or promise preached in many churches today).

Chapter 7

- Warns we must repent from OUR personal self-righteousness and hypocrisy, rather than (as so commonly is the focus in church today) to decry the sins of others,
- God's promise that our repentance TO God will be met with a sure acceptance of us on His part,
- That God's required repentance is very precise and "narrow" – Good News to those who desperately want a clear roadmap of what changes God DEMANDS and the promises of His Grace to enable us to meet these DEMANDS,
- That our "fruit" (good or bad) will show the legitimacy of our proper repentance (or not) and that
- Repenting to building on God's Word (His instructions) is required for our eternal salvation.

"Repent" is God's demand, not His suggestion! And it is both urgent and eternally vital "for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Thus, the great legacy of the pandemic? Maybe a time when the division between the authentic and nominal (false) Christian increasingly manifested itself, certainly Good News to those who look to God and His Word to show them day-in day-out that we must Repent (and how) so we are saved, sanctified and ultimately glorified. And how the single command to "Repent!" significantly simplifies and clarifies Jesus' teachings found in His Word.

As such, "Repent" is maybe the most important quote of all times because if this fork in the road is missed the narrow way of eternal salvation will be missed! Likewise, its importance is evidenced by:

1. Who said it: Jesus, the most influential person in all history.
2. When He said it – as His very 1st recorded public word.
3. That the summation of the frequency, quality, breadth and depth of repentance is the measure of a person's maturity. Which is why, as we see fewer people heeding God's Word and Jesus' teachings, we find more and more immature 80 year olds, 70 year olds . . . 30-year olds and fewer maturing young people. For only as we "Repent," and do so rightly, will any of us mature.

Practically?

Life can be "broken" into its major areas (all, in the end, Spiritual) requiring repentance:

Mental • Physical • Emotional • Relational • Work • Rest
Financial • Entertainment • Meals • Personal Grooming & Hygiene

In Summary

In effect, we only grow (versus stagnating and effectively beginning the process of dying) as we “Repent.” And we only “Repent” right as we seek and find God’s Grace for doing so as detailed ONLY in His Word. The choice is our, to die with a dying church or live under, in and by God’s Word.

The Legacy of the Pandemic for us personally?

That it wakes us up (or reinvigorates us)
to the greatest of all
historical and gracious teachings:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”