

"I feel unclean" were the presenting words of a 28-year-old man of considerable sophistication (two degrees in art). When he asked a minister whether he should go to a psychiatrist or some other kind of counselor, the minister sent him to me because he was filthy rather than crazy and hungry rather than sick. And a filthy-hungry life-tale he told! I was surprised to find that, though he had almost no religious background, the biblical language was so close a fit to his condition of life and mind that I had to do very little translating: the words of repentance/faith, confession/forgiveness, alienation/atonement were eagerly and gladly, tearfully and gratefully received, and the penitent prayed a penitential....This counseling session, a few weeks ago, with someone I'd never seen before and haven't seen since, has gotten connected in me to....

1. "The Moral Majority." When I say that my counselee "prayed a penitential" (repeating words I framed appropriate to his soul), I mean that he asked God to free him from the past so he could move into the future. But the order is not "repentance/faith": rather, one moves the "faith" foot forward, then finds one can get no farther into the future unless one brings up the "repentance" foot. Faith, trust, the hope of new life, precedes "letting go and letting God." (Usually: the sequence is not rigid, for sometimes a person falls into a deep remorse, like falling into a hole. Then one "repents" in the sense of struggling to get out of the hole even before considering whether getting out is possible.)....The Moral Majority is asking OTHER FOLKS to repent!

2. Because of the culture's biblical-theological amnesia, many feel "depressed" who are actually "penitent" (in mood) without being "repentant" (in action). Therapy-oriented people-helpers then treat the symptom ("depression") rather than the disease ("sin"). Two names pop into my mind when I think of our need of holistic diagnosticians: Viktor Frankl and Karl Menninger. Misdiagnosis, among all people-helpers, is the most common form of malpractice. Nothing neurologically wrong with our young man (above); much wrong with him spiritually and morally. If I'd viewed his "sin" as "sickness," the action would have centered in me (I'd've "treated" him) instead of in him (he "repented").

3. Psalm categories include "the penitentials," which are prayers for cleansing, forgiveness, restoration. The greatest of these is Ps.51, which I often ask a penitent to read slowly while copying down the phrases that seem most fitting at the moment. In it, note the predominance of the dirty/clean metaphor--and therefore note the psalm's appropriateness to our young man, whose presenting words were "I feel unclean." In revulsion against oneself for one's past behavior, one feels not like fine linen in need of laundering but rather like kleenex in need of replacement: one feels oneself to be a throw-away--and so, in vs.10 (Hebrew, vs.12), the new condition has to be "created" (the word used in Gn.1 to begin everything!), the new creation being "a clean heart"; and "a steadfast spirit [versus his weak/corrupt one]" has to be made "new" ("renew" is a bad translation). Here see Jer. and Eze., the prophets of the inner life; and note prophets belaboring external religion as substitute for "heart"-religion (Amos 5.21f; Hos.6.6; Is.1.10-17; Mic.6.6-8; Jer.7.21-23; Psalm 51.16f[18f being a later, contrary, supplement]; Jesus).

4. Among us, much "consciousness raising" about injustice against sectors of humanity, little about sin, which is the injustice of each against all as well as against self and nature and God. Result of neglecting the latter while preaching the former: self-blinding arrogance, injustice against truth & love. Is.6 shows the Bible rooting prophetic conscience in the sanction of purity (the rhetorical application of the dirty/clean metaphor). We impoverish ourselves and our discourse if we badmouth purity on the assumption that it can't be aimed without becoming claim--as though the purity ideal were inherently self-righteous!