

Repentance - A Work of the Holy Spirit

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From what we have seen so far regarding repentance it is obvious that the role played by the Holy Spirit is critical. Although it is not the Holy Spirit who repents the ability to repent comes from the Holy Spirit. To understand this ability we must recognize that within the definition of true godly repentance there are two important distinctions to be made.

1. Evangelical Repentance

This is the repentance we undergo when we are initially converted. It is hard for many covenant children to identify this moment in their lives but we know that at some point the Holy Spirit did perform the work of regeneration without which no one can be saved. To quote Jesus from Jn. 3:3, 5:

3 Jesus answered him, "Most assuredly, I tell you, unless one is born anew, he can't see the Kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"

5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly I tell you, unless one is born of water and spirit, he can't enter into the Kingdom of God! [WEB]

The reason the natural man cannot enter the kingdom of God is because he cannot repent. It takes the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit to enable him to feel any true sorrow for his past sins; and by "sorrow" is meant remorse at having offended a holy God. In Ezekiel 36:26 we read about this same rebirth but in terms of a heart transplant.

26) A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. 27) I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my ordinances, and do them. [WEB]

Finally for an explicit text on the cause of repentance we turn to Acts 11:18,

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life!" [WEB]

The repentance that follows is a general 180 degree turn around from a life lived on our own terms to one that acknowledges the Lordship of Christ. It's called evangelical repentance because it is performed only once at the point of conversion in response to hearing the gospel. The result of this repentance is salvation and the attendant change in status before God from alienation to sonship.

2. Ongoing Repentance

This is the repentance which Christians undergo on a regular basis and is their response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who convicts them of particular sins which they commit from day to day. For an example of this type of repentance we turn to 2 Tim. 2:23-26

23) But refuse foolish and ignorant questionings, knowing that they generate strife. 24) The Lord's servant must not quarrel, but be gentle towards all, able to teach, patient, 25) in gentleness correcting those who oppose him: perhaps God may give them repentance leading to a full knowledge of the truth, 26) and they may recover themselves out of the devil's snare, having been taken captive by him to his will. [WEB]

Here Paul commands Timothy to patiently go on teaching his parishioners in the hope that God will give them repentance from their particular weaknesses. The fact that they have already undergone evangelical repentance is evidenced by the fact that they are already members of the church and sitting under Timothy's ministry. In their current state of immaturity their knowledge of the truth is only partial and will be made full upon their repentance.

So ongoing repentance is the repentance we undergo when we confess our sins to the Lord in prayer and its result is our reception of God's fatherly forgiveness. Contrary to evangelical repentance ongoing repentance does not change our status before God but it does restore God's fatherly pleasure which can be removed for a season as a measure of discipline.

Both types of repentance are a result of the internal work of the Holy Spirit; the former as **regeneration** and the latter as **sanctification**. Recognising this highlights the danger of presumption, i.e, committing sin on the presumption that the Holy Spirit will bring us to repentance every time. But the sorrow of true repentance implies a desire to undo the damage, so to speak, and to compensate where possible. We see this in the case of Zacchaeus the tax collector who undertakes to give half of all his goods to the poor and to restore fourfold to the victims of his injustice. Let's turn to that.

Luke 19:1-10

1 Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. 2 Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. 3 And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. 5 And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." 6 So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. 7 But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." 8 Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." 9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; 10 for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." [NKJV]

Although we cannot compensate God (The Roman Catholics try to do this with their penance) the same heart must be present for the repentance to be genuine.

This, then, is a warning against premeditated sin where we reason that we can always repent afterwards. Premeditated repentance is not genuine biblical repentance. Premeditated repentance is a ritual performed in order to baptise premeditated sin and is doomed to fail everytime. Before we attempt to sin in this high handed manner we need to stop and think: If I am to receive forgiveness for this I must reach a point somewhere down the track where I am truly and genuinely sorrow I ever did this and if I had my time over I would never have done it. Perhaps if we all took the time out to contemplate this we would think twice before committing premeditated sin. This is not to say that premeditated sin is unforgivable but like any other sin, repentance is a necessary condition upon which forgiveness from God can be granted and this type of repentance cannot be manufactured.

Let's consider an example of this type of sin which, tragically, happens only too often. A Christian divorces his wife for another woman. This is a serious sin in the eyes of the Lord who tells us in Malachi 2:16 that he hates divorce. Jesus also condemns this type of divorce as nothing but adultery making it clear that the divorce does not alleviate the guilt of adultery on the part of the offending party. So the Christian reasons that his sin is not unforgivable and that he can repent afterwards. So when afterwards comes and he is at home with his new wife he gets down on his knees and says, "I repent". Has he repented? Very unlikely unless the Holy Spirit has brought him to this point. The

repentance he planned can never be genuine because it does not flow from a heart of genuine regret and sorrow toward God. Neither does it flow from a desire to undo the damage he has caused. To be genuine he would have to be able to say to his new wife, "This whole thing was a mistake and I am truly sorry I left my wife to marry you. If I had my time over I would never have done it." I think the point has been amply made.

Are there any examples in scripture of where people have wanted to repent and couldn't? Let's turn to Hebrews 12:14-17.

14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; 16 lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. 17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. [NKJV]

Esau broke the covenant of grace when he traded his birthright for a pot of stew. But later when he was a little more mature he began to realize the value of that birthright and, as the writer tells us, even sought that blessing with tears. But he never received it because he could not repent of his actions. He could not turn his back on the lifestyle he had created for himself.

The second example of a man who wanted salvation but could not bring himself to repent was the rich young ruler who wanted to inherit eternal life. In Matt. 19:21-22 we read the following:

21 Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Despite actually wanting salvation this man went away unsaved because he could not repent from the idolatrous attachment to his great wealth.

To conclude then, we need to understand that repentance is a work of the Holy Spirit not only in the heart of the unbeliever in the case of regeneration, but also in the heart of the Christian in the case of sanctification. Deliberate and premeditated sin is an act of presumption, i.e., presuming upon the mercy of God that he will bring us to a genuine repentance in due time. Well, we have seen two examples where God did not do this. Let's repent while we can and seek to serve God with fear and trembling for our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). Amen.