

The Doctrine of Repentance

Turning from Sin and Trusting in Christ

DOCTRINAL SUMMARY Repentance is an evangelical grace by which a sinner, made sensible of sin by the Word and Spirit of God and apprehending God's mercy in Christ, grieves and hates sin, turns from it to God, and purposes to walk in new obedience. It accompanies saving faith, contributes no merit to justification, and continues throughout the Christian life.

The gospel does not merely announce that forgiveness exists. It summons sinners to respond: "Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). Yet repentance is frequently misunderstood. Some reduce it to regret. Others treat it as self-improvement, penance, or a promise to behave well enough for God to forgive. Still others fear that calling people to repent compromises salvation by grace through faith alone.

Biblical repentance is none of these things. It is neither payment for sin nor preparation by which we make ourselves worthy of Christ. It is the grace-enabled turning of the whole person from sin to God. It is distinct from saving faith but never separated from it: the sinner turns from sin and, at the same time, looks to Christ as the only sufficient Savior.

KEY TEXT *"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" - Mark 1:15*

SECTION 01

The Gospel Command

Repentance stands near the center of biblical proclamation. The prophets called Israel to return to the Lord. John the Baptist prepared the way of Christ by preaching repentance and demanding fruit consistent with it. Jesus began his public ministry by commanding repentance and faith. After the resurrection, he declared that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations (Luke 24:46-47). The apostles continued the same message, calling people to repent, turn to God, and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:20).

The command to repent is universal because the problem of sin is universal. God does not command only the obviously immoral, socially destructive, or irreligious to repent. John warned even those who relied upon their descent from Abraham. Jesus confronted outwardly respectable religious leaders as

well as public sinners. Scripture removes every refuge built from ancestry, morality, religious service, knowledge, or comparison with others. All have sinned, and therefore all are summoned to turn to God.

Repentance must therefore be preached as part of the gospel call. It should not be hidden out of fear that people will mistake it for works-righteousness. The answer to that danger is not silence but clarity: repentance is necessary, yet it neither earns salvation nor causes God to pardon. No sinner should expect pardon while refusing repentance - not because repentance moves God to be gracious, but because the grace that brings a sinner to Christ also turns that sinner from sin. Repentance is a grace God gives and a response the sinner truly makes.

SECTION 02

The Meaning of Repentance

The language of the Old Testament frequently portrays repentance as turning or returning to the Lord. Israel's deepest problem was not merely the violation of isolated rules but departure from God himself. Therefore, the prophetic call was relational and covenantal: abandon false gods, renounce rebellion, and return to the Lord with the whole heart.

The principal New Testament noun, *metanoia*, is often described as a change of mind. That is correct but incomplete if "mind" is reduced to intellectual opinion. In Scripture, repentance reaches the understanding, affections, will, and conduct. The sinner begins to agree with God's judgment of sin, grieve sin as an offense against him, hate its corruption, turn from its rule, and seek a new course of obedience.

WORKING DEFINITION Repentance is a Spirit-produced change of mind, heart, and direction in which a sinner, apprehending God's mercy in Christ, recognizes, grieves, and hates sin, turns from it to God, and purposes and endeavors to walk in new obedience.

Repentance is therefore both negative and positive. It is a turning from sin and a turning to God. Merely abandoning one destructive behavior is not necessarily repentance; a person may exchange one idol for another. Biblical repentance returns to the living God and rests in his mercy revealed in Christ.

SECTION 03

What Repentance Is Not

Repentance Is Not Mere Regret

Regret may arise because sin has become painful, embarrassing, or costly. A person may sincerely wish that an action had never occurred while remaining unwilling to confess the offense or turn to God. Paul distinguishes "worldly sorrow," which produces death, from godly sorrow that produces repentance leading to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10). The decisive question is not simply, "Do I feel badly?" but "Has this sorrow turned me toward God?"

Repentance Is Not Penance

Penance attempts to make satisfaction for sin through prescribed acts, suffering, or religious performance. Biblical repentance makes no payment. Christ has offered the sufficient sacrifice, borne the curse, and satisfied divine justice. The repentant sinner comes empty-handed, pleading neither personal suffering nor future obedience as the basis of forgiveness.

Repentance Is Not Self-Reformation

A person may improve habits for many reasons: health, reputation, relationships, fear, or discipline. Such changes may be valuable, but moral improvement is not identical to repentance. Repentance does not clean up the sinner so that Christ will receive him. It brings the sinner to Christ because he cannot cleanse or save himself.

Repentance Is Not Outward Religion

Fasting, tears, confession, baptism, public response, and restitution may accompany repentance, but none guarantees its reality. Israel could rend garments while withholding the heart. John could administer water baptism while warning his hearers to produce corresponding fruit. God sees beyond the sign to the allegiance of the heart.

SECTION 04

Why Repentance Is Not Natural

Fallen people do not naturally respond to guilt by running toward God. Adam and Eve hid among the trees. David concealed his adultery and murder until God sent Nathan. Knowledge of wrongdoing, fear of discovery, and painful consequences may all be present while the sinner continues to suppress the truth and protect the self.

The problem is deeper than a shortage of information. Sin darkens understanding, disorders desire, and enslaves the will. We love darkness rather than light because our deeds are evil (John 3:19-20). This moral inability does not remove responsibility; it reveals the depth of our need. We cannot cure a heart that resists the Physician.

Accordingly, repentance does not arise from unaided human nature. God confronts sinners through his Word and awakens them by his Spirit. He called Adam from hiding, sent Nathan to David, raised John as a voice in the wilderness, and now commands all people everywhere to repent through the proclamation of the gospel.

SECTION 05

Repentance Is a Gift of Grace

Scripture speaks of repentance both as a duty and as a gift. God commands people to repent, and those who hear the command are responsible to respond. At the same time, the church rejoiced that God had “granted repentance that leads to life” even to Gentiles (Acts 11:18). Paul instructed Timothy to correct

opponents gently in the hope that God might grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 2:25).

This conjunction of command and gift reflects the nature of grace. God does not repent in our place. The sinner truly recognizes, grieves, confesses, turns, and believes. Yet the sinner does so because God has first acted. Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit gives life to the spiritually dead, opens the heart, renews the will, and enables a willing response to Christ.

GRACE AND RESPONSE God's sovereign grace does not make repentance less personal or sincere. It makes repentance possible. The renewed sinner truly turns because God has graciously made him willing to come.

Reformed theology commonly speaks of regeneration as logically prior to faith and repentance. This does not require a consciously perceived interval between them. Regeneration is God's life-giving work; repentance and faith are inseparable acts of the renewed sinner in conversion. The emphasis is not on measuring moments but on confessing that salvation begins with God's mercy rather than the sinner's autonomous will.

SECTION 06

Repentance and Saving Faith

Jesus joined the two commands: repent and believe. Paul summarized his ministry as testifying to both Jews and Greeks concerning "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Repentance and faith are not competing paths, nor are they two merits added together to obtain salvation. They are distinguishable but inseparable dimensions of conversion.

- Repentance turns from sin, self-rule, and every false refuge.
- Faith turns to Christ, receiving and resting upon him alone for salvation.
- Repentance acknowledges that sin is evil and cannot be safely cherished.
- Faith confesses that Christ is sufficient and may be wholly trusted.

Repentance without faith in Christ collapses into despair, religious penance, or moral reform. A profession of faith that refuses repentance collapses into empty assent. Saving faith comes to Christ as Savior and Lord; genuine repentance comes to the God whose mercy is offered in Christ.

This does not mean that a believer must first identify, remember, and conquer every sin before coming to Christ. No sinner possesses exhaustive self-knowledge, and no sinner achieves complete reformation in this life. Repentance renounces the rule of sin and the right to preserve protected exceptions. It brings known sin into the light while asking God to reveal what remains hidden.

SECTION 07

Repentance and Justification

Justification is God's gracious declaration that the sinner is righteous in his sight because of the righteousness of Christ credited to him. Its ground is Christ's obedience and satisfaction, not anything wrought within or performed by the sinner. Faith alone is the instrument by which Christ and his righteousness are received.

Repentance is therefore not the ground or instrument of justification. Our tears do not wash away guilt. Our turning does not supply righteousness. Our future obedience does not complete Christ's work. Even the sincerity of our repentance cannot become a secondary savior.

ESSENTIAL DISTINCTION We are not justified because our repentance is sufficiently deep. We repent because grace has awakened us, and we are justified only because Christ's righteousness is sufficient and received by faith.

Nevertheless, the faith that alone receives Christ never remains alone. The Spirit who brings the sinner to rest in Christ also turns him against the sin for which Christ died. Repentance is necessary not as a meritorious condition that persuades God to be gracious, but as an inseparable grace of conversion and a continuing fruit of new life.

SECTION 08

The Fruit of Repentance

John demanded "fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). Fruit does not create repentance or purchase forgiveness; it reveals the direction of the heart. When the crowds asked what they should do, John addressed possessions, economic honesty, abuse of authority, false accusation, and contentment. Repentance took visible form within ordinary relationships and responsibilities.

Biblical fruit may include honest confession, abandonment of sinful practices, restitution where possible, pursuit of reconciliation, renewed obedience, and willingness to accept appropriate consequences. Zacchaeus did not purchase salvation by repaying those he had defrauded. His restitution displayed the transformation accompanying Christ's saving visitation.

Fruit must also be assessed patiently. Temptation may remain intense. Entrenched habits may require prolonged warfare. Consequences may persist long after forgiveness. Genuine repentance is not sinless perfection but a changed allegiance: the believer no longer wishes to justify, conceal, or peacefully coexist with sin. He brings it into the light and fights it by faith.

SECTION 09

Repentance in the Christian Life

Repentance is not merely the doorway into Christianity. In conversion, repentance marks a decisive change of allegiance: the sinner turns from the dominion of sin to God in Christ. That definitive turning then expresses itself in repeated repentance throughout the Christian life. Believers remain dependent upon grace, continue discovering the reach of sin, and repeatedly turn from it to God. The more clearly they see God's holiness and Christ's mercy, the more honestly they can confess without hiding or despairing.

When a justified believer sins, he does not return to condemnation or fall out of adoption. Union with Christ is not maintained by flawless repentance. Nevertheless, sin grieves the Holy Spirit, disrupts communion with God, harms others, weakens assurance, and invites the loving discipline of the Father. Confession and repentance restore the enjoyment of fellowship, not the judicial foundation of acceptance.

Hebrews 12 describes divine discipline as the treatment of sons and daughters. It is not the wrath of a judge exacting the penalty Christ has already borne. It is the correction of a Father training his children to share in holiness. Christian repentance therefore takes place within the security of adoption, even when the Father's correction is painful.

Repentance should also become increasingly specific. General prayers about being imperfect can conceal the very sins that need to be named. Scripture encourages believers to confess known sins honestly, seek forgiveness from those harmed, make restitution where appropriate, and pursue concrete obedience. Specific repentance is not morbid introspection; it is truthful fellowship with God.

SECTION 10

Repentance and Assurance

Assurance begins with Christ rather than with the strength of our repentance. If we look first to the intensity of sorrow, completeness of confession, or speed of improvement, we will either despair or deceive ourselves. Christ's finished work, the promises of the gospel, and the faithfulness of God provide the objective foundation of assurance.

Repentance nevertheless serves as confirming evidence of grace. A new hatred of sin, willingness to confess, desire for holiness, perseverance in warfare, and repeated return to Christ are signs of spiritual life. Such evidence is never perfect, and it does not replace Christ as the object of faith. It reassures the believer that grace is bearing fruit.

Tender consciences should remember that weak repentance may still be real repentance. The question is not whether sorrow feels impressive enough to earn mercy. The question is whether the sinner is bringing sin to the light and seeking mercy in Christ. Presumptuous consciences, however, should hear

John's warning: a verbal profession that makes peace with sin has no right to claim the comfort of repentance without its fruit.

SECTION 11

The Pastoral Call

The doctrine of repentance protects both the freeness of grace and the transforming purpose of salvation. It prevents us from offering forgiveness without a call to turn, and it prevents us from turning repentance into a human achievement. It confronts the self-righteous, invites the ashamed out of hiding, comforts the struggling believer, and directs every person to Christ.

To the unbeliever, Scripture says: abandon every defense, renounce confidence in your own righteousness, and come to Christ. You need not make yourself worthy before coming. You cannot. Turn from sin and trust the Savior who receives sinners by grace.

To the believer, Scripture says: do not hide what Christ already knows or defend what he died to destroy. Bring sin into the light. Confess it specifically. Receive afresh the assurance of the gospel. Pursue reconciliation and new obedience - not to regain the status of a child, but because in Christ you have been received as one.

CONCLUSION

Repentance does not compete with grace; it is produced by grace. It does not supplement Christ's work; it brings us away from every rival confidence to rest in Christ alone. The gospel call remains: turn from sin, believe the good news, and behold the Lamb of God.

RELATED STUDIES

Explore current studies and resources related to repentance.

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Historical Witness

The Reformed confessions do not replace Scripture, but they help the church state biblical teaching carefully and guard against familiar errors. Across Presbyterian, Reformed, and Baptist expressions, they describe repentance as a grace of the gospel, distinguish it from satisfaction for sin, connect it with apprehending mercy in Christ, require its continuing exercise, and deny that it merits pardon.

The Westminster Confession calls repentance unto life an “evangelical grace” to be preached alongside faith in Christ. It denies that repentance is a satisfaction for sin or a cause of pardon while affirming that sinners may not expect pardon without it. The Westminster Larger Catechism describes repentance as a saving grace worked in the heart by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby the sinner sees the danger and offensiveness of sin, apprehends God’s mercy in Christ, grieves and hates sin, and turns to God in new obedience. The Second London Baptist Confession teaches repentance as part of effectual calling and as a continuing duty throughout life. The Heidelberg Catechism describes conversion as the dying of the old self and the rising of the new.

Primary Biblical References

Isaiah 55:6-7; Joel 2:12-13; Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 15:11-24; Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:37-38; Acts 3:19; Acts 11:18; Acts 17:30; Acts 20:21; Acts 26:20; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:8-11; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Hebrews 12:4-11; 1 John 1:5-2:2.

Confessional Sources

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 15, “Of Repentance unto Life.” [Online text](#)

Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 76, “What is repentance unto life?” [Online text](#)

Second London Baptist Confession (1689), Chapter 15, “Repentance to Life and Salvation.” [Online text](#)

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 33, Questions 88-90. [Online text](#)