

REPENTANCE

When I was a young man, I had an interest in spiritual subjects. I considered myself to be a believer, but I wasn't sure about it. I had the understanding about Laestadian Christians that, in discussion, they would very quickly turn the topic to matters of faith and would encourage one to repent. And this they did to me, also. I thought then that they certainly are difficult people. However, those discussions forced me to consider what repentance is. Although they tried to explain the matter to me, I did not comprehend it. I rebuffed the offers, but God did not leave me at peace. When His time was come, I received the grace of repentance. Only then did I begin to understand that repentance was not my work, but that of God. It was His gift, which I accepted when it was offered to me. He also brought about a receptive mind. In my case, it required time and removal of my own ideas and strength.

That event turned the direction of my life. It signified a deeper change than I then comprehended. Almost five decades have passed since then, during which the world has changed. Apparently, people have an even more obscure understanding than before of what repentance means. Many people think that repentance takes place when a person corrects his life so that it is more in accordance with God's Word, avoiding sin and doing good. Such a self-made repentance is the building of self-righteousness. It is not acceptable before God. Even many persons, who are correctly believing, mix repentance with the setting aside of sin and correction of matters, which takes place in confession. Repentance and confession are separate matters.

SCRIPTURE AND CONFSSIONAL BOOKS TEACH ABOUT REPENTANCE

In the new [Finnish] Church Bible, the word "repentance" has been changed to conversion in some instances, but the content of the matter has not changed. God shows man that the direction of his way and life is wrong, and thus requires a change of direction. In repentance or conversion, there is not a question of checking the direction but of changing it. Neither is there a question of mere "surface remodeling," nor even of a fundamental change for the better, but of construction on an entirely new foundation. Scripture also contains other expressions that mean the same as repentance. Of them, rebirth probably has the most significance. It describes in detail what is at issue in repentance. The Pharisee Nicodemus did not comprehend the necessity of new birth, even though Jesus taught him (John 3:1–21). Do we comprehend?

When He started His public activity, Jesus proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In this condensed program announcement are found the crucial matters relative to repentance: God's kingdom, penitence, and believing the gospel. It also shows that the preaching of repentance has a central place in the work of God's kingdom. Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist, preached in the same manner (Matt. 3:2). Just before He ascended into heaven, Christ still reminded His disciples, "Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46, 47). The speech of Paul at the Areopagus in Athens culminated in the admonition to repent, "But now commandeth all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30).

The Scriptures give us many examples, how people have repented when approached by God. The Old Testament describes the repentances of the high priest Joshua (Zech. 3) and King David (2 Sam. 12:1–13). The New Testament again depicts how the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32); the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39–43); the Ethiopian Queen's eunuch (Acts 8:26–39); the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1–18); and the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10) received the grace of repentance.

Each of the people mentioned was different. Their spiritual backgrounds and the outward framework of their repentances differed. But on each occasion, penitence and the receiving of the forgiveness of sins

Day5L2R04_Repentance, The Treasure Hidden in a Field

were clearly in evidence. Also present was God's congregation, to whom the resurrected Christ left the office to preach the forgiveness of sins in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states that the doctrine regarding repentance should be the brightest and clearest of all in the church. The doctrine of repentance and the doctrine of justification belong closely together, for the doctrine of penitence [repentance] ought to be as clear and plain as possible in the church (XXI:41 and XII:59) The Augsburg Confession, for its part, stipulates that repentance actually contains two parts. One is penitence, or the fear caused by consciousness of sin, which presses upon the conscience. The second is faith, which is born of the gospel, the remission of sins. Faith trusts in the fact that one's sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ. This gives consolation for the conscience and frees it from fear. After this will follow good deeds, which are the fruits of repentance (XII:3–6).

Repentance, from beginning to end, is the work of God, which includes penitence caused by consciousness of sin, believing the gospel, and a new life. God calls man to Him, awakens the conscience, and engenders sorrow over sin. "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

THE CALL OF GOD

A person loses his childhood faith because of sin and disobedience. Many do not even know when such a loss took place. Faith, even the faith of a child, needs care. If God's Word is not allowed to care for a conscience, the faith-connection to God is severed. A person raised in a believing home and there rooted into God's kingdom may remember how sins that one couldn't put away piled up on the conscience. Little by little the conscience hardened and stopped admonishing him. The flame of faith was extinguished. God's Spirit departed because of disobedience, and it was replaced by the spirit of the world. The extinguishing of faith is not always a slow event. It is rapid, for example, when a believer falls into public sins and does not want to repent and give them up. In this way, he denies his faith by his manner of life.

However, God does not forget a person who has turned his back to Him, but calls the person, who has lost his faith, back into fellowship with Him. The person hears the call of God in his conscience.

God calls the person who has lost faith in many ways: through difficulties in life, suffering, and the example of others, but especially by His Word. The drift of the prodigal son's life into a dead end brought him to a stop. The father's home, which he had once wanted to leave, came to mind in a different light. Many have experienced a near one's death as a reminder from God. Unavoidably, the thought has come, "Someday, perhaps soon, it will be my turn to leave. What will be my condition or portion at that time?" A serious illness can stop a busy person. The things that filled life earlier now fall into the background, and the person's relationship to God begins to occupy the mind. The repentance of a friend or a relative touches a person even if he tries to relate to it with indifference or even scorn.

God calls a person especially through the preaching of His Word. The gatherings of the believers are occasions in which the Holy Spirit teaches the way of salvation. Often the matters that were learned in childhood and the instructions of Scripture also remind and rebuke the sinner. When a person's interest in matters of faith has been kindled, his heart opens to God's Word, and he no longer wants to close it.

But borrowing words from the handbook, Christian Doctrine: "Man can, however, reject God's calling. At that time, he presents many defenses in order to avoid standing in the light of God's face. In this way, he sinks still deeper into indifference and hardens his heart. This can lead to spiritual death" (CD 69). God's Word warns us not to harden our hearts if we hear His voice today (Heb. 3:15).

AWAKENING

God's call awakens the conscience of man. Christian Doctrine describes the awakening in this way: "When God stops a sinner before Him, he is compelled to see his true state. He sees that he has broken God's commandments. He begins to grasp that he not only has individual sins, but that the direction of his entire life is wrong. But in addition to distress over sin, in him awakens a drawing to the Savior and a hope that in spite of all the Savior will not reject him. This distress over sin and longing for grace before God is called awakening" (CD 70).

The prodigal son awakened in a foreign land to see his sinfulness. He remembered how all was well in the Father's home and decided to return. Sometimes, repentance is viewed as having taken place at that point. If this interpretation were correct, then the redemption work of Christ would have been in vain. Repentance would be a person's own decision. The grace of God, which seeks and saves, would be unnecessary. "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph. 5:14). Awakening is not yet repentance, even though repentance includes the awakening of the conscience.

CONSCIOUSNESS OF SIN

An awakened person becomes aware of having committed sin against God. He remembers deeds and speech that his conscience condemns as wrong. They press upon his conscience. However, sin is not only known deeds and words, but it is much more. Those individual matters are only the tip of the iceberg. "Sin is the falling away of the heart from God" (CD 23). Having completed creation, God examined His resultant work; He saw all, including man, to be good. However, in the Fall, the nature of man was corrupted so that his desire turned to evil and he became an enemy of God (Col. 1:21). This poor heritage from the first people is common to all mankind. It is called inherited sin. From this internal corruption proceed evil thoughts, speech, and deeds, which are called actual sin (CD 21, CD 22). These deeds are fruits of original sin and unbelief.

A scribe once came to Jesus and asked, "What is the greatest commandment of all in the Law?" Jesus answered, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:28). A sinfallen, unbelieving person, cannot love God, because he is God's enemy. Therefore, even his best deeds do not take him closer to God. God does not presume that an awakened person would comprehend the entire depth of his corruption of sin. It is sufficient for God that man recognizes that he has transgressed against Him and that by his own deeds man cannot be reconciled with God but needs pardon.

PENITENCE

The awakened person begins to seek God's kingdom so that he can hear the gospel. The prodigal son thought, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no longer worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15:18,19). Repentance is a change of heart. In it, a person regrets his sins and wants to turn away from them. The question is of the consciousness of sin and not the listing of sins. "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Ps. 51:4).

"Contrition is the genuine terror of a conscience that feels God's wrath against sin and is sorry that it has sinned. This contrition takes place when God's Word denounces sin"

BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

According to Luther, true contrition is the work of the Holy Spirit. (The first debate with the Antinomians). It leads to believing the gospel. In his book, “The Last Testament of the Bloody King, Our Lord Jesus Christ—An Explanation of the Sacrament of the Holy Supper,” Luther counsels the contrite person, “It is the correct path that you come there, where My Word is, and hear it, and receive it in faith; then you will be freed from sin in My Word of grace.” He warns about contrition without faith, “If you had all of the contrition in the world, but no faith, then it would be the contrition of Judas, which angers rather than appeases God. Nothing will turn the affection of God toward us except that we give Him the honor that He is the God of truth and grace. It is done only by the person who believes His Word.” Christian Doctrine makes this teaching by Luther briefer, “Penitence without faith is despair” (CD 71).

The most important part of repentance, therefore, is believing the gospel. True repentance is not possible without God’s kingdom and its preaching of remission coming within hearing distance. The important duty of the congregation of God is to proclaim the gospel of the forgiveness of sins to the penitent person. According to the Augsburg Confession, “True repentance is nothing but contrition and fear because of sin and, at the same time, faith in the gospel and absolution.” The question is of faith in this, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been received through Christ. Again, this faith consoles and satisfies the heart. It is followed also by improvement of one’s life and leaving sin, for these must be the fruit of repentance. As John the Baptist says in the third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

NEW LIFE

When a penitent person believes the gospel, new birth occurs: he becomes a child of God. Life in faith and the fellowship of God’s kingdom begins at this point. God’s grace brings about the improvement of life. It teaches him to reject godless ways and to live a godly life before God and men. Christ’s Spirit awakens in the heart of one who has been helped to believe the desire for a new life and also gives him the strength for this. When sin attaches and makes the journey slow, he wants to put sin away and believe it forgiven (Heb. 12:1–2).

A believer does not become perfect; he commits sin every day in thought, word, and deed. We are both sinful and righteous at the same time. However, the direction of life changes. The first sign of this is love. The relationship to God changes to one between a child and a loving Father. The children of God, brothers and sisters, become dear. The heart begins to be ruled by the wholesome grace of God, obedience of faith, and the correct fear of God. It is the fear of a child, in which one cries out to the Heavenly Father, “Abba, dear Father.” Thus begins the endeavor of a Christian.