

Part 3 of this series on *The Church* is entitled, Our Message. By definition, a message is “a significant point or central theme, especially one that has political, social or moral importance.” In my view, anything of consequence begins with a message born in someone’s mind as an idea, and resulting in an outcome that proves to be better or worse for those involved. For instance, the after effects of WWI left Germany economically devastated. At its weakest and most vulnerable point, a new leader came forward with a message of revitalization, which would not only lead that nation to economic prosperity, but give its people a new sense of identity and greatness. Adolf Hitler, considered by many as the most reviled man in history, was the most revered man in Germany during the 1930s. On the other hand, Winston Churchill was reviled by many in Great Britain, because of his strong opposition to Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement with Hitler. The message of Churchill was a call to arms, articulated powerfully in his famous – “We shall fight on the beaches” – speech delivered to the House of Commons on June 4, 1940. The man so reviled became most revered when he led Great Britain, with tremendous help from Allied forces, to victory over the Third Reich. It all began with a message.

The message of the church is articulated in the Bible, and corresponds to that of the historic church since the first century. As children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, our message is His message, which was announced in advance by a peculiar spokesman, named John. In Matthew 3:1-2 we read, “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” That’s quite an opening line, don’t you think? Repent, which literally means “change the mind,” is not a word that we want to hear, because it implies something is wrong with us. But God doesn’t mince words, and neither did John, when he called people to confess their sins and change their ways. Like so many prophets of old, who called wayward Israel to turn from their sin, John’s message was not new. What is new is the fulfillment of prophecy that happened with John, as indicated in Matthew 3:3 – “For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’”

While serving as a battalion chaplain in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, I attended Jumpmaster School, which trains soldiers in the skills necessary to properly and safely conduct airborne operations for paratroopers. The training is intense, because the expectations are high. The most important job of a jumpmaster is to ensure that every paratrooper is good-to-go before exiting the aircraft in flight. A series of jump commands end with the jumpmaster shouting, GO! Just before issuing those commands comes the call for everyone on board to GET READY! Similarly, John the Baptist was calling people to get ready. In the same way that a paratrooper’s physical wellness is dependent on being ready before going out the door of an aircraft, our spiritual wellness is dependent on being ready before the Lord returns. When John called people to repent, they knew what they must do, just as we know what we must do. Walking right with God starts by getting right with God, and repentance is the first step in the process. It’s a call we don’t want to hear, but when we take time to seriously look at ourselves in light of our standard bearer, Jesus Christ, we will not just hear the call to repent, but heed it.

Our aversion to repent is definitely rooted in our unwillingness to change, but it is also related to a question we have for the messenger, which goes like this: "Who are you to tell me to repent?" This is like the kettle calling the pot black. Since we're all guilty of sin, we're not receptive to those who point out our faults. To overcome this aversion, we merely need to consider the attitude of John the Baptist when he encountered Jesus on the bank of the Jordan River. John, who had been calling people to demonstrate repentance through baptism, suddenly has Jesus, the Son of God, coming to him for baptism. According to Matthew 3:14, "John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?' Jesus responds, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.'" John complies, but with reluctance and humility, for previously the Baptist had said of Jesus, "I am not fit to remove His sandals" (Matthew 3:11). My point is that repentance requires humility, both by those hearing the call and those heeding the call. This is where life-change begins, but the Lord waits for us to acknowledge our need first, with a humble heart. God's work of grace comes through our faith, preceded by our repentance.

After Jesus is baptized by John, He is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where Satan tempts Him over a period of 40 days and nights. It is an intense time of preparation for His public ministry, which opens with these words from Matthew 4:17 – "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." What Jesus says here is exactly what John had been saying. This was God's call to His people then, and is God's call to His people now. Not only is the Lord telling us what to do (i.e. "Repent"), He is also telling us why (i.e. "the kingdom of heaven is at hand"). When Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, He is referring to the realm and reign of God. To say that God's kingdom "is at hand" means it is imminent. A king and his kingdom are inextricably connected; therefore, with these words Jesus equates Himself with God's kingdom. John the Baptist was calling people to repent and prepare themselves for the Christ, the king of Kings. So, when Jesus says, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand," He means, "Turn from your sins to Me, your King, for forgiveness, for that is why I came."

Repentance begins with a change of mind, but it must produce a change of behavior and direction for real transformation to occur. In every branch of the military, new recruits learn and practice over and over the marching maneuver, "About-face." When that command is given, everyone immediately pivots 180 degrees and continues marching, but in the opposite direction. This is what Jesus, our ultimate Commander-in-Chief, expects when He calls us to repent by turning from our sinful direction of travel to face Him, confess our sin, receive His forgiveness, and follow His lead. But where is the King leading us? The answer comes in His very next words, where Jesus says in Matthew 4:19, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." So, His message, which is our message, has two parts: (1) Repent; and (2) Follow Me. Now that we have turned around, let's see where we're going.

The first disciples recorded in the Gospel of Matthew are fishermen, where we see this scene unfolding: "As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers who were fishermen, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew, catching fish in the lake with a net. Jesus said to them, 'Come with me,

and I will teach you to catch men.’ At once they left their nets and went with him. He went on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in their boat with their father Zebedee, getting their nets ready. Jesus called them, and at once they left the boat and their father, and went with him” (Matthew 4:18-22, TEV). From this particular account, it appears that four men, who never met Jesus before, suddenly leave their livelihoods and families to follow a total stranger. If that sounds impetuous, you’re right, but according to other gospel accounts, these fishermen had some prior association with Jesus. Nevertheless, their response to His call is immediate and life-changing. We are called to do no less. Jesus’ invitation to follow Him begins with our turning from our direction of thinking, behaving and living to His direction. If you will, the Lord is calling us to an about-face from our way of life to His way of life.

Now it’s time for the rubber to meet the road by applying the two-part call of Jesus – “Repent” and “Follow Me” – to our own lives. First, let’s consider the obvious, which is that Jesus is not just calling fishermen to follow Him. In fact, like us, the 12 apostles were a mixed bag of people with different personalities, temperaments and professions. For example, with regard to Mathew, the tax collector, Jesus might have said, “Follow Me, and I will make you a manager of human resources for God’s glory;” and of Simon, the zealot, He may have said, “Follow Me, and I will give you a zeal for God’s kingdom, where peace prevails.”

Let’s now look at ourselves, consider the unique personalities, temperaments and abilities He gave us, and ask these questions: How can I be all that God has created me to be for His glory? How can I do all that God has created me to do for His glory? The answers are embedded in God’s story working in and through your story. For instance, God’s story did not become the centerpiece of my story until the Lord opened the eyes of my heart as I read the gospels for the first time. I was 23 years old. Before then, my story was all I had, and my life was all about me enjoying myself. I was having a good time, but I lacked a sense of direction, meaning and purpose. God met my needs when I gave my life to the One who gave His life to me. Suddenly, my story was engulfed in Jesus’ story, and a new life-journey began of we, not just me. I heard His call to repentance, and did so. I also heard His call to follow. I wasn’t hearing or even sensing a vocational call at that time, but a personal call. I just wanted to follow Jesus, and become more and more like Him. I have no doubt that Christ calls all of His followers to be “fishers of men” in accordance with our particular interests, natural talents and God-given gifts; however, I firmly believe that He calls us first and foremost to Himself. So, let’s come with humility, repenting of our sins, receiving His gift of grace, and following His lead step-by-step and day-by-day. Whatever the Lord gives us to do along the way, being “fishers of men” simply means sharing the good news of His story with those who connect with our story in whatever way it happens, whether at home or at work or at play or even in a check-out line with another customer waiting to buy groceries. When we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ by grace through faith, His message becomes our message, because His story becomes the heart and soul of our story. The call of Jesus to repent of our sins and follow Him is not only the most important message for us to receive, it is also the most important message for us to share with others.