

Fruits of repentance

By Bob Young

Matt. 3:8, Luke 3:8, Acts 26:20

Introduction

I received a question concerning a practice that is used by some churches (especially in Latin America) in the process of restoring members who have fallen away—that is, in the restoration of members to the church when they return and say they have repented.

Question: Is it correct for a local church to accept a restored member and then to exclude that returning member from participation in certain activities for a certain period of time? This action is often justified by saying that the member must bear fruits that give evidence of repentance before becoming a fully active member.

The biblical use of the phrase

The phrase, fruits of repentance, appears in only two contexts in the New Testament. The first context, in two parallel passages in Matthew (3:8) and Luke (3:8), is the baptism of repentance by John. The words were spoken by John the Baptist to opponents who were present. The second context is Paul's description of his call to preach the gospel to unbelievers, calling them to repent and turn to God, doing deeds consistent with their repentance (Acts 26:20).

Biblically, the words were never spoken by Jesus. They were never included in the instructions given to the early church, in Acts or any of the letters, concerning church discipline.

Analyzing the phrase

Fruits “of” repentance seems to refer to repentance that bears fruit. If there is no fruit, one can question whether there is repentance. What kind of fruit should we expect? What kind of fruit does repentance bear?

A text that speaks extensively about repentance (2 Corinthians 7), includes this list: See what great earnestness godly sorrow has produced in you! How ready you are to clear yourselves, how indignant, how alarmed, how full of longing and enthusiasm, how eager to seek justice! (7:11)

What is a correct application?

Repentance must involve both a change of thinking and a change of life or behavior. Repentance is essential in obedience to Christ, as is seen in Acts 2:38. When is the evaluation of fruit to be done? Is fruit required before complete restoration of an erring brother or sister? Is fruit required before accepting a new Christian as genuine? Is it correct to delay baptism until a person desiring to obey Christ has time to prove that repentance is genuine? Is there a New Testament example of baptism being delayed until repentance was proven? Is there a New Testament example of continuing to exclude a restored brother until repentance was proven? Concerning the question at hand, Galatians 6:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-10 suggest the opposite.

For thought

On what principle do we apply the “waiting” requirement to brothers or sisters in Christ, but we do not apply it to unbelievers desiring to be baptized?

Do we have more confidence when an unbeliever says he has repented than we do when a brother says he has repented?

Conclusion

Let us consider our own lives and our own experience. We want to do right, we decide to do right, but we struggle to follow through on the decision. We repent (change our mind with the desire to change our lives) but we fail repeatedly.

Is there an appropriate time to question repentance? Certainly so. When a person seeks to be restored to the fellowship of the church again and again, affirming repentance but repeatedly failing, returning to the same sin, there is a need to study with that person and clarify the meaning of repentance.

Gal. 6:1 speaks of a brother who is surprised by sin. Satan is deceptive. Spiritual maturity is required to escape the traps of Satan. This is why Paul urges Timothy not to name novices as church leaders (1 Timothy 3).

Let us be people of compassion.

The practice of excluding a person from participation in certain areas of service in the church, based on the idea that such a person must first show fruits of repentance, is not a New Testament teaching supported by a specific text or application, or by an example from the practice of the first century church. We have no specific teaching, we have no example, we have no inference in the history of the New Testament church. In fact, the practice has roots in the teachings and practices of other religious groups.

The first biblical occurrence of the phrase is in the context of Judaism where leaders often said one thing and did another (Matt. 23). The second occurrence refers to the preaching of the gospel to unbelievers.

While there is to be a principle to be applied, one must take care lest the intense punishment actually serve to drive the person away rather than reinstating and including the person (2 Cor. 2:5-10).