

# Russell and Duenes

## The Dangers of National Repentance

leave a comment »



C.S. Lewis is helpful to me for many reasons, but perhaps most because he writes about important subjects which pastors rarely take up. I don't blame the pastors per se, as they often must preach to a wide and diverse audience, but I simply must turn to Lewis and others like him in order to keep my soul in order.

One of the "strange" issues to which Lewis addresses himself in *God in the Dock* is "the dangers of national repentance." I found Lewis' take on this particular topic to be particularly penetrating, perhaps because I have been in Christian circles that find the idea of "national repentance" to be quite important.

Lewis writes, "The idea of national repentance seems at first sight to provide such an edifying contrast to that national self-righteousness of which England is so often accused . . . that a Christian naturally turns to it with hope. Young Christians especially – last-year undergraduates and first-year curates – are turning to it in large numbers."

One could as easily substitute the word "America" for "England" in Lewis' argument, and I take Lewis to mean that, young Christians find it easy to assail England (or in our case, the U.S.) for all of her national stains and blots, and to therefore call for our nation to repent. This was some of my experience as an undergrad.

Lewis continues: "The young man who is called upon to repent of England's (America's) foreign policy is really being called upon to repent the acts of his neighbor; for a Foreign Secretary or a Cabinet Minister is certainly a neighbor. And repentance presupposes condemnation. The first and fatal charm of national repentance is, therefore, the encouragement it gives us to turn from the bitter task of repenting our own sins to the congenial one of bewailing – but, first, of denouncing – the conduct of others." It is at this point

that Lewis is beginning to touch a nerve, and I find myself having that twinge of discomfort, for I know all too well how easy it is to “denounce and bewail” others’ sins. And I am likely to pick easy targets.

Lewis says that one of the deceptions in calling for “national repentance” is that we tend to address the government we are denouncing as “we,” and this is deceptive because we know we ought not to go easy on ourselves when it comes to sin, and thus, if a person denounces the government as “we” then he “can say anything [he] please[s] about it. [He] can indulge in the popular vice of detraction without restraint, and yet feel all the time that [he is] practising contrition. A group of such young penitents will say, ‘Let us repent our national sins’; what they mean is, ‘Let us attribute to our neighbor (even our Christian neighbor) in the Cabinet, whenever we disagree with him, every abominable motive that Satan can suggest to our fancy.’” But what’s wrong with this? Perhaps the Senator or Cabinet Minister we are denouncing is guilty of what we say, and perhaps we are guilty of complicity with him or her in the sin?

The problem, as Lewis identifies it, is that, in the England of his time (and I think, the America of our time), it cost something for an older person to call the government to national repentance, for the older man “was brought up to certain patriotic sentiments which cannot be mortified without a struggle.” But Lewis thinks it quite different for the young. For the educated twentysomething, “in art, in literature, in politics,...has been, ever since he can remember, one of an angry and restless minority; he has drunk in almost with his mother’s milk a distrust of English (American) statesmen and a contempt of manners, pleasures, and enthusiasms of his less-educated fellow countrymen.” One may certainly see elements of this in both the Tea Party movement and the Occupy movement, if movements they can be called. The point is, whatever the political persuasion, I believe Lewis’ analysis resonates with our own evasiveness.

As is often the case with Lewis, he moves from the abstract to the specific, and my discomfort grows. He offers that in asking people to repent of their national sins, we are asking people “not to mortify, but to indulge, their ruling passions.” In other words, Lewis is not saying that national repentance is uncalled for in itself, but that “it is emphatically not the exhortation which your audience needs.” Well, if not repentance from our national sins, then from what? He responds: “The communal sins which they should be told to repent are those of their own age and class – its contempt for the uneducated, its readiness to suspect evil, its self-righteous provocations of public obloquy, its breaches of the Fifth Commandment (i.e., Honor your father and your mother). Of these sins I have heard nothing among them. Till I do, I must think their candour towards the national enemy a rather inexpensive virtue.”

Ouch! At this point, sitting on a plane and reading this paragraph, I was stopped in my tracks, haunted by the litany of sins. Do I not look down on those I take to be uneducated, or undereducated, or simply “not that smart?” Indeed I do, and often with artful disguise, in the

name of my agitation for more “excellence” or “education.” Do I not often suspect evil of those with whom I disagree? Have I ever been called to consider ways in which I might be dishonoring my father and mother? I know with certainty that I dishonored them throughout my twenties, ungratefully and selfishly taking from them their hospitality and generosity, while barely lifting a finger by which to serve them, consider their needs, or just plain spend time with them. It was all too easy not to notice my violations of God’s commandment.

Lewis concludes with an illustration: “The sight of a Christian rebuking his mother, though tragic, may be edifying; but only if we are quite sure that he has been a good son and that, in his rebuke, spiritual zeal is triumphing, not without agony, over strong natural affection. The moment there is reason to suspect that he enjoys rebuking her – that he believes himself to be rising above the natural level while he is still, in reality, grovelling below it in the unnatural – the spectacle becomes merely disgusting.” It’s arresting to ponder such a scene even as I read Lewis’ words again. It strikes at something that is never exposed. It is, as Lewis says, characteristic of Judas, who found Jesus’ hard sayings not hard, but delightful, like a “duck tak[ing] to water.” I would never have expected such penetration into my soul, and hopefully, repentance on my part, from an essay on “national repentance.”

-D

About these ads

## You May Like

?



- 1. [Top](#)

Written by Michael Duenes

August 12, 2012 at 6:56 pm

Posted in [Duenes](#), [Literature](#), [Reflections](#)

Tagged with [C.S. Lewis](#), [God in the Dock](#), [National Repentance](#)

**Blog at WordPress.com. The Journalist v1.9 Theme.**