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EDITORIAL

This edition includes papers from the 2015 Rutherford House Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference on Reformed Worship by Drs Terry Johnson and Paul Wells. Terry Johnson's paper has been divided into two parts, with the second part due to appear in the next issue. These papers provide thoughtful reflections on worship from the church in the past and for the present.

Today as I write there is renewed optimism over a vaccination against Covid-19. The news brings hope of improved life and conditions for many. Pfizer, one of the companies behind the vaccine introduced their latest results in a press release as, 'a great day for science and humanity.'¹ It sounds promising, but there is much to discover as to what effects it will have. Shortly afterwards the Prime Minister urged caution as the vaccine is still in trial stage.

In a helpful article on how the church has responded to pandemics in the past, Darrel W. Amundsen and Gary B. Ferngren comment that during the Black Plague in medieval times, 'Clergy stressed repentance as the best medicine and treatment; physicians, a healthy regimen; and governmental officials, restrictive containment.'²

Today at daily briefings government officials and medical officers address the nation. The message is the same as in the past, suppress the virus and take steps for maintaining health. These press conferences provide social and medical advice but no spiritual guidance is offered. Amundsen and Ferngren comment on widespread changes in thinking about the origin of plagues since the cholera epidemic of the 19th century. The disease was traced back to natural causes of contaminated water supplies. Whereas at one time all would have agreed a cause was the wrath of God (or the gods in Roman times), 'As our focus shifted to inoculation, sanitation, and germ theory, theological explanations for disease receded for many.'

This is not to say that the desire, or realisation of a need to trace back to supernatural causes has ceased. It can't, as the soul is made for eternity, temporal social and medical advice is unable to address the eternal

¹ 'Pfizer and BioNTech announce vaccine candidate against Covid-19 achieved success in first interim analysis from phase 3 study', <<https://www.pfizer.com/news/press-release/press-release-detail/pfizer-and-biontech-announce-vaccine-candidate-against>> [Accessed 16 November 2020]

² Darrel W. Amundsen and Gary B. Ferngren 'The Plagues that Destroyed', <<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/plagues-that-destroyed-135>> [Accessed 16 November 2020]

matters of death and judgement, hastened by disease. Neither should we conclude that clergy do not have a platform on which to speak. Although clergy do not have the prominent platform as government or medics of high standing have, congregations gather in almost every part of the country around God's word, and now since the pandemic, there is an increased online presence that gives easy access for any who should wish to listen to church services.

If there is a consistency in the message today from government officials and physicians with that of the past, is it also true of the clergy? Is the church's message the same as it was, or has it changed? Readers will be able to arrive at their own assessment of these questions, through their own experiences in church and listening to or watching services from other churches online. One observer in the United States found the message of repentance was lacking among messages addressed to some of his country's largest congregations.³ Perhaps you have found otherwise. If not, it's worth asking why not? Why wouldn't the message be the same? The tracing of disease to natural causes doesn't fully explain the meaning of the times we live in. Yes, there are natural causes to diseases and plagues, but the creation and its events find their origin in the purposes of our supernatural Creator, not the creation and natural, physical causes.

Neither does a lack of proclaiming repentance arise because of a lack of this message in the Bible. Among Jesus first words recorded in Mark's gospel are 'repent and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:15); his message was one of daily repentance, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' and the apostolic message was that 'now he commands all people everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30).

Consequently, repentance has always been in the vocabulary and practice of the church. However the history of repentance in the church has often been an unhappy subject. There were days when it was generally taught that absolution of sin was only through confession to an earthly and fallen priest. Martin Luther's anger at the selling of indulgences sparked his nailing of his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, his first thesis being, 'When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.'⁴

³ Colton Corter, '4 Reflections after Listening to 18 Hours of Sermons in America's Biggest Churches' <<https://www.9marks.org/article/4-reflections-after-listening-to-18-hours-of-sermons-in-americas-biggest-churches/>> [Accessed 16 November 2020]

⁴ Martin Luther, 'The 95 Theses' <<https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>> [Accessed 16 November 2020]

The issue in the 16th century wasn't repentance *per se*: it was the way in which this teaching had been uprooted from its true setting in Christian life and was being administered as a means of spiritual bondage for financial and material profit. Repentance is the right medicine for the fallen human condition, but it needs also to be administered correctly and appropriately. We can consider not only that Jesus preached *repentance*, but *Jesus* preached repentance. He speaks the message of repentance and provides the power needed for it. Repentance cannot be a hopeful teaching if it is detached from him.

In Paul's writing to the Corinthians we can observe two kinds of grief: 'godly grief' and 'worldly grief'. Following this, there are two kinds of repentance: that which leads to life and that which leads to death, 'For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death' (2 Cor. 7:10). In Scotland the old terminology that was used to describe this difference was that of 'evangelical' repentance that is motivated by godly grief and 'legal' repentance that follows from worldly grief. In proclaiming the message, care needs to be taken with the spiritual medicine of 'repentance', that 'evangelical repentance' is being administered, that is 'repentance that leads to life' (Acts 11:18) and not the 'legal repentance' which leads to death.

Legal repentance and worldly grief are rooted in a servile fear of God, it is of the flesh. But evangelical repentance and godly grief derives from the Spirit and a filial fear of God. The evangelical kind comes from Christ because godliness comes from him. Thus in describing the 'mystery of godliness' Paul immediately directs his words in praise of Christ' person and work (1 Tim. 3:16-17).

Since the word 'repentance' doesn't necessarily mean Christian repentance – church history tells of Christian martyrs offered the opportunity to 'repent' before suffering death for their Christian faith – it needs to be accompanied with biblical counsel, providing answers to the questions, 'from what?', 'to what (or better, whom!)?', 'how?', as well as 'why?' and 'for how long?'. Rightly administered and acted on, repentance has a happy outcome. In Lachlan Mackenzie's poem, 'The Happy Man,' was 'born in the city of regeneration in the parish of repentance unto life.'⁵

On reflection, examining ourselves we may find that our repentance is not what it ought to be, or could be. Luther found that he could not adequately repent of his repentance. We may find as Christians that our own repentance has been a mixture of both types that we have described, evangelical at times and legal at other times. Identifying the difference

⁵ Iain H. Murray, *The Abiding Witness of Lachlan Mackenzie* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 5.

between the evangelical type and the legal type and the differences in their origins, may assist in seeking more of the evangelical kind. While it may not provide the medical solution to the pandemic, it provides the cure for the greater need which the pandemic heightens awareness of and hastens, the matter of our mortality and the summoning to God's throne to give account of our lives. In Christ's message of repentance God has graciously summoned us before that day, to turn to him in faith and repentance and thereby be saved from the judgement to come. As such we can say afresh and communicate in these times, 'repentance as the best medicine and treatment'.

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Papers by Terry Johnson and Paul Wells were presented at the 16th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference on the subject of Reformed Worship, Palmerston Place Church, Edinburgh, 31st August – 3rd September 2015.

Correction: The 15th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference on the Doctrine of Scripture was in 2013, not 2015, as mentioned on p. 5 of the previous edition of the Bulletin.