

# Intercontinental Church of God

## 10. Repentance

### DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

Repentance is the act of acknowledging one's sins and resolving to fully obey God. To repent means to change one's overall attitude from wanting to go his own way to wanting to go God's way. It begins when God opens one's mind to see himself in comparison with God and His law. True repentance is the first step toward reconciliation with God, and thereby toward ultimate salvation.

### DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

Repentance signals the start of a changed and godly life. It involves a fully conscious recognition of one's sinful, lawless way of life, a way of life that is antagonistic toward God and His law, accompanied by a firm conviction to make a total change and to begin to live in full accord with God's way of life as described in the Bible.

True repentance can occur only when God Himself opens one's eyes to see his past sinfulness by *granting repentance* (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). But repentance is much more than a recognition of personal sins. Repentance, rather is the process through which God leads us so that we can become progressively more like Him, thereby proceeding toward salvation as sons and daughters in His divine family which is God's ultimate desire for all humanity. As such, repentance should include the positive, joyful realization of the fact that it is *God who grants repentance*, that this repentance is "unto life" (Acts 11:18), and that all who are so called shall "come to know the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25).

True repentance is a complex and deeply personal phenomenon that can only be understood, in the final analysis, by experiencing it. The first component is the realization that there is a vast difference, a great gulf, between God and oneself (e.g. Job 42). The next aspect is an all-consuming desire to close that gap, to become more like God in character, thought and behavior, though the capacity to accomplish this is far beyond human power alone and requires the active involvement of God's Holy Spirit.

One who is coming to repentance must first understand that sin is the transgression of God's law (1 John. 3:4), the penalty for which is death (Rom. 6:23). Added to this theoretical definition of sin must be the deep personal realization that one has indeed sinned and that his whole frame of mind and attitude of approach is oriented against God's law (Rom. 8:7). But the deceitfulness of sin blinds one to seeing his sinfulness unless God opens his mind to reality, to recognize that one indeed is a sinner. Genuine repentance, therefore, must come from God Himself, and man cannot claim credit for it, though he has a part in it. His part is to acknowledge the truth about himself which God has shown him and then to act upon it.

In the process of seeing himself, a person comes to realize that the human "heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). Since sin is ultimately of the mind, he also begins to understand that even his own righteousness, which in an unconverted person is invariably motivated by selfishness, is only a "dirty rag," as it were, in God's sight (Is. 64:6). When an individual repents, he must compare his righteousness to God's righteousness and not to that of other human beings. When man compares himself to God—and with God's help sees himself as he really is—he is astonished at his own sinfulness and inadequacy.

Confronted with this reality, the person nearing repentance comes to appreciate that man is incapable of leading a godly life without God's direct help and intervention through His Spirit. "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). While man's intentions are often

the best—he may *want to do good*—he nevertheless finds himself caught in a struggle between them and his natural inclination toward evil. Romans 7 describes this struggle: "For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I . . . For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not" (vs. 15-18). A person in an attitude of repentance feels a strong need for help in this spiritual dilemma and reaches out to God for aid through His Holy Spirit. Thus, Paul admitted that the only relief from this eternal conflict between the good of God and the evil of our own nature is "through Jesus Christ" (v. 25).

In his natural state without God's Spirit, man is cut off from God and indeed at enmity with God (Rom. 8:7; Is. 59:1-2). The story of Adam and Eve is an example of how this spiritual enmity has occurred in man (Rom. 5:12). The Genesis account indicates that Adam and Eve were born morally neutral, with the ability to do good *or* evil, right or wrong, but without an actual inclination toward either. God nonetheless instructed them in His law and explained to them right from wrong. They had no reason to doubt God or to disobey until Satan, symbolized (and/or materialized) in Genesis 2 as a serpent, tempted them by saying God was both holding back knowledge from them and lying about death as the penalty for disobedience. Adam and Eve chose to obey Satan rather than God and so ate of the forbidden fruit. The effects of this sin cut them off from God as is evidenced by His thrusting them from the garden. It also caused a rationalization of, or a blinding to, the sin, as shown by Adam's attempt at justifying himself. Likewise, their act of stepping from the realm of moral neutrality to that of sinfulness through the initiation of this one sin caused deep and profound mental changes in Adam and Eve. They were no longer morally neutral but became evilly oriented in much the same way as was—and is—Satan, since Satan's attitude of mind had now influenced their own.

All human beings are, like Adam and Eve, born morally neutral. Yet living in Satan's world, surrounded by an ungodly environment, all persons soon sin, as did Adam and Eve. (To ask at what age or to try to discern the demarcation line between moral neutrality and sin is not practical.) Thus, sin has the same consequences in us as it did in Adam and Eve. It cuts us off from God, it blinds us to our own sinfulness and it changes our minds from neutrality to enmity against God (Rom. 8:7).

Viewed in this context, repentance is the bridge between a carnal mind, one that is at enmity against God, and a spiritual mind, one that has God's Spirit and is obedient and pleasing to the Creator. When one repents, he sees for the first time in his life the ungodly, debilitating, wicked orientation of his natural mind; he asks God for forgiveness and is baptized. He then receives the Holy Spirit which, working in and through his mind, actually changes or "transforms" it from carnal to spiritual (Rom. 12:2). This transformation is called "conversion." And repentance is the bridge—first step—in this process of transformation.

Although repentance involves seeing the sinful side of oneself, thus generating negative personal feelings, it nevertheless has extremely positive aspects. Upon true repentance and baptism, one is forgiven of sin. The psalmist said, "Blessed is the man to whom sin is not imputed" (Ps. 32:2). The sheer joy of having one's sins forgiven is the sure knowledge of being right and clean before God. King David bore testimony to the positive, uplifting nature of repentance when he prayed "Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which though hast broken [as a result of my sin] may rejoice" (Ps. 51:8). One who has repented can rejoice at the impending forgiveness of his sins, joy indeed.

The most profound evocation of real repentance in the Bible must truly be this heartfelt prayer of David in Psalm 51. The occasion was Nathan the prophet's coming to him about his sin with Bathsheba. The prayer shows the important basic components of godly repentance: an attitude of abject wretchedness and contrite humility before God; a deep recognition of all one's sins, which are "ever before me"; the conviction that God can and will forgive all one's iniquities and cleanse him from all his sins; and the sure knowledge that God can and will create in a truly repentant individual "a clean heart" and put "a new and right spirit" in him, restoring "the joy of your salvation."

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment" (Ps. 51:1-4).

"Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Ps. 51:9-12).

Godly repentance must, of course, be accompanied by "godly sorrow." Godly sorrow reflects a profound awareness that one has sinned against God. It is a sorrow that is felt because sin hurts others and works against God's master plan of salvation. It is this "godly sorrow" that produces a repentance that leads to salvation" (2 Cor. 7:9-10).

On the other hand, God also speaks of "worldly sorrow." Worldly sorrow is not sorrow that one has committed sin, but just a momentary feeling brought on by adverse consequences such as results after one has been caught and is being punished. It is temporary self-pity, in no way involving permanent change from sinning to obedience, and its end is death.

True repentance, conversely, is a deep-seated desire to change one's whole being. It is a desire to reform and redirect one's motivational approach to life. It is coming to abhor sin as God does. This type of repentance can come only from God. As we have seen, it is God who must give and lead one to repentance (Rom. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:25).

In a more detailed way, repentance includes many things. It involves a profound sense of utter helplessness, realizing that to do what must be done is impossible by one's own willpower. It requires the conscious awareness that God must take an active part in redirecting and reshaping one's life, for only God knows the way to life and only He can solve the problems of mankind. We must come to realize this fact and accept the process by which we can become acceptable to God. We have to change from doing things our own way to acknowledging God, His will and His laws in our lives. This means a desire to change our very hearts and minds. We have to turn from our way of lust, greed, selfishness and self-centeredness to God's way of mercy, generosity, love and outgoing concern for others (Eph. 4:22-24). We can view this as a spiritual "mind transplant." We have to adopt new ways of thinking, new feelings and attitudes (2 Cor. 5:17). Repentance, however, is not designed to create total uniformity of personality, tastes, interests, life styles, etc. among Christians. Such would be an anathema to God, who is creating true sons in His family, not the proverbial "rows of yellow pencils." Repentance, in fact, is the means by which human beings can grow to have the same overall attitudes and character of God. This is the overwhelmingly uplifting result of godly sorrow.

Paul lists seven attributes of this godly sorrow. "For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter" (2 Cor. 7:11). This type of sorrow generates real repentance which in turn will lead to salvation.

Real repentance is a spiritual gift, and only God can give it. Human remorsefulness, even accompanied by great emotion, is not the repentance that the Bible says is a prerequisite for baptism and salvation. Consequently, an individual desiring to be converted must ask God for a repentant attitude of mind as well as for forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. This conscious act of *asking God* is an essential part of the process.

As is commonly known, true repentance must be followed by water baptism, which results in the forgiveness of one's sins by God and the consequent reception of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands of the ministry.

Although one's initial act of repentance occurs prior to baptism, repentance is not a one-time event—It must be a continuous lifelong process. The more one learns about God and His way, the more one becomes aware of how far he must go to be like God. As a converted individual seeks God's way and reads God's Word to receive personal correction, so his inner sinful attitudes and motivations are perceived. This continuous process of growth and change is the very essence of the Christian life. As God opens His mind to see more clearly (even more than before baptism) his sinful nature, the Christian repents more and more *deeply*. His post-conversion repentance is a continuous reaffirmation of his commitment to live God's way as well as being contrite and remorseful for any errors made.

Repentance is not synonymous with perfection. A repentant person is not guaranteed a sinless life for ever after. Even a converted person will sin out of weakness from time to time, but he need only repent of that sin and confess it before God, acknowledging Christ's atoning sacrifice once again, in order to restore contact with God and to obtain God's full forgiveness which reestablishes the joy of righteousness.

Such a repentant person knows that God shall completely forgive all his sins upon repentance. He knows that God has willed to actually *forget* all our iniquities once they have been repented of and put under Christ's blood. God can no longer even remember our sins! ". . . as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). This is the incredible promise of real *repentance*—*real freedom*: freedom from guilt and fear, freedom from anxiety and depression, freedom from sins, freedom from eternal death. It is the reason why true repentance is the most encouraging, beneficial gift God can give us. It is with this confidence that the Christian continues to suppress and overcome his human nature with God's help. He asks God to replace his ungodly thoughts with the godly approach of the Holy Spirit; he seeks to diligently understand God's law more and more through the practical experience of obedience.

God does warn—and it should not be taken lightly—that "it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold Him up to contempt" (Heb. 6:4-6). This shows that any who willfully reject God by adamantly refusing to follow His way cannot be coerced into repentance and cannot be forced to receive eternal life. Yet, diametrically contradicting the alien concept of a harsh, vengeful God is the astounding, thrilling, clarion-call truth of the Bible that *all who want to repent can repent—at any time, for any sin, with the full assurance of God's total and immediate forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Savior. God does not want any human being to perish "but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).*

In summary, repentance involves a change of one's whole way of life and frame of mind from disobedience and antagonism toward God to obedience and love toward God. It is the bridge that takes one from worldliness to godliness, from wickedness to uprightness, from the way of "get" (selfishness, self-concern, vanity) to the way of "give" (selflessness, outgoing concern, service). All this is only possible through God's Holy Spirit. Already working in the lives of thousands, God's gift of repentance is a great miracle that shall eventually work in the lives of billions.

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This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

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