

# REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

by C. D. Cole

**I**t 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*" (#Mt 3:1,2). And our Lord began His ministry by saying, "**Repent ye, and believe the gospel**" (#Mr 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*" (#Ac 20:21).

## **DEFINITION AND AMPLIFICATION**

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 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 the 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 for God is no small change. It is as difficult as it is 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 instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure

will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (#2Ti 2:24). "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (#Ac 5:31); "When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (#Ac 11:18). We should preach the duty of repentance and at the same time, pray for God to give repentance.

The Divine order, when repentance and faith are used together, 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 the sinner is helpless; in faith Christ is mighty to save. In repentance there is sorrow for sin; in faith there is joy for salvation. 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 trim 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*" (#Jas 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 a 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?"* (#Ac 16:30).

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 #Ac 8:22 it is written: *"Repent therefore of this thy wickedness."* In #Re 2:21, Jezebel is said to have been given time *"to repent of her fornication."* In #Re 9:20,21 *"And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk: Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts"* , 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.

## **THE NATURE OF REPENTANCE**

1. Repentance is not a work to be done in order to be saved. This would conflict with the many Scriptures which teach salvation without works; *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them"* (#Eph 2:8-10); *"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;"* (#Tit 3:5); *"Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began"* (#2Ti 1:9), with many others. Repentance is not something one does with his hands, but what he feels in his soul. It is not a benevolent act, although benevolence will be the fruit of it. A man once boasted that he could do more repentance with a barrel of flour and a side of bacon than was ever done at a mourner's bench. This sneer at the mourner and the claim that one repents by doing deeds of charity are alike unscriptural. He who has never mourned over his sins cannot rejoice in Christ as Saviour.

2. Repentance is not bodily exercise. It is internal, rather than external; inward attitude of the soul, rather than outward exercise of the body. Job sat in ashes when he repented, but sitting in ashes is not repentance. The

publican beat upon his breast when he repented, but smiting one's breast is not repentance. Sitting in ashes and smiting the breast were outward signs of how these men felt in their souls. Sin was a grievous thing to them.

3. 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.

4. Repentance is not any self-torture of the body. This confounds repentance with penance as something meritorious. The monk does penance by sleeping on a hard bed or wearing a coarse shirt. Luther was doing penance by climbing a stairway in Rome on his hands and knees. When Anselm of Canterbury died, his garments were found to be full of vermin he had harbored in order to mortify the flesh.

We will let a Roman Catholic tell us what penance is. We quote Dr. Chaloner in "The Catholic Christian Instructed:" Question: "What do you mean by the sacrament of penance?" Answer: "An institution of Christ by which our sins are forgiven which we fall into after baptism." "In what does this consist?" Answer: "On the part of the penitent, it consists in three things: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. By satisfaction we mean a faithful performance of the penance enjoined by the priests."

Penance is called the second plank after shipwreck. It is the way of salvation the second and all subsequent times after the first salvation by the sacrament of baptism.

5. Repentance is not some hard term imposed by God for salvation. This would make it inconsistent with God's way of salvation which is not a hard way but an easy way. If salvation were by a hard way, nobody could be saved because man by nature is without strength to do good. If salvation is by grace through faith; if it is without money and without price; if it is the gift of God, how can it be said to be on hard terms? The way of salvation is indeed made hard, not by God, but by the pride of the natural heart. It is pride and self-sufficiency that leads one to ask, "*What good thing shall I do*

*that I may have eternal life?" (#Mt 19:16). We must indeed strive to enter in at the strait gate, but this striving is not with an unwilling Saviour, but against a nature that wants ground for boasting. Everything in our old self-centered and self-confident nature fights against the way of salvation by grace through faith.*

6. Gospel repentance is toward God. One may repent towards his parents. A wild young man away from home, having broken the hearts of his father and mother with his wayward life, may be moved to tears by hearing a description of the old homestead and of the grief of his aged parents. He may experience a change of mind towards father and mother and return home to take care of them in their declining days, but this would not be gospel and evangelical repentance.

7. 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 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**

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*" (#Lu 13:3). Paul preached that God had commanded "*all men everywhere to repent*" (#Ac 17:30). Let us note some reasons for repentance.

1. Salvation without repentance would fill heaven with people who hate God and love sin. It would perpetuate rebellion by transferring rebels from earth to heaven. Salvation is deliverance of a person from sin, not merely from a sinful environment. Faith toward Christ without repentance toward God would make Christ nothing more than a fire escape-nothing more than a Deliverer from hell. But Christ is the Saviour from sin as well as from the punishment of sin. One element in repentance is hatred of sin, and to hate sin is to love God.

2. Refusal to repent is even worse than the sin for which one ought to repent. One may tell a lie, and this is an awful sin, but refusal to repent is worse. And why? Because one may lie from fear or other weakness of the flesh, but failure to repent is to justify the lie. Peter denied the Lord out of weakness and fear, but he did not justify his denial. He wept bitterly; he repented. Nor did he give up in despair, like Judas, but clung to the Lord and profited from his sin. His fall cured him of boasting and taught him the needed lesson of humility.

David manifests the spirit of the true penitent in the 51st Psalm. In the

parable of the prodigal son we have a classic example of repentance. We have the father's heart, the father's provision, and the son's repentance. The son left home in a spirit of pride and independence, and this was a sin against the father. He went deeper and deeper into sin until he was reduced to abject poverty: rags and hunger and shameful occupation. He felt the shame of all this, but that was not repentance. Now a change takes place in his attitude toward his father. He returns to the father in a spirit of contrition and confession. He does not return to boast of his success while away from his father, but rather to confess his failure and need. He does not return with an offering for his acceptance with the father. He had nothing to offer but rags and a broken life. The only hope of acceptance was the father's love which forgave him all. Cannot every child of grace read his life's story in the experiences of the prodigal? The story of the prodigal does not illustrate faith toward Christ, but only repentance toward God. It has nothing about God as Lawgiver, but only as Father. It does not give the ground of the sinner's acceptance before God, but only the fact of it. It has nothing to say on the doctrine of atonement, and was not given as a complete picture of the way of salvation. It was spoken by Christ to the Pharisees and scribes in reply to their complaint that He received publicans and sinners. He who uses this parable to deny or discount the truth of blood atonement makes it serve a purpose not intended by Christ. It does not give a complete picture of God, for God is Judge as well as Father. It does not give us, as a certain liberal has said, the very heart of the gospel. The heart of the gospel is the story of Christ crucified. The gospel is concerning Him in Whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sin. Repentance is associated with remission of sin, *"and without shedding of blood is no remission"* (#Heb 9:22). And the blood of Jesus Christ was shed that God might be just in justifying the believer. *"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a*

*propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (#Ro 3:24-26).* On the one hand, there is no remission apart from the death of Christ; on the other hand, there is no remission apart from repentance on the part of the sinner. May writer and reader bow in adoring wonder at the wisdom of God in human salvation!