

Repentance

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Whoever talks about and reflects upon an evil thing he has done, is thinking the vileness he has perpetrated, and what one thinks, therein is one caught—with one's whole soul one is caught utterly in what one thinks, and so he is still caught in vileness. And he will surely not be able to turn, for his spirit will coarsen and his heart rot, and besides this, a sad mood may come upon him. What would you? Stir filth this way and that, and it is still filth.

Rabbi Isaac Meier of Ger

This remark, quoted by Eric Fromm in *The Heart of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964; 2nd paperback ed., 1980) 129, raises a question about the Reformed practice of including a confession of sin in the Service for the Lord's Day each Sunday. Many may, in fact, find it hard to say the prayer of confession as printed in the bulletin without a sense of insincerity or hypocrisy. They at least take the prayer seriously. Others simply repeat it as a matter of form without paying any attention at all.

The prayer of confession is intended to be a constant reminder of the important place of repentance in the life of a Christian, and a regular opportunity to experience the forgiveness of sins. Perhaps the liturgical malaise experienced by many today indicates a pastoral need. What is real repentance? And how can I experience forgiveness, not only in corporate worship, but in my own inner life? Lent provides a good occasion for the pastor to probe these questions for himself or herself as well as for the congregation.

Stages on the Way of Repentance

Recognition of sin is prerequisite to and may be the first step toward repentance. Consider the following self-characterizations of notable personalities who died in 1984:

I'm an alcoholic. I'm a drug addict. I'm a homosexual. I'm a genius.

Truman Capote, 59, writer

I am good-looking, intelligent, articulate, arrogant, and an artist.

Marvin Gaye, 44, soul-singer and writer

It may be that these men recognized the traits listed as socially undesirable, but they seemingly did not view them as sin nor did they seem to feel any guilt for them. Knowing no remorse, they could not repent, for they could neither confess sin nor turn away from their pattern of life. For those who see no flaws in themselves, or who simply accept the flaws they see, repentance is not possible. The road to repentance leads from recognition through remorse

to confession and turning.

Of these four stages on the way of repentance the last two are most difficult. For both Judaism and Christianity, they are essential to a right relationship with God. Without them recognition of sin leads to a sense of guilt and remorse, but ends in self-hatred and despair rather than repentance and redemption. How then can one move out of the "slough of despond" into the redemptive experience of confession and turning?

The Bible offers several striking examples of confession that can serve as models. Consider David. For David the recognition of sin came slow and it came hard. Physically attractive, artistically gifted, politically astute, and theologically sound, this young man viewed himself as a paragon of virtue. His reaction to any evidence of hostility, criticism, or suspicion was a self-righteous, "What have I done (now)?" (See 1 Sam. 17:29; 20:1; 26:18; 29:8). Examination of this refrain in context will show the growth of David's sins, which were increasingly evident to everyone but himself until the terrible moment when Nathan the prophet through a parable confronts him with his covetousness, adultery, murder, and deceit. Seeing himself clearly perhaps for the first time in his life, David says to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13).

An ancient tradition enshrined in the canonical headings of the Psalms attributes Psalm 51 to David "when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." Whatever doubts may be cast on the historical accuracy of this attribution, its theological intuition is correct. Psalm 51 is surely one of the greatest penitential prayers in the Psalter, if not in all literature. It can serve as model and mode of expression not only for the one who wishes to confess adultery, but for confessing any sin.

Another magnificent text of confession is the Prayer of Manasseh, less well known because it is among the apocryphal or deuterocanonical writings. Its connection with the notice of Manasseh's repentance in 2 Chronicles 33:11-13, like that of Psalm 51 with 2 Samuel 12:13, is historically dubious. Like Psalm 51, the Prayer of Manasseh is couched in the first person singular, but it is appropriate for corporate worship because of its exalted invocation and ascription of praise as well as its poignant beauty throughout. Perhaps the last third of the prayer will tempt the reader to look it up and be moved by the power of the whole:

And now I bend the knee of my heart,
beseeching thee for thy kindness.
I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned,
and I know my transgressions.
I earnestly beseech thee, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me!
Do not destroy me with my transgressions!
Do not be angry with me for ever or lay up evil for me;
do not condemn me to the depths of the earth.
For thou, O Lord, art the God of those who repent,
and in me thou wilt manifest thy goodness;
for, unworthy as I am, thou wilt save me in thy great mercy,
and I will praise thee continually all the days of my life.
For all the host of heaven sings thy praise,

and thine is the glory for ever. Amen.

Prayer of Manasseh, 11-15

A third model of confession in Scripture is to be found in the parable of the Prodigal Son. At the heart of the story of the younger son we read of the moment of truth when he recognizes who he is, frames his confession, and reverses the direction of his life:

But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father.

Luke 15:17-20a

As the younger son exemplifies, confession alone does not constitute repentance. True repentance includes the "turn" or "return" expressed in the Hebrew word *teshuvah*.

Saul, like David, experienced the pain of recognizing and confessing his own sin. For Saul the moment of truth came on the hill of Hachilah in the wilderness of Ziph. Ironically David, who had just spared Saul's life, was the agent of the terrible gift; this was one of the moments when he uttered his innocent "What have I done?" (1 Sam. 26:18). Saul however, conscience-stricken, said, "I have done wrong . . . I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly" (1 Sam. 26:21). Yet Saul persisted in trying to kill David, later in desperation resorted to a medium, and finally took his own life on a battlefield. Saul knew confession but no turning. David, on the other hand, evidences a genuine change of heart when, near the end of his life, on his own initiative he confesses his sin in the matter of the census. Through the prophet Gad the Lord offers David a choice among three punishments. David chooses pestilence, but when he sees its effect on the people he cries out:

Lo, I have sinned and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let thy hand, I pray thee, be against me and against my father's house.

2 Sam. 24:17

Was it this genuine turn in his life that made David a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22)? David's broken spirit, his broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17) issued in a new quality of mercy in his exercise of power; his life bore fruits that befit repentance (Luke 3:8).

The New Testament also offers a pair of examples which show that recognition of sin, remorse, and confession are not enough, but that turning is an essential component of repentance. Judas and Peter both were filled with remorse over respectively betraying and denying Jesus. Surprisingly, the Bible reports a confession of sin by Judas (Matt. 27:4) but not by Peter. Yet in Judas the process of repentance was short-circuited. He confessed to the wrong people; he tried to make restitution, but could not, and in despair "he went and hanged himself" (Matt. 27:5). Peter, devastated by the gaze of Jesus (Luke

22:61-62), was able to move beyond remorseful tears to a new commitment (John 21) and to live out Jesus' word, "and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32).

This turning (*epistrepsis*, *teshuvah*) is essentially a change of heart, but when it is genuine it includes several outward elements. Among these are renunciation of the sin for which one feels sorry, restitution if the sin has harmed others or brought ill-gotten gain, and substitution of a new way of living.

Renunciation. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik has spoken convincingly of penitents who are not true penitents, like the usurer who leaves debt-pledges in his drawer in case he has "need" of them again, and like that sinner who retains the address of the woman with whom he had sinned, in case he "desire" her again. "If one visits the home of a penitent and sees that the dice are still on the table, the dovescotes still standing in a corner and the usurious loan deeds still lying in a drawer, then it is obvious that he has not as yet broken his will so as to allow for rehabilitation" (Pinchas H. Peli, ed., *Soloveitchik On Repentance* [New York: Paulist Press, 1984] 45, 59-60).

Restitution. A clear example of this principle is Zacchaeus who responded to Jesus' gracious friendship by saying, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and If I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." Jesus' reply shows the significance of this act of restitution: "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:8-9).

Substitution. Jesus' teaching about the homeless demon who decides to return to the "house" from which he came is applicable to the one who has renounced sin but put nothing in its place. "And when (the demon) comes he finds (the house) empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (Matt. 12:43-45). Paul, of whom it was said, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (Gal. 1:23), exemplifies well the principle of substituting a new way of life for the old one. He, or someone writing in his name, pointed to life in Christ as a matter of putting off the old nature with its practices and putting on a new nature which is borne out in a new "walk" in life (Col. 3:5-17).

The Pastor and Repentance

I have affirmed thus far that true repentance includes recognition of sin, sorrow or remorse for it, confession, and most importantly a "turning"; that is, a change of heart evidenced by renunciation of the sin confessed, restitution when it is appropriate, and substitution of a new way for the old one. Of what use is it to know these things?

First, a full understanding of repentance can inform one's preaching during Lent.

The lectionary offers several texts for the season this year in which repentance is explicit, namely Joel 2:12-17 and Psalm 51:1-12 on Ash Wednesday

and Psalm 51:10-17 on the fifth Sunday in Lent. The preacher might choose other texts on the theme, such as those mentioned earlier in this article, or any one of a number in Luke-Acts in which the third evangelist's theology of repentance and forgiveness of sins comes to the fore.

The use of storytelling as a sermon form is particularly apt. Certain possibilities have been suggested above: Saul, David, Judas, Peter, the Prodigal Son, Zacchaeus. The Bible offers other examples, and so does church history and secular literature.

Judicious reading in religious and secular classics can stimulate the preacher's mind. Among the significant religious works dealing with the theme are Augustine's *Confessions* and Pinchas Peli's recent translation of the thought and oral discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on repentance referred to above. Soloveitchik (1903-), a professor at Yeshiva University in New York, is looked up to as the unchallenged leader of enlightened Orthodoxy. His annual lectures on *teshuvah*, here published in English for the first time, became the major annual academic event for United States Orthodox Jewry, and for me a major pump-primer for this article. I have also found helpful the chapter on "Confession" in Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), who in turn suggests John Wesley's sermon on "The Repentance of Believers" (in *Sermons on Several Occasions* [London: Epworth Press, 1971]; now in A. C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 1, Sermons I, 1-33* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984] 335-352). A good example of Calvin on repentance is his treatment of Peter and Judas in the "Fourth Sermon on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (in L. Nixon, tr., *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950] 99-116).

Background reading in secular literature might include a rereading of Dickens' *Christmas Carol* (surely Scrooge's about-face is one of the best-known examples of *teshuvah* in English literature), or a comparison of El-dridge Cleaver's two works, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968) and *Soul on Fire* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1978), or Charles W. Colson's account of his conversion from Watergate conspirator to prison minister and campaigner for prison reform (in *Born Again* [Old Tappan, N.J.: Chosen Books, dist. by F. H. Revell, Co., 1976] and *Life Sentence* [Lincoln, Va.: Chosen Books, dist. by Word Books, 1979]).

In the second place, reflection on the full meaning of repentance can inform one's pastoral care of those who struggle with guilt.

I do not mean to suggest that the pastor can use the elements in repentance suggested in the first part of this article as a "four-easy-steps-to-forgiveness" formula. That would not work, for several reasons. To begin with, it does not lie in our power to program forgiveness; it is the gift of God, from the moment of recognition of guilt to the moment of cleansing and liberation. Furthermore, forgiveness does not come easy, not for God who paid the price of the gift, and not for us who are called upon to repent. For if the recognition of sin is the terrible, gracious gift of God, the response to that gift must be our own. Moreover, what is required by true repentance will differ at various times in particular lives. The shape of repentance is determined by the circum-

stances, not by formula. This is what makes the role of the pastor so demanding. The pastor must be sensitive to the situation, to the particular individual seeking release and forgiveness, to the gift and demand of the gospel, and above all to the grace of God. I believe this sensitivity is given only to those who have themselves experienced guilt, remorse, repentance and forgiveness. And I suspect that I am only beginning to acquire it.

A painful memory of my first pastorate is that of the visit of an elder and Sunday School superintendent in the little coal camp church I served. He was an able engineer, an energetic citizen, a loyal churchman, and an Irishman with a terrible temper. In a county-wide evangelistic campaign led by one of Billy Graham's associates, this elder came under conviction and the next morning he was in my living room in tears. "You must have told that preacher about me," he said. "He was preaching right to me. How can I be a Christian and teach Sunday School and get mad at people like I do? I didn't sleep a wink all night. Help me!"

I was fresh out of seminary. I canvassed my knowledge of Calvinist theology and my memory of biblical texts and came up with Jesus' similitude about the master who does not invite a servant, weary from the day's work, to sit down and eat with him, but rather commands the servant to prepare and serve him supper first, and afterward to eat and drink. "Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what is our duty'" (Luke 17:7-10). I told the elder to be glad that God had given him this sense of unworthiness, and after exchanging some more remarks (I wonder if either of us heard the other?) we knelt at our chairs and prayed together. I still cringe at the memory of my response to this elder, this brother, in anguish. Not that what I said was wrong, but it was so pat. I know now that my words rubbed salt into his wounds. I told him to keep on wallowing in his guilt and pain, when what he needed was an opportunity to confess and someone to help him think through what turning might mean for him. Since then I have known often enough the anguish of guilt over my own short temper. Could I be more sensitive now, and listen longer before I spoke? Sometimes. But I find that I, like that elder, can live at peace only by the grace of repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance is one of those mysteries of human experience that are at once grace and discipline, gift and demand. It can no more be programmed by the pastor than it can be produced by the penitent. But a pastor whose self-understanding is that of a forgiven sinner can help others find a proper response to this painful gift of God, so that pastor and people (like husbands and wives) can live together as "joint heirs of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7).