

Restorations At Camp

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The only justification for connecting the terms “restoration” and camp” is that we are interested in conducting Christian camps—camps which are guided in principle and detail by the teachings of Christ. This being true, two things are evident: Christians make up the camp; and Christians are simply saved sinners — but still sinners.

We know the New Testament gives directives concerning post-baptismal sins. One of the most familiar Scriptures is the exhortation by Jesus: “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.” (5:16). A close view of the passage will show:

- (1) it is prayer and not confession that is highlighted in this section by James;
- (2) it is absurd to find even the ghost of a shadow of authority for confession to a “priest” here;
- (3) the particulars as to how and when and under what circumstances the confession is to be made are not even suggested; it is assumed that the readers would possess enough Christian maturity to supply these.

Power Problem

One of the problems we sometimes meet in Christian camps is this: We are able, by God’s grace, to create such a spiritually charged atmosphere that the commonest human imperfections incite conscience pangs, and this often in the hearts of noblest boys and purest girls. The gospel of power (Romans 1:16) when presented by a persuasive pleader can be used to create what we consider a power problem. Sin may be described with undue passion. Minor infractions of morals and ethics may be magnified into mortal sins. Tender consciences are touched with alarm. Those who feel that they have “sinned in such a way as to bring reproach upon the name of Christ” are urged to “make it right” by “coming forward” to re-dedicate their lives to Christ. The effectiveness of such an approach is seen numerically in that every camp session in some areas sees many “re-dedications,” often three to five times the number of baptisms.

Analysis

How shall we view such a practice? It is good, bad or indifferent?

We must first remember that the manner of confession of sins is not fixed in scripture, This being so we must avoid binding traditions, (Some religious communions, e.g.. will stand formally as a body and confess their sins to God. The nearest we come to this is when we are led in prayer and confession is made.) But if no other reason than the fact that “re-dedications” are increasing—almost beginning a rash—we must try honestly to evaluate them.

Advantages

It might be said that “re-dedication” as is commonly practiced in answer to an Invitation renews the faith and devotion of weak and straying youth, It might be argued that these people have real psychological need to do this—that this is a way of having burdens lifted. It might be contended that such “restorations” bring a sense of wholeness again to the soul, It can be further reasoned that “the confession ought to be as public as the sin” and that for the sake of the church— if for no other reason—the guilty are duty bound to “make confession.”

Disadvantages Or Dangers

While recognizing the place of public confession when it is needed, we ought not to overlook certain related dangers.

First, we must be careful lest we leave the impression that just about any sin ought to be confessed publicly.

Second, preachers must watch out for the temptation to swell the ego by being able to “bring them down the aisles.” The true servant of God wants to help people change— whether they come forward or not.

Third, we must remember that ‘coming forward’ is not mentioned in the New Testament.

Fourth, too much stress on public acknowledgement may create a sense of failure in the mind and heart of a young person. Failures must be admitted but Paul’s advice about “forgetting the past and reaching forth to the future” must receive strongest affirmation.

Fifth, too much stress on re-dedication may cause a young person to doubt the validity of their baptism. “If what I’ve done is as bad as all that,” the youngster may reason, “maybe I really wasn’t ready when I was baptized.” We must here register strong personal resentment of those would-be religious teachers who teach in such a way as to cause sincere young persons to unnecessarily question their baptism. We see too much of this.

Sixth, the unspecified public confession may rouse undue suspicion on the part of fellow campers. The imagination needs no encouragement here!

Seventh, these re-dedications may create unnecessary anxiety on the part of the camper who feels guilt but who has not the courage to go forward and face an audience. This would be especially true if they did the same thing as one of their friends who went forward.

Conclusion

The New Testament teaches us to confess our faults to each other: it does not say how or when. The parable of the wasteful, wayward son (Luke 15) shows that Jesus recognized confession as a part of the return of a child of God. Most of us have known times when public confession and re-dedication were clearly a turning point in a person’s life.

And yet we must see to it that in our youth camps the tender consciences, immaturity and inexperience of young people are not used as opportunities to swell the number of “responses” reported at the end of the season. Perhaps if we cultivate more the spirit of Romans 12:1—that of daily re-dedication—we would not have to be too concerned with a growing number of “re-dedications” among us.