Turning to God: Attrition vs Contrition **[1]**

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When Christianity was first introduced to the Western world, it brought with it many new ideas which had previously not been conceived. The early church father Tertullian, a lawyer by trade, is credited with inventing new words in the Latin language just to be able to be able to express the ideas which Christianity brought into the fold.

In this post I want to discuss two English words which are similar and has a subtle, but important, difference in definition. This will not be a complicated or difficult article. But most atheists do not seem to grasp the difference and when engaging with the religious, they need to understand it.

The two words which I shall be discussing in this article are *attrition* and *contrition*.

I have heard the word attrition [2] used in the workplace, so it might not be completely foreign to the reader. It can mean to (gradually) reduce or wear away (through friction). But it has another, theological, definition:

> Sorrow for sin arising from fear of damnation,

The avid read may also have come across the word contrition [3] in sentences such as "she had a contrite heart", meaning she was (sincerely) remorseful or regretful over something. The word is connected to, but not always used in, a religious sense:

> Sorrow for and detestation of sin with a true purpose of amendment, arising from a love of God for His own perfections.

Can you spot the difference? Many atheists love to believe that, ultimately, the only road to God is through the former: a fear of punishment. But as it turns out, Christianity understands the concept of changing your life for the *love* of of something, not only fear. It is interesting to note that when Jesus began His public ministry (Mark 1:14–15), He called people to repentance not because *hell* is near, but "*the Kingdom of God*".

In fact, the full definition of attrition (as given above) is:

> Sorrow for sin arising from fear of damnation, *especially as contrasted with contrition, which arises purely from love of God*.

Emphasis added. Attrition is also sometimes called "imperfect contrition" (as opposed to "perfect contrition" which was defined above).

Here are a couple of analogies. If a young, married couple has their first child, the husband and father may give up his motorcycle which he got during his early student years, even though he is a careful rider and has never been in an accident. Exactly because he knows that he is a careful rider he does not fear an accident which may claim his life. But riding a motorcycle is one of the more dangerous everyday activities [4], because as a rider you are quite vulnerable and have very little protection. Instead of fearing for his own life, he recognises that in the unlikely event that he is in a fatal accident, he does not want to leave his wife widowed and young child fatherless. He gives up something about himself *for the love of others*.

Another analogy would be a man who cuts down his cholesterol intake after suffering a heart attack because he does not want to die (yet). This is selfish in the sense that his actions are motivated only by concerns for himself. It is true that this can be done under the guise of the previous example, where he does not want to leave his wife widowed and children fatherless. But for the purposes of this article the man is ultimately driven by a *fear and concern for himself*.

Throughout the ages some Christians thought that attrition was perfectly acceptable, as long as others began to think and act like they themselves did. There was little real concern for what was happening underneath "the hood". But I believe that contrition spurs sanctification, while attrition may not necessarily. Sanctification is the process of becoming more like the person of Jesus in thought and deed, and it is the sign of a true Christian. A person who is attrit may likely only do the "minimum" to "get into heaven".

Ultimately I believe that all Christians should eventually be contrite. Even if someone became a Christian because of attrition, God is love, and we need to come to recognise that and love Him back for that. Fear has no place in the heart of a Christian, as Jesus gives strength. We love God because He created us and cares for us, and that when we rejected Him, He did not reject us, but gave up Himself in the person of Jesus Christ so that we can be in a right relationship with Him.

I want to end this article off by raising one final point. An atheist may still object by saying that God cannot possibly be good and that, therefore, contrition is misguided. For now I shall grant this objection, as long as they recognise that there is a distinction between contrition and attrition. I hope to address this other objection in a future article.

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