

## The Role of Repentance in the Christian Life

The Pentecostal movement is diverse, and the pursuit of holiness takes on a variety of shapes; but, for the most part, Pentecostal believers are expected to resist sin and to practice a lifestyle of obedience. However, in some sectors of Pentecostalism, post-conversion repentance is not encouraged. Also, the recent hyper-grace movement has downplayed the need for repentance, teaching that all sins were forgiven by Christ at the cross; and, therefore, repentance is a redundant act-of-works righteousness. Furthermore, some preaching sounds more like lessons in self-help and positive thinking. If these sermons are to be believed, Christians have the power to make themselves better through their own efforts. The Bible teaches that any genuine growth or spiritual transformation begins in repentance and in our admission of powerlessness. The Lord encourages us, however, when He says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NKJV).

We normally associate repentance with the initial experience of conversion, and we should (see Acts 2:38). We tell unbelievers to confess their sins so that God will forgive them. However, the Bible teaches us that repentance is also needed in the Church and in the lives of individual Christians. In the New Testament, the call to repentance is addressed to the unbeliever (see Acts 17:30), to the Jew (see Acts 2:38), and to the Christian alike (see Revelation 2:5). For each group, the Greek word for “repent” is the same (*metanoeo*). True repentance includes the act of confessing one’s sins, whether one is an unbeliever (see Mark 1:5), a Jew (see Matthew 3:2-7), or a Christian (see 1 John 1:9). The repentance expressed in Psalm 51; James 5:16; 1 John 1:9; and Revelation 2:5 is not the repentance of unbelievers who are turning to God for the first time; it is the repentance of believers. Although confession is certainly required of sinners, the Bible teaches that believers also must confess any sins that they commit after becoming a Christian. In

what we call “The Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus teaches us to pray, “Forgive us our sins . . .” (Luke 11:4).

### **The Church of God Teaching on Repentance**

The Church of God has affirmed the importance of repentance and confession. The “Declaration of Faith” states, “We believe . . . that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God and that repentance is commanded of God for all and necessary for forgiveness of sins.” While this statement clearly requires unbelievers to repent, the fact that repentance is “necessary for the forgiveness of sins” might also suggest that Christians who commit sin must repent if they hope to obtain forgiveness from God. The New Testament assures Christians that they can live in obedience to God. For example, John declares, “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin” (1 John 2:1 NKJV). However, *if* a believer sins, they must turn to God in repentance (1 John 2:2). The role of repentance in the Christian life is clarified in the “Practical Commitments of the Church of God”, where we find the following: “Through confession of our sins to God we are assured of divine forgiveness” (1 John 1:9-2:2). The sharing of our confession with other believers provides the opportunity to request prayer and to bear one another's burdens (see Galatians 6:2; James 5:16). Confession signifies the acknowledgment of our sins, the admission of guilt. In the Bible, the word “confession” is a component of repentance, and it is often used interchangeably with “repentance” (see Leviticus 16:21; Nehemiah 1:6-9; Matthew 3:2-6; Acts 19:18).

### **Repentance of Believers in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, the Israelites were the covenant people of God, but they were instructed to confess their sins (see Leviticus 5:5; 1 Kings 8:47; Jeremiah 25:5; Ezekiel 14:6). Nehemiah is a great example. He was in captivity, serving as cupbearer to Artaxerxes, king of

Persia. He received news from Jerusalem that the city was in great distress and that the walls were broken down. The bad news drove Nehemiah to his knees, and in Nehemiah 1:4-10, he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. He prayed, “LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, *You* who keep *Your* covenant and mercy with those who love *You* and observe *Your* commandments, please let *Your* ear be attentive and *Your* eyes open, that *You* may hear the prayer of *Your* servant which I pray before *You* now, day and night, for the children of Israel *Your* servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against *You*. Both my father's house and I have sinned” (NKJV). Nehemiah confessed his own sins, the sins of his family, and the sins of Israel. (Compare Nehemiah’s confession with that of Daniel 9:3-20).

### **Repentance of Believers in the New Testament**

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul rebuked the church and pointed out several areas where the believers were falling short. When Paul writes his second letter to the same church, he states, “Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance” (2 Corinthians 7:9 NKJV). His rebuke in his first letter made them sorrowful, and their sorrow led them to repentance. Even though Paul’s Corinthian readers were Christians, they needed to repent of their sinful behavior.

Scripture encourages us to confess our sins to God, and in some cases, to each other. We read in James 5:16, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (NKJV). There are two positive results from our practice of confession. First, when we confess our sins to God, he forgives us and frees us from the power and bondage of guilt and shame that sin generates. Second, the sharing of our confession with other believers provides the opportunity to request

prayer and to bear one another's burdens. James instructs us to confess our sins to brothers and sisters in the Lord who can be trusted to maintain confidentiality. These faithful and mature believers can intercede on our behalf. The result of this confession and prayer is that we will “be healed.” The word “healed” suggests forgiveness, transformation, and restoration.

The most prominent New Testament call for confession is found in 1 John. John the Elder writes to the Church, saying:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world (1 John 1:8-2:2 NKJV).

In these few verses, John highlights several very important concepts regarding confession. First, John is writing to Christians; therefore, Christians are expected to confess any sins in their lives. Second, John encourages the believer *not to sin*. Third, “If” we sin, we can rely on Jesus Christ to intercede for us with the Father. Fourth, our forgiveness is based upon the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

Two factors make repentance necessary for the Christian. The first is the believer’s growth in grace and knowledge. As we “grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior” (2 Peter 3:18 NKJV) and as we pursue holiness in our lives (see Hebrews 12:14), we will ask God to search our hearts for anything that is displeasing to him (see Psalms 139:23). Then we will confess anything that the Holy Spirit brings to our attention. The second is the occasion of known sin in the life of the believer (see 1 John 1:9). Every Christian should be careful to avoid falling into any of the works of the flesh (see Galatians 5:16-26). If we discover a root of pride,

bitterness, envy, or any other work of the flesh, we must immediately repent. Rather than a one-time event, salvation is a journey that involves both crisis and development. As we mature on our journey, regular searching of the heart and repenting should be a way of living in Christ. It is essential for renewal, and life that is not in continual renewal will die. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, urged his followers to examine themselves daily and to repent of any sins of commission or omission. Consider these six excerpts from an early list of Wesley's questions:

1. Did the Bible live in me today?
2. Am I enjoying prayer?
3. When did I last speak to someone else of my faith?
4. Do I pray about the money I spend?
5. Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
6. Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?

Wesley's questions were not intended to make the Christian life difficult or to create condemnation in the lives of believers. Wesley knew that God's grace is sufficient to forgive our sins, to overcome our weaknesses, and to keep us on track spiritually. These questions will help us grow in holiness, follow close to God, and become more and more like Jesus Christ, our example. The practice of repentance as a part of continual renewal may be illustrated by entries from the diary of early Pentecostal leader A.J. Tomlinson. On July 9, 1901, Tomlinson writes, "We had a very special meeting last night, which lasted until 2:00 A. M. today. . . . [We] confessed our sins, begged forgiveness of each other. . . .;" and on Dec. 4, he records the following: "We have been having some confession meetings and we are having a general sifting. One person has been asked to leave the work. Others are searching their lives" (pp. 20, 29).

## **Corporate Repentance**

Corporate repentance is a significant topic that shows up in Scripture (see Joel 2:12-19). Although individual repentance is demanded by Scripture, corporate repentance is called for with equal severity and should be practiced by the Church. After all, in His prophetic messages to the churches of Asia Minor, Jesus seven times calls for repentance (see Revelation 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19). The church at Ephesus is told to repent because they left their “first love” (2:4-5). The church at Pergamos must repent because they tolerated false teachers (2:14-16). The church at Thyatira is called to repentance also because they allowed false teachers and because they permitted sexual immorality (2:20-22). The church at Sardis is commanded to repent of their spiritual deadness (3:1-3). Finally, the Laodicean believers must repent because they are lukewarm (3:15-19). It is the love of God that causes him to call his Church to repentance. Jesus says, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (3:19 NKJV).

## **Pentecostal Practices that Facilitate Repentance**

The ongoing life of repentance is facilitated by several Pentecostal practices, including footwashing, the Lord’s Supper, and the altar call that may follow preaching. Footwashing, as John Christopher Thomas has shown in his groundbreaking work *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, is the Pentecostal ordinance that speaks most directly to post-conversion sin. Thomas states that the footwashing in John 13 “signifies the disciples’ spiritual cleansing for a continued relationship with Jesus. As such, the footwashing functions as an extension of the disciples’ baptism in that it signifies continual cleansing from the sin acquired (after baptism) through life in a sinful world” (p. 152).

The Lord’s Supper provides the opportunity for believers to ‘examine’ themselves (see 1 Corinthians 11:28) and to repent of any known sin. Repentance can also be a response to the

preaching of the Word, as the minister gives opportunity for the congregation to pray at the altar or to kneel at their seats and seek the face of God. Believers may also respond in other ways to the minister's call to repentance (see Luke 3:10-14). Even when reading it privately, the Word of God brings us again and again to moments of repentance, times in which a truth in the Scriptures stands over against us as that word of reproof or correction (see 2 Timothy 3:16).

## **Conclusion**

God's grace is sufficient to keep us from sinning; but if we sin, we can confess our sins and Jesus Christ will be our advocate with the Father. If you realize that you have committed a sin, confess it immediately and ask for God's forgiveness. Genuine confession will bring restoration.

You may want to schedule a regular prayer time when you will ask God to reveal any areas of your life that are displeasing to him. You could use John Wesley's list of questions, and you could make a list of the most troublesome temptations that you face. Then you can repent and seek God's strength for victory over these areas.

## **For Further Reading**

R.H. Gause, *Living in the Spirit: The Way of Salvation* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, Rev. and expanded edn, 2009).

Cheryl Bridges Johns, 'Yielding to the Spirit: A Pentecostal Understanding of Penitence', in Mark J. Boda and Gordon T. Smith (eds.), *Repentance in Christian Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006).

Lee Roy Martin, *Living What We Believe: A Saved People* (Cleveland, TN: Church of God Adult Discipleship, 2018).

John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2nd edn, 2013).

A.J. Tomlinson, *The Diary of A.J. Tomlinson 1901-1924* (The Church of God Movement Heritage Series; Cleveland, TN: White Wing Publishing House, 2012).

Respectfully submitted by Lee Roy Martin (DTh) to the Church of God Doctrine and Polity Committee on Friday, April 11, 2019.