

Unity And Personal Responsibility

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". . . that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another."

—I Corinthians 12:25

Has there ever been a time in man's history when such a prevalence of disunity existed? Everywhere one looks on God's great green earth, turmoil between competing factions has either already erupted into open hostility and people—many of them entirely innocent of the conflict—are being killed; or people are living in anxiety because strong differences of opinion, sometimes among multiple sides of a disagreement, are smoldering and about ready to explode into conflict.

But what if the disagreement is between God and His nation or His church? What if the citizens or members of the church have drifted so far from a vital, thriving relationship with Him that they are not even aware that God has a disagreement with them? When God acts to make them aware of His disagreement with their conduct, how will people react? His intervention into human affairs might be to send a prophet or minister, as often happened in the Old Testament. On the other hand, He might create a calamity (Isaiah 45:7) designed to make people analyze and evaluate the state of their standing before Him. What would we do in such a situation?

Such circumstances took place any number of times in God's relationship with Israel under the Old Covenant, giving rise to prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a host of others, named and unnamed, whom God sent to make the nation aware of His concerns. The reactions of the people were varied, but typically, they continued on their self-destructive course. When a significant change for the good did occur, the unity and peace it generated historically lasted but a generation, or two at the best.

Final Warning

An intriguing confrontation is detailed in the book of Amos. It is especially significant because this confrontation turned out to be a final warning from God to His nation, Israel. As such, it contains vital lessons for us today. A particular lesson for us begins in Amos 3:1-7 and carries through chapter 5. The prophet writes in Amos 3:1-7:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Will a young lion cry out of his den, if he has caught nothing? Will a bird fall into a snare on the earth, where there is no trap for it? Will a snare spring up from the earth, if it has caught nothing at all? If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it? Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.

Amos' prophecy contains some dreadful descriptions of disasters God planned to send unless the Israelites changed their attitudes and conduct. Amos is the prophet who coined the phrase, "the day of the Lord." At least no one else used it in his writings prior to Amos. He introduced it in his preaching to the Israelites around their capital city, Samaria. Regarding the disasters of the day of the Lord, Amos 5:18-20 declares:

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you?
It will be darkness, and not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear
met him! Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent
bit him! Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no
brightness in it?

Amos was a Jew, a citizen of the southern kingdom, not an Israelite of the northern kingdom. However, God sent him, a Jew, to preach to the northerners. Almost needless to say, he was not a popular man there! First, because he was a Jew, and ethnic antipathy against Jews was high there. Second, because the message he brought is quite accusative of the northerners' attitudes and conduct.

Amos 3:1-2 establishes the foundation for God's accusations by showing the privileged and intimate relationship between God and the Israelites. It follows, then, that because of the privilege He had freely given them as a gift to establish the relationship, God has every right to make such accusations. Moreover, due to the intimacy of their relationship, He is justified in making them.

Verse 3 begins a string of seven questions that any Israelite could have answered, as they address familiar things. The purpose of these questions was to help them understand that a fact invariably leads to a reasonable conclusion, that is, a given cause produces a given effect. God designed them to get the Israelites' attention and to point their thinking in a desired direction: that their immoral conduct was leading them and the nation to the day of the Lord. God's aim was to help every Israelite admit a measure of responsibility for Israel's immoral condition and thus repent.

What It Means to Repent

There is nothing difficult to understand about what *repent* means. It simply means "to change one's mind." In biblical usage, it implies changing one's mind in relation to God and His way of life. Repentance, though, is invariably preceded by something else, usually a deeply felt sense of concern, arising from guilt that one has done wrong. It can also be fear for one's life or reputation, or it may be sorrow over the horrible mess one has created.

We must understand that concern, unease, guilt, fear, or sorrow is not repentance. However, these feelings can *lead* to repentance, the change of mind that contains the resolve never to repeat whatever made us feel uncomfortable about our relationship with God. Notice the apostle Paul's explanation of this in II Corinthians 7:9-11:

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly

manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all these things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

Paul had, in effect, chewed them out in a previous letter, and it set off a chain of reactions: It produced the sorrow that leads to repentance, the change of mind in relation to God. That, in turn, produced a change of conduct because they set their wills never to allow their unrighteousness to be the cause of breaking their relationship with Him again. If a person changes his mind in relation to God rather than merely because of the pain that his conduct caused himself and others, it opens the door to making real change in attitude and conduct.

A number of factors always work to keep us from admitting responsibility for the destructive conditions surrounding us. First, sometimes we simply do not "get" it! It sometimes takes a while to understand that, by our own conduct, we are shooting ourselves in the foot and hurting our loved ones besides. In human nature, the tendency always exists to blame others before ourselves.

Second, sometimes we are so unfeeling, so unconcerned, and so self-centered that we just do not care! This attitude is dangerously destructive—in fact, biblically suicidal. This attitude is similar to what occurs to people in the grip of a drug, whether it is alcohol, a chemical like heroin, cocaine, or the nicotine in a cigarette.

The third reason is more subtle and difficult to grasp, and it resides at the foundation of a great deal of our failure to repent and change. Because of our tendency to think we are nothing, we cannot seem to get it through our minds that what we do matters! Are we not only one of billions of people on earth? Are we not only one of 300 million Americans? Or, are we not only an insignificant member of community, family, club, or church?

It is a careless but nonetheless strong inclination to believe that nothing we do has any effect whatever on the improvement of life for anybody else. Do we realize that almost everybody else also carelessly feels the same way? Thus, the whole family or nation continues its violent, heartbreaking, pell-mell rush into the pit and on to oblivion!

It Does Matter!

The same beliefs confronted Amos as he preached to the people of Israel more than seven hundred years before Christ was born. They also confronted Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and all the other prophets, as well as Jesus and the apostles! Isaiah lamented with all his heart, "Lord, who has believed our report?" (Isaiah 53:1). They are the ministry's challenge to this very day.

It is also where our relationship with God becomes so vital to the quality of our lives. We cannot afford to let ourselves be lulled into thinking that our attitudes and our conduct do not matter—that they do not contribute to the disaster that is this world.

The drought that the Charlotte area is enduring provides an interesting illustration in this regard. In 2001, Charlotte experienced a drought similar to the present one. Voluntary water-use restrictions were imposed, producing a 23 percent water savings. This past year, in the second-worst drought in Charlotte history, mandatory restrictions produced 30 percent savings, a modest seven-point increase. Why was a higher percentage of water not saved during a far more serious drought?

Measurements reveal that 50 percent of the water drawn from Charlotte's reservoirs goes to home consumption. The reason for the modest increase, then, largely comes down to the attitude in each individual's human nature that says, "What I do doesn't matter."

But to the Christian, it *does* matter! Why? Because watching our response to governments and circumstances that God has established is, in an overall sense, what He is judging most closely. In each of His regenerated children, He wants to see whether we really do perceive Him to be sovereign over His creation and will submit to Him by faith. He wants to see whether we will look to Him beyond the human government He ultimately installed; beyond what everybody else is doing; beyond our cynicism, distrust, and skepticism; and beyond our feelings of being of no consequence.

Oh, yes, it *does* matter. Spiritually, to God and to our ultimate destiny, it matters a great deal! It shows that we are living our lives "by faith, not by sight" (II Corinthians 5:7).

The Israelites to whom Amos preached did not repent and perhaps did not feel even a little guilt for the direction their immorality-laden nation was headed. Therefore, nothing changed. Thus, as God planned, the Israelites, defeated by the Assyrians, were taken into captivity and seemingly disappeared from the pages of history—all because each individual Israelite thought that his actions did not matter. Israel's unity as a nation was destroyed.

As Christians, our attitudes and actions really *do* matter. Just as individual Israelites ultimately affected the decline and fall of their entire nation, so our approach and conduct affect the whole body of Christ, as I Corinthians 12:12-27 shows so clearly. We must always be aware that what we do individually affects the whole, so we must each take personal responsibility to do our share in love to "knit together" the church, building godly unity (Ephesians 4:16).