

MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

Part 26: The Holy Spirit: repentance

Regeneration (the impartation of life) and conversion (the expression of life) are closely related. The soul is passive in the former and active in the latter. "Conversion is that action of man which results from regeneration" (Shedd). Conversion entails repentance (turning from sin) and faith (turning to Christ).

Q. 90. *What is repentance unto life?* A. 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, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience—Shorter Catechism

This saving repentance is an evangelical grace, whereby a person, being by the Holy Spirit made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin, doth, by faith in Christ, humble himself for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-abhorrency, praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose and endeavor, by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things—LBC [15:3]

I. Repentance

A. Five aspects of repentance

1. *Its necessity.* [1] Repentance is necessary to avoid perishing. "I tell you...unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Lk.13:5). "If a man does not repent, He will sharpen His sword" (Ps.7:12). [2] Repentance and faith are inseparably related. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk.1:15). [3] Repentance was central to the preaching of the prophets, Christ, and the apostles. "John the Baptist came preaching...saying, Repent" (Matt.3:1), "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, Repent" (Matt.4:7), "and they (the apostles) went out and preached that men should repent" (Mk.6:12; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30-31; 20:18-21).¹

All without exception, need repentance toward God. It is not only necessary for thieves, murderers, drunkards, adulterers, fornicators, and the inmates of prisons and of jails. No: all born of the seed of Adam – all, without exception, need repentance toward God. The queen upon her throne and the pauper in the workhouse, the rich man in his drawing room, the servant maid in the kitchen, the professor of sciences at the University, the poor ignorant boy who follows the plough – all by nature need repentance. All are born in sin, and all must repent and be converted, if they would be saved. All must have their hearts changed about sin. All must repent, as well as believe the Gospel. *'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven.'* *'Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish'* (Matt.18:3; Lk.13:3)—J.C. Ryle [*Old Paths*, 410-411]

¹ Jesus illustrates the repentance required for entry into the kingdom in numerous different ways. He does this when in the Sermon on the Mount he assigns the kingdom of God to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and so forth (Matt.5:3ff); when he says that one can enter eternal life only by passing through the small gate and by taking the narrow road (7:14); when he calls not the righteous but publicans and sinners to repentance and invites to himself the weary and the burdened (9:13; 11:28); when he enjoins his disciples to change and become like a child (18:3); when he tells them they must leave everything behind, deny themselves, lose their life, and take up their cross to be worthy of him (10:37ff, 16:24ff); when in the parable of the prodigal son – to mention only one example – he depicts for us how this young man, prompted by hunger and misery, came to his senses, arose, and returned to his Father with a confession of sin—Herman Bavinck [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.4, 137]

2. *Its nature.* Most Hebrew and Greek words rendered "repent" or "repentance" literally mean "to change the mind, purposes or actions." Thus at its heart, repentance is a change of mind resulting in the change of conduct. "Repentance is a grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed" (Watson). There is an intellectual, emotional, and volitional element in repentance. "It entails a radical and conscious change of view, change of feeling, and change of purpose with respect to God, ourselves, sin, and righteousness" (Reymond). "There is a change of view, a recognition of sin as involving personal guilt, defilement, and helplessness...there is a change of feeling, manifesting itself in sorrow for sin committed against a holy and just God...and there is also a volitional element, consisting in a change of purpose, an inward turning away from sin, and a disposition to seek pardon and cleansing" (Berkhof). [1] Sight of sin. Repentance entails a true sight and sense of sin. "I would not have known sin except through the law" (Rom.7:7). "Sin, through the commandment, became exceedingly sinful" (Rom.7:13). "I know my transgression, and my sin is ever before me" (Ps.51:3). "True repentance begins with knowledge of sin. The eyes of the penitent man are opened. He sees with dismay and confusion the length and breadth of God's holy law, and the extent, the enormous extent, of his own transgressions" (Ryle). [2] Sorrow for sin. "As all births bring a certain degree of pain, so all true repentance brings with it a certain amount of sorrow" (Watson). "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom" (Jas.4:9). [3] Shame for sin. "In repentance we come to see that our sin has degraded us, and more important, despoiled God of the image of his glory in us" (Ferguson). "They shall be ashamed of their iniquities" (Ezek.43:10). "When the heart has been made black with sin, grace makes the face red with blushing: *'I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face'* (Ezra 9:6)" (Watson). [4] Confession of sin. Repentance entails the acknowledgment or ownership of the guilt and filth of sin. In confession the sinner agrees with God against himself. "We have sinned, we have done wrong, and have committed wickedness" (2Chron.6:37). [5] Hatred for sin. "Repentance is accompanied with a loathing, detestation, and abhorrence of sin as the worst of evils; to truly penitent sinners, sin appears most odious and loathsome; nay they not only loathe their sins but themselves for them" (Gill). "Repentance sets a man at variance with himself. He sees his ugly face in the glass of God's law, Christ's sufferings, and the Lord's goodness, and he loathes himself" (Boston). [6] Apprehension of mercy. A true sense of sin and an awareness of God's mercy in Christ, are the taproots of repentance. "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, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience" (Shorter Catechism). No sinner ever repented without the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ. "The goodness of God leads you to repentance" (Rom.2:4), that is, the knowledge of God's goodness in Christ, leads the sinner to repentance. "He who would repent acceptably must first believe in Christ that he may so repent. He must believe that there is safety in entrusting his guilty soul to Christ before he can, with sincerity and good courage, turn from all sin to God in him" (Colquhoun). "Evangelical repentance...is always suffused with the promise and hope of forgiveness. In the theology of Scripture, a sense of sinfulness on its own is never equated with repentance. Thus, the encouragement towards repentance is that 'there is still hope for Israel' (Ezra 10:2)" (Ferguson). [7] Turning from sin. Repentance entails a turning from sin to God, a turning from self to Christ. It entails, "turning from vain things to the living God" (Acts 14:15), "turning from the Gentiles to God" (Acts 15:19), "turning from darkness to light" (Acts 26:18), and "turning from idols to God" (1Thess.1:9). "Whatever sense of sin, shame, sorrow, etc., for it one have, if it end not in returning to God, it is naught. It is under this notion that repentance is so often called for in the OT, 'Return,' 'Turn ye.' And it may be well put for the whole of repentance" (Boston).²

² The parts of repentance are two, namely, humiliation for sin, and turning from sin unto God. These two put together, make up true repentance. Accordingly the Scripture speaks of repenting of sin, 2Cor.12:21, "*which have not repented of the uncleanness,*" and likewise repenting from sin, Heb.6:1, "*Not laying aside the foundation of repentance from dead*

(1) Job 42:5-6; Ps.32:3-5; Ps.51:3-4; Prov.28:13; Isa.55:7; Ezek.18:30-32; Ezek.36:31; Joel 2:12-13; Lk.15:17-21; Lk.18:9-14; Jas.4:7-10

3. *Its evidence.* True repentance is always accompanied by various fruit. This fruit distinguishes it from a non-saving repentance illustrated in Judas (Matt.27:3-10). "The fruits of true repentance, then, are in general the good works which every evangelical penitent endeavors, through grace, diligently to perform; the spiritual and acceptable works, or '*fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God*' (Phil.1:11). They are styled fruits, and fruits of repentance, for they spring from the incorruptible seed of evangelical repentance in the heart, implanted there at regeneration. Such works, are '*fruits meet for repentance.*' They are suitable to it, and they prove the genuineness of it. As a tree is known by its fruit, so repentance is known by good works" (Colquhoun).

(1) Lk.3:7-14; Acts 26:19-20; 2Cor.7:9-11

4. *Its continuance.* Repentance and faith are never separated, both in the beginning and continuation of the Christian life. "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying 'Repent ye' etc., intended that the whole of the life of believers should be repentance" (Luther). "Repentance is not a transient action, a sigh for sin, a pang of sorrow for it, which goes away again; but it is an abiding grace, a new frame and disposition, fixed in the heart, disposing one to turn from sin to God on all occasions" (Boston). "It is a mistake to think that we repent only once, at the beginning of the Christian life. Repentance means the whole of life returning to the purpose of God. Therefore it continues throughout our entire life" (Ferguson). [1] Commands for Christians to repent. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent" (Rev.2:5). [2] Examples of Christians repenting. Job (42:5-6), David (Ps.32; 51), Peter (Matt.26:75), and the Corinthian Church (2Cor.7:9-11), are examples of Christians repenting. [3] Descriptions of Christians as penitent. "Blessed are those who mourn (lit. 'the mourning ones'), for they shall be comforted" (Matt.5:4), that is, those presently mourning for sin.

True repentance is not a transient act, as if a sigh or a pang of sorrow for sin amounted to it. No, these may indeed be acts of true repentance, while they issue from a heart sincerely penitent: but repentance itself, instead of being a passing act, is an abiding principle, a lasting disposition of soul, a gracious principle laying deep in the heart, disposing a man at all times to mourn for and turn from sin (Zech.12:10). The waters of godly sorrow for sin in the renewed heart will continue to spring up there while sin is there, though they may, through remaining hardness of heart, be much obstructed for a time. After the heart has, at the sinner's first conversion, been smitten with evangelical repentance, the wound still bleeds, and will continue more or less to bleed until the band of glory be put about it in the holy place on high—John Colquhoun [*Repentance*, 27]

(1) Ps.32; Ps.51; Lk.6:21, 25 (Matt.5:3); Rev.2-3

5. *Its relation to faith.* Though repentance and faith are inseparably related, faith receives the priority. "In the moment of regeneration the Holy Spirit implants all spiritual and saving graces in the heart of the elect sinner, and among others, faith and repentance. He implants at the same instant the

works," etc. So in the OT repentance is expressed by two words; the one denoting remorse and sorrow, Job 42:6, "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Jer.8:6, "No man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done?" the other denoting the turning of the soul from sin unto God, Ezek.18:30, "Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions"—Thomas Boston [*Works*, vol.6, 399]

root or principle of saving faith and of true repentance. He gives these two graces together and at once in respect of time; and therefore, though in our conception of them, they are to be distinguished, yet they are never to be separated from each other" (Colquhoun). Thus, while repentance and faith are twin graces which enter the soul simultaneously, faith receives the priority. [1] Repentance presupposes faith. Nobody ever repented without believing the law and gospel for themselves. "No sooner is the dead sinner quickened than he begins to act spiritually, and his first activity is that of believing. His true belief of the law with application to himself issues in true conviction of his sinfulness of heart and life...and his saving faith of the gospel with application to himself issues in union and communion with Christ" (Colquhoun). [2] Repentance is the result of faith.³ "Faith leads to repentance, not repentance to faith" (Shedd). "They shall look on Me whom they have pierced (faith), and they shall mourn for Him (repentance)" (Zech.12:10). "It is the eye of faith, contemplating sin in the cross of the adorable Redeemer that affects the heart with bitter repentance and with true abhorrence of all iniquity...The tears of godly sorrow drop as it were from the eye of faith. It is the exercise of faith in the crucified Redeemer that melts the hard heart into penitential mourning, and that produces the tears which run down in repentance. The eye of faith fixers on God in Christ as a God of love, mercy, and grace; and then by repentance the heart turns to him, and to the love and practice of true holiness" (Colquhoun). [3] Repentance entails turning to God. "Repentance involves turning to God; but there can be no turning but through Christ" (Shedd). "A great number believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:22).

Faith is the spring and source of repentance so that though the grace of faith and repentance are given together and at once in respect of time, yet, in the order of nature, faith goes before repentance, and the acting of faith goes before the exercise of repentance. And he that would repent, must first believe in Christ that he may repent—Thomas Boston [*Works*, vol.6, 392]

There are some, who suppose that repentance precedes faith, rather than flows from it, or is produced by it as fruit from a tree. Such persons have never known the power of repentance, and are moved to feel this way by an unduly slight argument. Christ, they say, and John in their preaching first urge the people to repentance, then add that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near (Matt.3:2; 4:17). Such was the command the apostles received to preach: such was the order Paul followed, as Luke reports (Acts 20:21). Yet while they superstitiously cling to the joining together of syllables, they disregard the meaning that binds these words together. For while Christ the Lord and John preach in this manner; 'Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand' (Matt.3:2), do they not derive the reason for repenting from grace itself and the promise of salvation? Accordingly, therefore, their words mean the same thing as if they said, "Since the Kingdom of Heaven has come near, repent"...Yet, when we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to birth; but we mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace—John Calvin [*Institutes*, 3:3:1-2]

³ Faith is the hand that receives Christ and his righteousness, as the all of salvation (Jn.1:12); and repentance unto life consists in that godly sorrow for sin, flowing from faith, which is the exercise of all who are concerned about the salvation of their souls (Jer.50:4; 2Cor.7:11)—Thomas Boston [*Works*, vol.2, 398]