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Repentance Unto Life

By the late C. D. Cole

It is the opinion of the writer that the word "repentance" was better understood in the days of Christ and the apostles than it is today. The first message of John the Baptist was on repentance, although he did not define the term: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:1,2). And our Lord began His ministry by saying, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). When Christ and the apostles preached repentance, the meaning of the word was fixed in the minds of the people, so that definition of the word was not necessary. But this is not true today. There is so much confusion over the doctrine; there are so many conflicting ideas; the word is used with such a variety of meanings, that the preacher needs to take great pains to know and to teach the true meaning of the word. If a man does not know what repentance is, he cannot know whether or not he has repented. The writer believes that many a saved person is confused over the matter and is anxiously asking himself, "Have I repented?" We believe the average Christian has a better view of saving faith than he has of "Repentance unto life." However, if one is sure of his faith in Christ, he may also be sure that he has repented.

Repentance and faith are mutually inclusive, like the two sides of a coin; they are inseparable graces, so that you cannot have one without the other. The two doctrines are mutually helpful so that to understand the one will help to understand the other. The New Testament sometimes uses both terms to

express a saving experience, while at other times only one or the other term is employed. When we read that repentance is unto life, saving faith is implied; and when we read that the believer has everlasting life, repentance is implied. While inseparable, repentance and faith are also distinct exercises of the human soul. Paul testified, "Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

Etymologically, repentance means a change of mind. The English word comes from a compound Greek word: metanoeo. The Greek noun nous means mind. The Greek verb noeo tells us what the mind does: it thinks or considers. Then the Greek preposition meta, when connected with noeo expresses the idea of a change. And so metanoeo (repentance) means to consider the past, to think back and change the mind. It is afterthought as opposed to forethought. In repentance the sinner is occupied with his past record before God.

If one should feel that it is minimizing a great truth to define repentance as a mere change of mind, it is enough to say that in the Bible the mind includes what we mean by the heart; it includes the affections as well as the intellect. And, remember also that gospel repentance is a change of mind toward God about sin. The carnal mind is enmity against God, and to change the mind from enmity to love God is no small change. It is as difficult as to raise the dead or create a world. This may cause one to ask, How can a sinner repent since a stream cannot rise higher than its source? The answer is obvious: we cannot

repent except by Divine grace. The New Hampshire confession says, "Repentance and Faith are sacred duties, and also inseparable graces, wrought in our souls by the regenerating spirit of God." This plain statement finds ample support in Scripture. Paul writes that, "In meekness", we should instruct "those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (II Tim. 2:24). We should preach the duty of repentance, and at the same time pray to God to give repentance.

The Divine order, when repentance and faith are used together, it is repentance and faith, not faith and repentance. In repentance the sinner takes the place of a sinner; in faith he takes Christ as Saviour. In repentance one sees himself as a sinner before God; in faith he sees Christ as Saviour from the wrath of God. In repentance one is sick of sin; in faith Christ is precious. In repentance there is sorrow for sin; in faith there is joy for salvation. In repentance the sinner is helpless; in faith Christ is mighty to save. In repentance the sinner distrusts himself; in faith he trusts the Lord Jesus Christ. A man who reversed the Divine order and put faith before repentance once asked the writer to explain how one could repent toward God who did not first believe there is a God. This question revealed the man's idea of faith. To him faith was simply the belief in the existence of God, something the devils also believe, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). Of course, one must first believe there is a God before he can repent towards God, but this is not the faith that saves. In saving faith there is an element of trust--trust in Christ who put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

Our Lord said, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel," thus putting repentance before faith. To urge an impenitent sinner to trust Christ is like urging a well man to take medicine, or like begging a rich man to beg for alms. Repentance is the effect of seeing oneself as he really is: ruined, guilty, undone, and in danger of hell. Repentance is the effect of seeing sin in its true colors. The natural man, morally speaking, is color blind; sin appears attractive and entrancing. The natural man has ruined taste; he calls sweet bitter and bitter sweet; he confounds good and evil; he is all mixed up on the question of right and wrong. Repentance is caused by the withering work of the Holy Spirit, who takes the sword--the word of truth--and slays man's natural self-esteem and self-righteousness, causing him to cry, "What must I do to be saved?"

Repentance involves two facts: the fact of sin and the fact of grace. If a man is not a sinner he would not need to repent, and if God is not gracious it would do no good to repent. The writer once found himself in a Bible Conference with certain brethren who insisted that repentance has nothing to do with

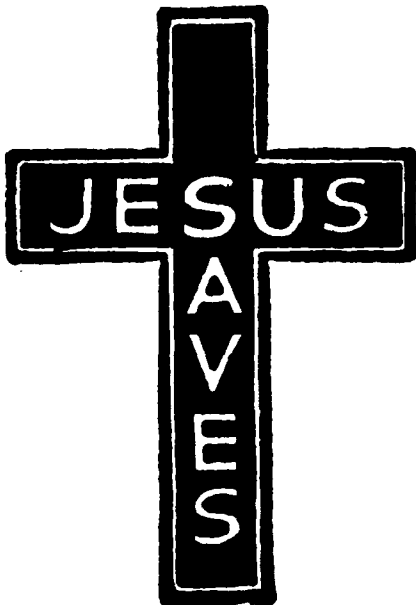
sin. One of them challenged anybody to find the expression "repentance for sin" in the Bible, or where we are commanded to "repent OF sin". It is the contention of this school of thought that repentance has only to do with one's attitude toward Christ, and that one repents by trusting Christ as Saviour. It is true that the exact words "repent of sin" are not in the Bible, but we do have the equivalent of the expression in several places. In Jer. 8:6 we read that no man repented him of his wickedness. In Acts 8:22 it is written: "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness." In Revelation 2:21, Jezebel is said to have been given time to repent of her fornication. In Revelation 9:20, 21 we are told that certain men who had been visited with plagues repented not of the works of their hands. So repentance implies sin, sorrow for it, and a changed attitude towards God about it. Nobody but a sinner can repent, and there is nothing to repent of but sin. It is absurd to talk about repentance for doing what is good.

Repentance is not internal grief and sorrow as the price of salvation. There is nothing meritorious but rather the conscious lack of merit. In repentance the sinner says in effect: "Nothing in my hands I bring, Simply to Thy Cross I cling." Repentance is emptying oneself of all self-confidence, and when it is "repentance unto life" includes confidence in Christ as the one and only ground of salvation. There is no specific length of time one has to mourn nor any certain degree of sorrow one must feel. This is because mourning is not the price of salvation. One mourns over his lost condition--mourns because he is not saved, not in order to be saved. The sinner cannot be saved by his mourning. Mourning may reveal his interest in salvation, but will not merit salvation. You go to your physician for a check-up just as a precautionary measure. He gives you a thorough examination and tells you that you have cancer. This will naturally cause grief and anxiety. But all the mourning you might do would not contribute to any cure. Worry and grief would not cause you to get well. Now suppose your doctor, after a brief pause assures you that he can cure you without surgery. If you believe him there will be wonderful peace of mind, but if you keep on in your grief that will be evidence you do not trust him. From the standpoint of the sinner's duty there is no need to mourn any length of time over sin. As soon as he feels concern over his lost condition and hears about Christ as Saviour, he ought to put His trust in Him and cease his mourning. The preacher should never tell the grief-stricken sinner to keep on mourning, but should tell him to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. However, from the standpoint of God's sovereign dealings, He often allows the sinner to grieve and struggle with sin for a long time before He shows him the sufficiency of Christ as Saviour.

Repentance unto life includes faith in the Lord

Jesus Christ. It has respect to Christ as Saviour, as well as to God as Lawgiver. It does not end in despair but in hope. Judas repented and hanged himself, but this was not gospel repentance, and a different word in the Greek is used to describe it. In gospel repentance we have sins perceived, sins abhorred, and sins abandoned in the heart, as one turns to Christ for salvation. The believer will never in this life be able to quit sinning, but in his heart he wants to. Someone has called repentance the repudiation of sin. In true repentance there is not only the desire to escape the consequences of sin, but to be rid of sin itself as a thing displeasing to God. Much so-called repentance is illustrated in the little girl's prayer: "O God, make me good--not too good-- not real good, but just good enough to keep me from being whipped." True repentance is a permanent and abiding grace in the soul. It is an attitude that belongs to the whole Christian life in regard to sin and the Saviour. As one grows in grace, sin becomes increasingly hateful and Christ becomes more and more precious.

The necessity of repentance was emphasized by Christ, by John the Baptist, and by the apostles. Our Lord preached, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Paul preached that God had commanded "all men everywhere to repent". May writer and reader bow in adoring wonder at the wisdom of God in human salvation!



***"Therefore If Any Man
Be In Christ, He Is A
New Creature" II Cor. 5:17***

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