REPENTANCE OF THE BELIEVER
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

It is generally supposed by many Christians that repentance is only the gateway of faith – that it is necessary only at the beginning of the Christian life (cf. Mt 3:2; Mk 1:15; Lk 24:47; Acts 2:38; 17:30; 2 Cor 7:10; 2 Pet 3:9). But there is a very distinct repentance that is necessary for “believers” as well – if they are to grow in grace. God tells the churches of Ephesus and Laodicea in Rev 2-3 to “repent.” The Ephesians were reminded of the height from which they had fallen; as such, they were told to repent and return to their first love (cf. Rev 2:5; Mt 22:37). The Laodiceans had become spiritually lukewarm and spiritually indifferent; God reminded them that He rebukes and chastens those whom He loves; thus they needed to be zealous and repent (Rev 3:19; Heb 12:6). The promise to those who repent is that “Jesus will dine with them” (cf. Rev 3:20); the picture is one of intimacy and enjoying one another’s company. The apostle Peter, after his threefold denial of the Lord Jesus, was said to have “wept bitterly” (cf. Mt 26:75); experiencing the emotional component of repentance. David frequently expressed his repentant grief over his sin (cf. 2 Sam 12:7-13; Ps 32:3-4; 40:12; 119:176). Godly sorrow will lead to the open acknowledgment, confession, and repudiation of sin – read David’s two penitential psalms (cf. Ps 32:5; 51:3-4). Job, likewise, repented or turned from his sin (cf. Job 42:1-6). When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church on October 31, 1517, his very first theses was on “repentance.” It read – “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

The Greek word translated “repent” is “metanoeo” – it is a compound word made up of two words: The first word “meta” indicates a change or transformation, and appears in many English words, such as “metamorphosis,” which means a change in condition. The second word is from the root word “nous,” which we translate “mind.” So metanoeo literally means to “change your mind” – by extension it means to turn about, to express regret or adopt another view. Whenever the Bible says you should repent or turn away from unrighteousness, its main emphasis is on your will, changing your mind or purpose – thus turning to God from unrighteousness are functions of the mind. The fact that God demands repentance shows that it involves the mind – it is something we must choose to do. A Christian’s mind plays a vital role in his relationship with God as he learns what God expects of him and chooses to please Him (cf. Rom 12:2; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2). So biblical repentance has an intellectual component (change in thinking). . . an emotional component (remorse and godly sorrow). . . and a volitional component (an inward turning from sin to God), which is evidenced by fruit (cf. Mt 3:8; Lk 13:5-9; Acts 26:20).

In what sense do we “repent as believers”? John Wesley asked the question: “Are we fully purified from a carnal mind. . . and wholly transformed into the image of Him that created us? Far from it!” he says. “We still retain a depth of sin. . . there still remains a whole body of sin in our hearts, weakened indeed, but clearly not destroyed. . . and it is the consciousness of this indwelling sin which constrains us to groan for a full deliverance. . . and cry out in our souls” —

I sin in every breath I draw,
Nor do Thy will, nor keep Thy Law
On earth, as angels do above:
But still the fountain open stands,
Washes my feet, my heart, my hands,
Till I am perfected in love.

Writes Wesley: “It is not seldom long before he who imagined all sin was gone, that he sees an overwhelming evidence of it in his life.” Let’s recount the ways – we think more highly of ourselves than others (sin of pride). . . we feel self-will in the heart; a will that is contrary to the will of God. . . we feel the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life. . . without continually watching and praying, we feel the assaults of inordinate affection and become lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. . . we find within ourselves attitudes that are contrary to the love of our neighbors – jealousy, envy, evil surmisings, criticisms, malice, hatred, anger, and outright bitterness. . . we find resentment and revenge in our hearts when we are injured or affronted, especially against those whom we had labored to help or oblige in some way. . . we see how covetous we are when we discover how tight a grip we have on our money, and how much we desire more of it. . . we see how carnal we are, and how prone we are to wander and depart from the God we love. . . and how sin cleaves to our words – many are mixed with sin, but some are altogether sinful (backbiting, tale-bearing, gossip, and outright lies); as Wesley says, “much sin cleaves to even the best conversation of believers.” And then there is the matter of our sins of omission – writes Paul, “To the one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jam 4:17). Are there not a thousand instances where we might have done good – be it to our enemies, to strangers, to friends, to our brothers, and did not do it? How many opportunities to share the faith have we neglected? So aware was that holy man, Archbishop Usher, of his sinfulness, that he cried out with almost his dying breath — “Lord, forgive me my sins of omission!” Yet even besides these outward omissions, do we not also find within ourselves inward defects without number? It is good for us to remember the confessions of Job, Isaiah, Peter, and Paul –

- Job – “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6).
- Isaiah – “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5).
- Peter – “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8).
- Paul – “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom 7:18).

Writes Wesley: “By all the grace which is given at justification we cannot extirpate [our sinful dispositions]. . . there fore, if there be no instantaneous deliverance after justification [of all sinful behavior in this life]. . . if there be none but a gradual work of God, then we must be content, as much as we can be, to remain [in this condition] till death.” Because of the presence of sin in our lives as believers, we are to live lives of repentance – unless we do so, we will not grow. . . and unless we understand our disease, we will live despairing lives. We must believe the glad tidings of the great salvation of the gospel of Christ that God has prepared for us – we must believe the He is able to save to the uttermost all that come to God through Him. . . that He is able to save us from all the sin that still remains in our hearts. . . that He is able to save us from all the sin that cleaves to all our words and actions. . . that He is able to save us from sins of omission, and supply all that is lacking within us. It is true, this is impossible with man; but with God all things are possible (cf. Mt 19:26).

Therefore, as believers, we must continue to believe in Him that loved us and gave Himself for us – and when we go from faith to faith, and have faith to be cleansed from indwelling sin, and faith to be saved from all our uncleanness, then we may say with full assurance, “Every moment, Lord, I have the merit of Your death!” For by faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and His continual
intercession for us, we are being renewed moment by moment, and being fully cleansed. Furthermore, there is neither condemnation for us now, nor punishment awaiting us in the future as was the case before. The Lord is continually at work within us, cleansing both our hearts and our lives. By repentance we feel the sin remaining in our hearts, and cleaving to our words and actions; and by faith we receive the power of God in Christ, purifying our hearts, and cleansing our hands. By repentance we have an abiding conviction that there is no help in us; by faith we receive not only mercy, but grace to help at every point of need.

Repentance says, “Without Him I can do nothing.”
Faith says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Therefore, through Christ we can love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and walk in holiness and righteousness before Him. Will we do so perfectly? Absolutely not. We inhabit sinful flesh. Richard Owen Roberts in his book, “Repentance: The First Word of the Gospel,” gives us some practical advice – “practice immediate repentance!” Since intimacy is broken by sin, “seek to walk with God in such a way that there is no accumulation of sin or even any time lag in dealing with sin.” And in spite of your efforts, know this – the operative grace of God is continually producing in you that which is pleasing in His sight. As difficult as that is to believe, that is the miracle of “grace!” Without which “none of us” would see the Lord. Read – Jn 6:39; 17:12; 18:9; Rom 8:28-33; 2 Cor 4:17; Eph 1:5; Phil 1:6; 2:13; 1 Th 5:23-24; Heb 13:21.

(Much of the foregoing material was extracted from a sermon
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