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Is there a way for terrorist murderers to obtain "forgiveness for their past"?

A recent news story in the Belfast "News Letter" (29th February) carried the headlines: 'Former IRA men 'seeking forgiveness for their past'. It featured a report on the work of the 'Crossfire Trust' in South Armagh. It is funded by The International Fund for Ireland, an organisation set up by the British and Irish governments in 1986. It would be correct to say that it is an ecumenical organisation which has the objective of combatting sectarianism.

The article also featured a lengthy statement by a man the newspaper termed "a south Armagh peace-maker", Mr Ian Bothwell. He has been involved in community work in south Armagh since the late 1970s. Mr Bothwell's "Crossfire Trust" website makes reference to his desire to remind the people of South Armagh of "God and His love for them".

However, in the "Newsletter" article, Mr Bothwell's proposal for "a new way forward between paramilitaries and victims in the area" is clearly a social and political solution to the murderers' anxiety. The article states: "He says he knows several former IRA members who would like closure on the deeds they have committed in the past."

"We are talking about a number of republicans who have engaged in front-line activity," he told the News Letter.

"They would like closure. They would like to deal with the torment in their minds and I think they would like to have a framework which would allow them to feel safe in doing so.

"This really needs to be openly and purposely supported by churches and political leaders across the board. I think some people really feel bad and do regret the past."

"They are maybe sorry for the pain they have caused, yet not sorry for having felt they had to do it."

"They are on a journey and if they were to see the appropriate response coming from across the other side of the community at the same time, then I think we could be amazed at how far we could get at forgiving and letting go."

"I think we could be amazed at the area of common ground we could find in pursuit of lasting deep peace and wholeness."

"People have expressed these feelings to me," he said.

"We are talking about a number of people from Keady down to Crossmaglen, ranging from their forties to older. These people are seeking forgiveness for their past actions."

"But is there an inner conflict in the minds of people who are tormented by their past deeds and yet may still feel there was justification for their actions?"

What Mr Bothwell makes no reference to is what the Bible has to say to murderers regarding the forgiveness of sin. That is not really surprising when we consider the source of this "anxiety" amongst republican murderers as it is explained by Mr Bothwell in the newspaper article.

"Some south Armagh republicans have been expressing such views to me since Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley started having a warm and open public working relationship," he says. "The continuation of this relationship between Martin and Peter [Robinson] has deepened the impact," he says.

The relationship between the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Fein is void of moral integrity and Scriptural justi-



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fiction. It most certainly is no pattern to follow though I fear that has been seized upon by many opponents of the Truth of God and is being peddled as the wholesome basis upon which to build Ulster's future.

Previously published articles:

- When turning from sin means turning yourself in!
- A word to the distressed amongst God's flock today.

In the past, I have highlighted that the basis of the 'reconciliation' between the DUP and Sinn Fein was not based upon Biblical principles but rather political expediency.

The repeated defence of the terror campaign and a glorying in its activists and activities by Sinn Fein leaders highlight their unrepentant and wicked state. Recently, the Sinn Fein leadership endorsed the attempts to obtain public funds for the renovation of a statute erected in Crossmaglen, glorifying the terrorists' campaign which saw many hundreds of Protestants murdered in Ulster. The Department of the Environment have been very reticent about disclosing whether or not proper planning approval was ever sought for the erection of the statue. It is very doubtful indeed! Mr Bothwell states in his interview that even those who are supposedly showing "sorrow" for their activities, still insist that they were justified! Some grief, some repentance!

"WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURES" ON THIS MATTER?

Let me commence by saying that:

The Bible clearly teaches that there is forgiveness for the worst of sinners.

This truth was made abundantly clear when Paul the apostle was converted. He afterwards termed himself a foremost transgressor. "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief," 1 Timothy 1:15, KJV. He acknowledged that he had been guilty of having persecuted Christians "unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women," Acts 22:4, KJV.

In a very real way, every sinner is guilty of murder. So said the Saviour. "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. . . . Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart," Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, KJV.

The Saviour states that to embrace a sin within your heart is, in God's eyes, the same as actually, physically engaging in that sin. Who then is not guilty of every sin? This truth is repeated by John in his First Epistle. "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him," 1 John 3:15, KJV. Again, it is made clear that if we breach the Law of God in one commandment we are guilty of breaking the whole Law. Once more, heed John and James, the apostles of Christ. "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law," 1 John 3:4, KJV. "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all," James 2:10, KJV. One sin makes us guilty of breaking the whole Law of God - even murder!

I believe we can rightly conclude that the Gospel of Christ proffers mercy even to murderers since there are those, condemned for breaking the whole Law of God but who have found forgiveness of sins.

What are the terms under which God grants mercy to murderers?

I can do no better than quote from the Westminster Shorter Catechism for guidance to the Bible's answer



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to this question.

Question 84: What doth every sin deserve?

Answer: Every sin deserveth God's wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.

1. 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.' (Galatians 3:10b, KJV).
2. 'Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.' (Matthew 25:41, KJV).

Question 85: What doth God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?

Answer: To escape the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin, God requireth of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption.

1. 'Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.' (Acts 20:21, KJV).
2. 'My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.' (Proverbs 2:1-5, KJV).

Question 86: What is faith in Jesus Christ?

Answer: Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

1. 'But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.' (Hebrews 10:39, KJV).
2. 'But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.' (John 1:12, KJV).
3. 'And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.' (Philippians 3:9, KJV).
4. 'For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.' (Isaiah 33:22, KJV).

Question 87: What is repentance unto life?

Answer: Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.

1. 'Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.' (Acts 11:18b, KJV).
2. 'When they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?' (Acts 2:37, KJV).
3. 'Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.' (Joel 2:13, KJV).
4. 'Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth.' (Jeremiah 31:18b-19, KJV).
5. 'I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies.' (Psalm 119:59, KJV).



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Clarity

Here is clear doctrinal instruction with the proofs from God's Word to endorse it. The way of escape from the judgment of sin is wonderfully set forth. There is a urgent appeal to flee to Christ and His atoning blood as the only refuge from guilt and condemnation. We are told that we enter upon pardon by faith in Christ which is a receiving and rest upon Him alone as the only means of redemption. Not the "Church" or its rituals. Not acts of penance or works of charity - no, FAITH in Christ ALONE is the only hope of the sinner.

Furthermore, just what repentance means is explained to us. It is a turning unto God by a sinner "out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, with grief and hatred of his sin . . . with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience." No half measures! No self-justification! Rather, a full and free acknowledgment of the heinousness of the sins committed and a resting in the kind mercy of God in Christ set forth in the gospel.

Thief

It is to do what the thief on the cross did, a short time before he died and after an even shorter period from when he had been cursing and blaspheming Christ! Listen to the Bible's account of his sinful state before his conversion and the circumstances in which it took place. "And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth," Matthew 27:39-44, KJV.

That final sentence gives us the disposition of both thieves on the cross until the mercy of God intervened in the life of one of them. The change is recorded in Luke's gospel. "And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise," Luke 23:39-43, KJV.

Did he not die happy and at peace with the comforting words of Christ ringing in his heart? "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" - what a pillow to adorn our deathbed! That is what it is to enter into the peace of God's pardoning mercy and die triumphantly.

Hope

Herein is the only hope for those in Ulster whose hands are stained with blood. There is no hope in that fallacious framework which underpins the so-called peace that the power-sharing Executive in Stormont instituted and rules over. That seems to be the avenue along which those who are allegedly troubled by their crimes are being ushered. It will prove as false as the sandy foundation upon which the foolish man built his house, (Matthew 7:26). Ruin, everlasting ruin is what awaits those who cobble together a peace that is void of the wisdom set forth in God's Word and set their hope upon it.

Poor Ulster is ill-served by its political and spiritual leaders of late. May God be pleased to raise up faithful prophets to say "This is the way, walk ye in it," Isaiah 30:21, KJV.

Rev Ivan Foster.
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