

# How To . . . Repent

**(I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding repent =  
I believe that I cannot by my own reason or understanding believe.)**

How does repentance work? Most think: first I become aware of my sins, and then I am sorry for them. Then I name them and make amends. More or less. You have to do the best you can and God will do the rest. That's what repentance and forgiveness is about. In the Roman Catholic system, defined at Trent: Under the supervision of the priest, first you are contrite, then you confess, and then you make satisfaction.

**But are we truly aware of our sins?** Do we see ourselves as we really are? Are we sorry enough? And what if we forget some sins? And can we ever really make things right again? Here Luther is a first-rate example. He tried to confess all his sins and then repent and make it right. He realized, when he was brutally honest with himself, he ended up either in spiritual pride or in spiritual despair. There was no way to catch up and get ahead.

Presupposed in all of this is that we can and want to know our sins and do something about it. God's grace provides everything we need, but **first we have to repent**. That is to say, there is in us something that can turn toward God, a divine spark or a "bent" toward God in our very nature. ("The heart is restless 'til it rests in thee." Augustine)

When you come down to it, however, **sin is rebellion**. We never want to repent and never want to make it right. To be sure, people do change their lives. In the left hand kingdom we do repent and make changes. But in the right hand kingdom, before God and the true burden of holiness, we end up either misled by the evil one into spiritual pride or, like Luther, unable to be dishonest with ourselves, we sink into spiritual despair. We may, of course, be aware of and even ashamed of being caught in our sins. But to change in our heart of hearts is not possible.

You will remember from confirmation Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: "I believe that by my own reason or strength **I cannot believe** in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him." But the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies." We may paraphrase this by stating: "**I repent of the fact that by my own reason or strength I cannot repent...**" and that the Holy Spirit is the one who brings me to repentance.

We who live in a world of modern psychology can help ourselves by distinguishing **between psychological guilt and theological guilt**.<sup>1</sup> We may feel terribly guilty but that does not mean that we are necessarily guilty before God. Or we may feel innocent and still be guilty before God.

The same is true for faith. Faith can be analyzed psychologically, as by Fowler in six stages (from childlike faith to mature faith), but that has nothing to do with **theological faith, which is based on what God does**. A good example is infant baptism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alcoholics Anonymous is an example of a therapeutic use of repentance and belief in a higher power. AA is a very effective program, but it is not Christian repentance.

<sup>2</sup>"Thus faith is a gift, purely and simply. All are in the same situation when it comes to faith, just as all are in the same situation with respect to sin. That means that adult baptism is simply delayed infant baptism,"

Again, we may repent in all sorts of ways psychologically. But that is not what Christian repentance is about. **Repentance is a gift of God.** It does not depend on us, on how sincerely we repent, or what changes we make in our lives, or whether we make it all right.<sup>3</sup>

In the New Testament there is no pattern or sequence for repentance and salvation, such as call, repentance, conversion, adoption, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. In Romans 8:29-30, Paul writes:

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined . . . And those whom he predestined, he also called, and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

Faith and repentance are not mentioned and everything is in the past tense.<sup>4</sup> This is because it is all God’s doing, and it is **all really one act of God.**

For example, note the curious sequence of sanctification before justification in 1 Cor 6:11: “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the spirit of our God.”

Thus in the theme verse for the Gospel of Mark (1:15): “The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel,” it is important to realize that God delivers the kingdom just as he brings us to repentance and gives us faith.

We stand in awe at what God has done, is doing, and will do.

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Joseph A. Burgess, “Faith: New Testament Perspectives,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 1(1982) 147-48; read it [here](#).

<sup>3</sup>“Repentance” is not unique to Christianity but exists in other religions. How then is Christian repentance different? Is it because Christians repent in Jesus’ name? To be sure, we pray in Jesus’ name, but the name does not “work” like a magical formula. Rather, God elects us through the cross. As Luther says, the righteousness of faith is a purely passive righteousness. God does it. Thus Luther’s explanation to the Third Article of the Creed.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek verb here is the aorist tense, which does not exist in English. It is not a simple past or a past participle. Rather it means “now and forever,” as in Ephesians 1:4: “... [H]e chose us in him before the foundation of the world....”