

Identificational Repentance

by Randall Hardy

Introduction

This paper was originally prepared as a response to "Identificational Repentance: A Valid Christian Ministry?" (a paper by David Sladden - 22 June 1999). David's paper was prepared for discussion within the Theological Reflection Group (TRG) which had been formed out of the British Isles Prayer Network Leaders Annual Conference. I said in the original paper that, like David's paper, it was to be seen as constructive notes. I have lightly edited the original text in the hope of making it more accessible to those who were not involved in the TRG.

In this paper I have not tried to address every issue raised by David, but simply those I consider most central to the discussion. In his original paper David requested that those who are cautious about IR, propose an alternative strategy to address the problem of corporate sin and its consequences. I am not sure these notes will accomplish that, but I hope they help in identifying what the Biblical principles are which are relevant to the topic. On several occasions (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:18ff,) David suggested an emphasis which "seems to be implied". In subsequent paragraphs this implied interpretation seems to carry more weight than the clear, primary understanding of the passage. I am not comfortable with this approach and seek here to develop understandings which are more carefully drawn from what the Scriptures actually say.

Worldview

David contrasted the worldviews of Plato and Aristotle and their subsequent effect on societies including our own today. There is however another divergence in worldviews which he has failed to reflect on. Yet it is this one, I believe, which is central to the matter under consideration.

The different world views which I have in mind are those between Christians themselves. To some extent, the roots of our differences are in the Pre, Post and Amillennial divides. These are not just academic questions though they do affect how we each relate to the issues of everyday faith. David's own view is clearly reflected in his interpretation of Acts 17:26. David understands this to teach that, "God *has* a plan for each nation" (emphasis mine), suggesting that there is something in THE LORD's purpose which every nation *has yet* to accomplish. Yet this part of Paul's sermon was a quick lesson in *past* history, not future potential. Paul began his history lesson at creation, "The God who made the world and all things in it," He continued, "and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God." His message to the Athenian crowd was that the God whom they did not know had been, and continues to be, the one **in charge** of every aspect human history. It is His plans, Paul asserted which *have been* fulfilled throughout the years. He has always had plans for each nation - every one of them had been established by Him. He was the one who had determined where they settled, the territory they conquered and ruled and how long they should have that predominance. (This is amply illustrated by Daniel's prophetic insight of the rise and fall of various empires after his day.)

The destiny of the nations?

David gives the impression that he believes there is still a God-given destiny which every nation/people group has to (or perhaps, may) achieve. This is the real contested ground amongst Christians today. For some, seeing the nations accomplish their destinies seems to have become a higher priority than the salvation of individuals. It certainly has brought ambiguity to the terms we commonly use. In his section defining the aims of IR, David wrote:

"This, however, is not the priority. The priority is assisting and enabling world evangelisation. Both there is the intention to remove the legal-spiritual basis upon which the 'god of this world' is blinding the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4) - or, at least, some of it; and there is the recognition that a relation exists between praying for those in authority, our being able to 'live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness' and the Saviour's desire that all humankind be saved (1 Tim 2:1-4). In the latter, if IR helps improve the state of society, this is understood to aid evangelism."

Evangelism is a common objective amongst all Christian believers. However, what is the principal objective of evangelism? Why is it important? For years, along with many others I have believed THE LORD's prime concern was that men and women should be rescued from their sin and begin living on the path which leads to eternal life in fellowship with Him. However, it seems today there is an alternative objective for evangelism which, though rarely spelt out, underlies much popular theology. Its reasoning is along these lines:

- *Before Christ can return, the nations must be prepared (or perhaps " fulfil their destinies").*
- *The nations will only be prepared when there is a viable church in every people group.*
- *For there to be a viable church in many people groups, there is need for many conversions.*
- *Therefore, there is need for evangelism.*

If my assessment is accurate, then a principal purpose of evangelism in many peoples' thinking is to prepare the way for Christ's return to earth, for until every "nation" is disciplined, His way is barred.

David suggests, quoting 2 Cor. 4:4, that there is a need to disarm Satan by "remove the legal-spiritual basis" through which people are blinded to the gospel. There is a danger here which is that this is a theology looking for a Scripture? Col. 3:13-15 is clear that this disarming has already been accomplished - by Jesus, at Calvary. At times it is very easy to conclude that IR is amongst those theologies which have arisen from the belief that the Church has failed God. Such despair has motivated many searches for the key that will turn the whole situation around - and there have been endless suggestions as to what that key might be. If one's background theology is as described above, one which needs a 'successful' Church to pave the way for Christ's return, then this search for the vital key becomes increasingly essential. The required key (or keys) must be both found and used.

Conflicting Futures

Personally, in the early 70's I was an "angry young Christian", seeing all around me evidence that the Church was failing God. I have now become settled in the knowledge that THE LORD is working His purpose out, even though the Church is not as successful as I once thought it should be. This confidence sees a less than perfect Church, but one through which He is accomplishing His will. I believe the Biblical expectation for the days which proceed the return of Christ is one of world-wide difficulty and of a Church which will be increasing marginalised. However, all this is not a mistake on His part, or ours, but through it He is preparing a people for eternity. With Peter I look forward to a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell. By contrast, Roger Forster has declared that the task of the Church is to clean up this planet, environmentally as well as morally and spiritually, so that it can become **Christ's eternal home** (Whose Earth, Manchester, Sept. 18, 1993)

Perhaps Roger Forster's and my own expectations are two extremes of the spectrum. Whether they are or not, I would suggest that the agenda behind IR and many other contemporary "prayer strategies" derives more from the expectation that the church must "evangelise the world" **before** Christ's return than from that which accepts that "the love of many will grow cold". I suggest it is time Christian leaders acted honestly in this regard and acknowledged that there are vast differences of theology in the Church over these things. I don't know why, but there seems to be a vested interest in hiding this difference. Consequently there are those, and I have met several, who try to hold on to both teachings at the same time! The result? Confusion!

The Sins Of The Fathers?

To move onto the central issue under consideration - is there a Biblical practice which comes anywhere close to the modern practice of IR? David does cite some passages which suggest there is. Some he skips over, whilst others are not mentioned. Two he refers to are Exod. 20:5 and Ezek. 18:4,20. However, neither of these he considers in depth. In Exod. 20:5 THE LORD states, "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, *visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations* of those who hate Me,". David simply comments, "This may mean 'for a long time into the future'". I would suggest that this is the very opposite of what it means. THE LORD actually set a **time limit** on how long he would allow his anger to burn against a family. My own conviction is that there is a good reason for this - most of us know *a lot* about our parents, *some things* about our grandparents, *little* about our great-grandparents and *nothing* about generations before that (unless they were famous or infamous in some way). God, it seems, has limited his judgements to the scope of normal living memory. He is not unfair -he will not hold us accountable for actions we know nothing about, he is merciful as well as determined to teach us all that sin's wages is death.

Many Christians believe that the verses which surround v.5, the Ten Commandments, are binding today, though the New Testament teaches they are not. By contrast the question we have to address is, "Is God's warning that He will punish sons, grandsons, great and great, great grandsons, still a threat today?" Many look to Ezek. 18 and Jer. 31, and reason that it is no longer applicable. The main reason for this is that both these passages look forward to the New Covenant, which THE LORD has now established. However, this is a covenant which benefits those who choose to accept it, and is of no help to those who don't. It may be possible therefore that one could find space in these Scriptures to say that those outside of this New Covenant may still suffer for the sins of a previous generation. By contrast, we must also note that Exod. 20, records events at the time when God was establishing his covenant with the Hebrews. The warning in v.5 is certainly a warning about the nature of the God with whom they are about to enter into a binding contract. There is reason therefore to say that this level of judgement is primarily for people who have entered into a covenant with THE LORD. Both are valid lines of reasoning and consequently it is difficult to be sure from these passages what the actual relevance of "the sins of the fathers" is today to Gentile nations.

Families or Nations?

The passages we have looked at above clearly concern families not nations. As the focus of IR is usually national or international situations then we must also ask if there is any Biblical support for widening the scope of the punishment for sin continuing to successive generations? This clearly was the case for Israel - Deut. 28 and 29 records how Moses warned the people of the dangers of turning from THE LORD. The blessings of faithfulness would soon disappear if they persisted in disobedience and the judgement would fall not just upon them but their children also. Deut. 30:1-6 by contrast clearly states that should these things happen, there was a remedy. Similar statements are found elsewhere - Lev. 26 (which we consider below) and 2 Chron. 7:14 are two examples. It is important to remember though, that **all** these passages refer to a people with whom God had made a covenant. - there has never been, or will ever be, another nation which has 'enjoyed' this type of relationship with THE LORD. We cannot simply take aspects of a covenant relationship and apply them to situations which are outside that covenant.

The Old Testament does record how judgement fell upon the Gentile nations and in many instances this was stored up wrath from the sins of earlier generations. Not only that, but when THE LORD's judgement came it was of such ferocity that it affected generations yet unborn - often to the extent that those 'people groups' were blotted out from the face of the earth. For these there seemed to have been **no remedy**. Take for example Obadiah's prophecy concerning Edom. This does not seem to have been to offer Edom the opportunity for repentance, but to explain to others both that it was THE LORD

who had brought about their downfall and why He had done it. The Amorites were similarly judged with annihilation, but we are told why THE LORD waited to bring judgement upon them. In a vision Abram was told of his family's history for the next 400 years; finally "in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: **for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.**" It seems that in His mercy, THE LORD waits for nations to repent and humble themselves, but if they persist in pride and rebellion then the day will come when their sins come to full measure and then He acts swiftly in judgement. At that point no further opportunity for repentance is offered.

One Gentile city, Nineveh, we are told did heed the prophetic warning it received, but about 100 years after Jonah (the prophet who proclaimed that warning), Nahum and then Zephaniah announced the destruction of the city when the people had again turned their backs to THE LORD. I believe in spite of this failure to persist in the fear of THE LORD by the people of Nineveh, there is a far stronger case in the Scriptures for prophetic preaching as the tool THE LORD uses to bring repentance to the people of a nation, than there is for what today is called IR as the means to that end. Nineveh, should serve as a warning to us, that no nation upon the face of the earth has ever been or will ever be permanently 'converted'. No matter how godly their fathers were, the successive generations have to make their own decisions to obey or to disobey God.

Repentance or Confession?

A central issue when considering IR is the difference between **repentance** and **confession**. This is a difference which is often ignored and sometimes downplayed. Above we referred to Lev. 26. This is a passage which needs to be carefully considered in our search for a Biblical understanding. Verses 1-13 list the ways in which THE LORD promised to bless Israel if they walked in his ways. We then read a terrifying list of the increasing discipline Israel will experience if they disobeyed Him. This list ends in verse 39 with this warning, "So those of you who may be left will rot away because of their iniquity in the lands of your enemies; and also because of the iniquities of their forefathers they will rot away with them." God was clearly prepared to judge Israel because of the sins of their forefathers (to the third and fourth generation - note when this level of judgement finally happened, the exile lasted for only 70 years, easily within the set limitation).

THE LORD continues after this warning (v.40-42) with this promise, "If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me - I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies - or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land."

There are two actions specified in these verses. The first is **confession**. They would be required to confess the sins of their forefathers. Concerning themselves they had to humble their rebellious hearts *and make amends* for their own iniquities. These two actions are the hallmarks of **repentance**. Whilst we can do nothing more than acknowledge that our forebears were rebellious towards THE LORD, that is not the case when we consider our own disobedience - we must both confess our sin **and turn from it**. This call for action as the fruit of repentance is common throughout the Scriptures, (e.g. Num. 5:7; Deu. 30:1-3; 1 Kings 8:33-36, 47; Mat. 3:7.) We find Daniel confessing at length the sins of Israel (Ch. 9), but though he himself was humble before THE LORD he never attempts to "repent" on behalf of his people. Instead he appeals to God's great compassion (v.18-19). Today, confession and repentance are rarely understood as different acts and consequently an imprecise theology has developed.

Loyal to men or to God?

We must not underestimate the necessity of repentance by the 'present generation', but my experience is that personal repentance is often hindered by a reluctance to accept the sin of a previous generation. More than once I have sought to counsel a Christian struggling to acknowledge that a parent was outside of God's will on an important occasion. One young woman was striving to give up a relationship with a non-Christian boyfriend. Conversation and prayer highlighted the fact that her own mother though a Christian at the time had married a non-Christian man. Biblical teaching is clear on such matters, but our friend could not bring herself to confess to THE LORD that her mother had been wrong to do so. Why was this difficult for her? I would suggest because she was a result of that relationship. If her mother had done the wrong thing - what had that to say about her own very existence? Such questions are very real. From my own situation - conceived in a relationship where my natural father had left his wife to live with my mother - I know how important it is to have one's security in THE LORD alone. I too have had to face up to the sins of my fathers but I have also had to turn away from abdicating my own responsibilities (in many areas), which my forbears seem to have failed to do.

"Where is the relevance to IR and national sins?" you may be asking. From the Scriptures and experience it seems plain that where off-spring fail to recognise and acknowledge the sins of their 'fathers' (to the third & fourth generation), then they too will soon find themselves walking in the same sinful ways as their predecessors. (Remember they may find it hard to accept because they themselves have benefited personally from their ancestors' sinful actions.) This is clearly what Jesus was indicating in Matt. 23:34-35, which David quoted in his paper. The context of this comment by Jesus, is that the scribes and Pharisees had rejected His and John the Baptist's ministry just as previous generations had rejected the prophets they had been sent by THE LORD (2 Chron. 36:15-16). Now that it was clear that they had hardened their hearts instead of humbling themselves, Jesus foretold what He would do in order to confirm their sinful attitude. Though the Babylonian exile had dealt with Israel's desire to serve the gods of the nations, it had not freed its leaders from their stubborn rejection of THE LORD'S messengers. They could recognise the sin of previous generations (23:30), but it seems they were reluctant to **acknowledge it as sin**. Their loyalty to the forefathers being greater than their loyalty to the God to whom they were bound by Covenant, caused them to persist in the selfsame ways as those whom they loved the most. Their future treatment of these other messengers who were to be sent by Jesus would confirm that in their hearts was the same rejection of righteousness which had killed the majority of God-sent messengers from creation to the last martyr of the Old Testament. Thus they would be seen to be of the same heart as their forebears and guilty with them of every murder which sought to silence a messenger of God.

If today Christians believe THE LORD has revealed to them the sinful ways of their predecessors, then they need not only to acknowledge before Him the sins of past generations, but recognise where they too have been **acting in character** with their fathers and repent in practical ways so that from that time onwards they live differently. On far too many occasions repentance is reduced to words in prayer meetings (perhaps more akin to confession), but with little instruction to live noticeably differently afterwards. We need to remember that in the Old Testament "the sins of the fathers" was a principle of the Covenant which God made with Israel and that it was time limited. Further, we know of no occasion where a Gentile nation was called to "find its salvation" through addressing the sins of previous generations. They were called to repent for the sinfulness of their own generations.

Modern Examples Prove Very Little

David in his paper, as do other contemporary writers, cites modern successes as the real sign that their theology is valid. Is pragmatism a reliable basis for forming theology? If a practice *seems* to work are we wise to adopt it without Biblical testimony? My own conviction is that without a clear Biblical principle or precedent we cannot rely on experience alone. Egyptian magicians could mimic THE LORD'S miracles through Moses, but only for a time. False prophets have no difficulty in foretelling the actions

of the one who sends them - which is why Jeremiah knew that to prophecy disaster was not a sign of a true prophet (28:7-9). In recent years western charismatic Christianity seems to have accepted that if anything is 'supernatural' it must be from God.

Spiritual warfare has also been shaped by a "if it works it must be right" approach. This may however, be misleading for several reasons. First, it does not account for human nature. We are creatures who are easily led - having a natural tendency to go with the crowd. It is not uncommon for people to follow an example without thinking through their actions. We can feel inferior if we are not seen to adopt a similar attitude, be it good or bad, to those around us. Pressure though subtle and unspoken can easily bring instant contrition but not real repentance. Second, we must also recognise that there are motives which are nothing at all to do with true Godliness, which can and do produce actions which seem in our minds to be righteous. Those looking intently for reconciliation in Ireland could do no other than rejoice when the British and Irish Prime Ministers seem to make clear moves towards that objective. In their joy it is easy to attribute this to the outcome of their prayers. However, others may interpret these gestures, important though they may be, as no more than political manoeuvring through which the participants seek to gain advantage. God given sorrow leads to repentance **not just in one matter, but in every aspect of life**. However, worldly sorrow only produces death (2 Cor. 7:10). What has been the fruit of this public sorrow - in the situation itself and in the lives of those who professed it? Jeremiah rightly said, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?" (17:9).

We are unwise if we jump to conclusions as to why a situation changes. It is only through faith we can be confident that our prayers have been heard and answered. No matter how convinced we are, that confidence remains a matter of faith and without a similar God given certainty others will never be convinced that it is as we say. Some years ago, a group of Christians in a British city were concerned about the crime there and made it a matter of prayer. When the crime figures dropped they rejoiced at answered prayer and encouraged others to pray by their account of success. Several years later a yogic group claimed (on national TV) that their meditation techniques had successfully reduced crime in the very same city. Who are we to believe? How can we be sure that the changes were due to either? Only when THE LORD says to us, "You have what you asked for" can we be confident. Over 20 years ago, I attended a prayer conference at the end of a summer of drought. We were encouraged to pray for rain, but the conference leader emphasised that we should ask THE LORD *only* to send rain if it was a sign that he was going to send the spiritual rain of revival. We followed his lead earnestly and before the conference ended the physical rain had arrived. We left for home confident that our prayers had been answered. Now, two decades later, those present may not be so sure. Was the rain a promise from God, or just the expression of His mercy being the One who sends rain and sun on the righteous and the unrighteous? The latter is a Biblical principle. Where would we have been if He had withheld physical rain until now?

Conclusion

There are many issues raised by David's paper that I have not had the space to cover. However, I hope that this paper will help others to see why my reservations are not the result of narrow-mindedness, but the consequence of seeking to walk in God's counsel, being led by the Holy Spirit and careful study of the Scriptures. My greatest hope is that Christian leaders can move forward and grasp the real central issues which at present divide many - those to do with what has to happen before Christ returns - and discuss and debate them like adults. For too long groups like the prayer leaders conference have danced around these differences. Some seemingly refusing to accept differences exist, attempt desperately to push them out of sight. Issues such as IR and 'should we pray for revival' all hang on our understanding of what has yet to happen. We will never resolve these unless we recognise the depth of difference our eschatology makes to our agendas.

Having recognised and stressed this, my hope is that through this response to David's paper I have explained some reasons why I find the practice of IR lacking in Biblical support. Perhaps, whilst not supplying an alternative strategy, I hope I have given significant pointers to the reasons why I question the objectives. For without agreeing on objectives we will never agree on strategy. Some have sought to convince others that revival and persecution will happen together, but perhaps this too really fails to recognise the depth of difference between us. We need to recognise that the world in which we live will, in future either become more Godly *or* more godless - it cannot do both. Once our hearts are settled on the Biblical answer then we need to teach it openly and clearly so that God's people may prepare themselves appropriately.

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This study is aimed at providing a basic treatment of the topic, as a stimulus to personal Bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything (Acts 17:11; 1 Thess. 5:21).

Further studies by myself and other authors can be found at www.amen.org.uk/studies
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