

## Attrition versus Contrition

Sometimes, when a public figure is caught in wrongdoing, they acknowledge what they did and they express sorrow or repentance. We can be cynical about their apology because we might believe that they would never have “repented” if they had not been caught. We wonder if they truly are sorry for their wrongdoing. We also wonder if their repentance is a result of their wanting to maintain their office, and “repenting” of wrongdoing is a way to gain support of those who put them in their office (usually voters).

Contrast this to someone who has wronged another and has not yet been found out and probably would get away with what they did. Perhaps it's a contractor who has mistakenly overcharged his client for materials and when he discovers the error he can't sleep at night. He goes to this client with a cheque, seeking to right the wrong.

There are two similar words that are used to describe these scenarios. The first is attrition. Attrition is sorrow for sin merely out of fear of punishment or a sense of shame. The public figure wants to avoid the fallout of denying his wrongdoing by lying, so he admits to being guilty, hoping to avoid further harm to himself. This is attrition. The word used to identify what the contractor did is not attrition, but, rather, contrition. Contrition is a brokenness of spirit or sorrow for sin with the intent of not sinning again. We might say that contrition is the result of internal struggle while attrition describes situations created by external circumstances.

Let's consider these two words in relationship to the gospel. Both attrition and contrition result in faith in Jesus Christ, but one is more believable than the other.

In the Middle Ages, it was quite common for the church to preach a gospel based on attrition. Hell was a very popular subject, and much of what we think we know about hell comes from the imaginations of writers and artists and not from Scripture. Dante's *Inferno*, for example is a 14th century poem which describes in great detail 10 levels of hell and/or purgatory, the most severe being the level reserved for the devil and his demons. The church used images such as these to scare people to the point that they would profess faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to the church. This kind of teaching was used as a means to encourage people to put their faith in Jesus Christ centuries ago, and it has not lost its attractiveness today. Sometimes we hear Christians saying to those who do not believe in Jesus: you don't want to spend eternity in hell do you? Belief in Jesus becomes a means for one to escape punishment. It is a gospel of attrition, a gospel which uses the motivation of escaping hell as a way to get people to believe.

A gospel of contrition appears to be quite different. Instead of showing people a vision of what hell could be and offering them a means of escape, a gospel of contrition reveals to people a holy, powerful, just, loving and gracious God who we have offended with our sin. Instead of emphasizing the consequences of remaining steeped in sin (a one-way ticket to hell), the presenter of the gospel talks about God's love and grace for this world, love and grace shown to us in spite of our sin, and it calls people to repent and put

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their faith in Jesus Christ who came to this world to die for us (the ultimate act of grace) so that we could be restored to God.

Which method of evangelism is better? We might be pragmatic and say that it doesn't matter too much, as long as people put their faith in Jesus Christ. There is some truth to that. But just as we might be a little skeptical about someone's repentance when they are sorrowful only when caught, so we might be skeptical about whether someone truly believes in Jesus or if they are merely trying to avoid eternity in hell or gain a life of bliss in heaven. While we shouldn't question anyone's profession of Jesus, regardless of why they professed, it is harder to believe that a faith based on attrition is real. It sounds too much like they could have faith only because they are looking after themselves and their own eternal wellbeing.

On the other hand, when someone comes to faith because of who God is and responds to his grace and love, their faith seems much more credible. As a way of comparison, we might know a beautiful young woman who married a rather ugly guy who happened to be very rich, and we would question her motives. On the other hand, we can believe it is true love when a beautiful young woman marries an ugly poor guy. Why else would she want to spend the rest of her life with him? In the same way, when someone puts their faith in Jesus Christ because of who he is even without fully knowing the benefits we receive from him, we can believe that they believe because they truly love Jesus.

This may be reflected in our motivations for how we behave as well. If we obey God's commands because we are afraid of what might happen to us, we are obeying out of fear. If, on the other hand, we live obedient lives because we know God and his grace and love for us, we are obeying out of love. Being fearful of God and loving God might result in the very same behaviour, but the reasons behind that behaviour are vastly different.

Several times in the last years people have commented to me that pastors don't often speak of hell from the pulpit. There may be good reason for that, for we want to avoid a gospel of attrition wherein we scare people into believing and, instead, preach a gospel of contrition where people come to know their sin and see it in the light of God's grace and love, and fall before him in faith because of who he is and what he has done. The gospel of contrition tends to last while the gospel of attrition needs to be reinforced. To continue to mention hell as a punishment (or heaven as a reward) is to rely on a gospel of attrition. To preach Christ crucified is to bring people to Christ because of who Christ is. It is quite likely that someone who comes to faith because of contrition would believe even if there was no such thing as hell or heaven. They would believe simply because of who God is, with no regard for their own wellbeing.

True, pastors may need to mention hell more often. We cannot avoid this biblical topic. But should hell (or heaven) be mentioned as a way to motivate people to correct behaviour and move them to faith? There may be a place for that, but it does seem that the gospel of contrition is more effective and perhaps even more biblical.

**Attrition versus Contrition:** In attrition, we regret sin and seek God primarily from a perspective of fear for our fate: eternal loss of God is, obviously, existential failure, while eternal Beatitude is existential fulfillment. In contrition, we regret sin and seek God primarily from a perspective of love for God: sin is ingratitude to God, whom one "should (and wants to) love above all things."

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