

Repentance is a Vanishing Concept Today, Even in the Church

In society today there is no agreement today on what can or should be required of people.

A decision about what should be done is left up to the individual.

One will make the decision based on what one feels one needs to do at that particular time to get whatever one feels one needs at that particular time.

- When a choice is made in this way, it is assumed that the choice is right by definition and it would be wrong for others to challenge it.
- Choices are made for instrumental reasons (“I needed to do that to get what I wanted”), not for some higher goal that is right and valuable in itself, apart from our choice (for example, the honor and glory of God).

Read aloud the relevant sections of the following articles and invite discussion:

- Rachel Brem, “Excuses, Excuses: Student’s Sad, Endless Stories,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 13, 2004), pp. B15-16.
- Carolyn Max, “Contrition Needed for Bad Start,” *Grand Rapids Press*
- Abigail Goldman, “They Cover Your Tracks When You’re Bad,” *Grand Rapids Press* (Sunday, December 3, 2006), A6

Due to secularization, the Church and its teaching has lost authority in contemporary society, even among the Church’s own members.

- People still use religious (including Christian) language to make a symbolic statement about themselves, but they do it very selectively and for their own purposes.
- In practice, most people who use religious language no longer evaluate their lives against some broader standard that came before them, exists apart from them, and is bigger than they are.
- As a result, personal decisions and private resolutions can still be cast in religious language, but the idea of repenting because one has violated the law of God and is apart from God is becoming increasingly rare.

Read aloud the relevant sections of the following articles and invite discussion:

- “Florida Inmate Executed,” *Grand Rapids Press* (Thursday, May 27, 2004), A2
- Baptismal Testimony Handout

Biblical Definition of Repentance:

Repentance=Turning *from sin to God through Jesus Christ*

Repentance consists in

- turning away from evil,
- turning toward God out of love for God,
- through faith in Jesus and his saving work
- so that one may receive the forgiveness of one's sins.

4 Elements of True Repentance

- (1) The person repenting must have **contrition** (cf. Ps. 51:17: "a *contrite* and humble heart, O God, you will not despise")

Contrition=hating one's sin and being grieved at one's sin (i.e. feeling sorrow for what was done in the past and wishing one had not committed it) **because one has acted against God** (Cf. Ps. 51:4: "Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight")

"...each sin 'harms' or 'insults' God because it harms, wounds and opposes God. Being something non-existent, it offends and opposes the existence of God. As something evil, it harms God's benevolence. As something weak and ill, it insults His power. As ignorance, it harms His wisdom. And just as it is called and is an imperfection and shortcoming, it harms and opposes God's endless perfections. As a transgression and iniquity, it harms and wounds God's laws and commandments. And just as each word said against God is called blasphemy because it harms God's fame and identity, similarly each sin can be said to harm God, not only because as an 'ultimate evil' it itself opposes the 'ultimate good' but also because when it is carried out by God's creations, it causes their Creator to be blasphemed [as people assume] that He is similarly evil and therefore created these evil things." (St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, *Unseen Warfare*, Athens 1989, p. 15, cited in Saint Nektarios, *Repentance and Confession 1*, Roscoe, NY 2002, pp. 6-7 n.4)

- a. In contrition love toward God is the basis for being grieved by sin and wanting a change in life
 - i. One "can only be reconciled to God when he knows that he has offended Him, is grieved that he has done so, and desires to recover the divine friendship by any means that he can" (Williams, *Moral Theology*, p. 29)
 - ii. Cf. Rom. 2: 4: "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"
- b. **Contrition** (which is basis of true repentance) is contrasted with **attrition** (which is the basis of false, superficial repentance).
 - Being able to distinguish between these two is essential for spiritual health and life; cf. 2 Cor. 7:9-10: "...I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief...For *godly grief* produces a

repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas *worldly grief* produces death.”

1. In **attrition, the grief one feels in regard to sin is** closely (and largely) **tied up with**

- **concerns about oneself** and
 - **fears about the painful consequences to oneself** that may arise from sin (or its exposure, discovery, or punishment).
 - Unlike contrition, the focus in attrition may tend to be less on the past (the wrong done against God) and more on the present and immediate future (fearing and attempting to manage or ward off potential consequences of one’s sin that might be painful to oneself).
- a. Looking for signs of attrition—Some pastoral questions that might be asked:
- i. Is the person grieved at having violated the standard they had set for themselves? (As opposed to seeing sin as a rejection of the law and will of God and an offense against God himself)
 - ii. Do they despair simply because they have been caught unawares and have not lived up to the image they had of themselves (their pride and vanity having been hurt)?
 - iii. Do they make resolutions to be good in the future (as they themselves or the broader society defines goodness) or do they instead seek a return to the Father and confess their sin to Him (cf. Lk. 15:21)?
 - iv. Does their focus seem to be on expecting or finding an immediate release from temptation or an escape from the painful or harmful consequences of sin?
 - v. Do they alternate between hopeful thoughts of escaping the consequences of their sin and fearful thoughts of having to face the consequences of their sin, creating an up and down cycle where they alternate between hope/exaltation and despair/depression?
- b. Attrition is a corrupted form of self-love, which often produces strong, distorted feelings about the urgent need for self-protection.
- i. In attrition one typically aims to protect oneself by managing information and manipulating situations and people; the goal is to preserve others’ good opinion of oneself as an honorable, respectable person and to draw attention away from the sin and away from

oneself to other things (other people, other situations, other causes, other urgent matters, etc.).

- ii. Attrition cannot move us forward to better things (i.e. contrition and real repentance) because, being motivated by self-absorbed fear, attrition manages, defends and excuses, while refusing to look at the real problem (our wrongs come from a heart that is cold toward God, resists God and wrongs God). If a patient has been given a wrong diagnosis—i.e. the doctor says it is the flu when it is really cancer—no amount of cold medicine will make them better. Attrition is not something that can be improved (i.e. a stepping stone to better things); it is a kind of denial that leads to greater sickness, blindness and hardness of heart. It must be replaced by sorrow for sin for right, God-centered reasons (i.e. contrition).
- c. Attrition is closely connected with certain particular types of fear (fear of discovery, fear of exposure, fear of losing one's honor, fear of being shamed or punished, etc.).
 - i. These particular types of fears are an obstacle to growth in the Christian life because they look inward to self-protection by natural means.
 - ii. Divine love must overcome and heal these strongholds so that one is turned outward toward God with trust and hope.
 1. 1 Jn. 4:18: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."
 2. Transformation in and by Christ begins prior to repentance and develops over a lifetime, passing through four stages:
 - **Being without fear or love toward God** (heart hardened by sin)→
 - **Being with fear and without love toward God** (convicted inwardly of being in the wrong but outwardly wanting to deny or conceal it or to manage it oneself)→
 - **Having both fear and love toward God**→ (conversion and beginning to grow in Christ)

- **Without fear and with love toward God**
(something we progressively receive in different areas of our lives as we grow toward wholeness and maturity in Christ; does not occur without confession of sins and receiving spiritual counsel from pastors/other mature believers within the body of Christ)

(2) Open Confession of Sin

- Ps. 51:1,3-4: "Have mercy on me, O God...For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."
- Ps. 32:5: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin."
- James 5:16: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."
 - a. Sin likes secrets; concealing and hiding are signs something is wrong and needs to be examined more closely and addressed.
 - i. Cf. Prov. 28:13: "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."
 1. Concealing one's sins leads to despair and turning away from the power and promise of God.
 2. Mulling over unconfessed sins in one's mind increases their force and gives them greater power over us. This in turn makes it easier for sinful thoughts of this particular type to recur and to guide and shape our future actions.
 - a. "As hen's eggs that are warmed in dung hatch out, so thoughts that are not confessed hatch out and proceed to action" (Cf. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Boston 2001, p. 193 [26,21], cited in Nektarios, *Repentance*, p. 30 n.10).
 - b. Open confession must be done for the sole purpose of seeking reconciliation with God, not for other purposes (emotional release, feeling better, limiting harm that might follow from others' knowledge of one's sin, trying to bargain with God, etc.).
 - c. Does the person repenting take full responsibility for their sin and admit without reservation that the cause of the sin is within himself or herself?
Are they able to speak with others about the sin in question with
 - i. no denial
 - Cf. 1 Jn. 1:7-10:
"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus purifies us from all [=every] sin.
If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and

purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”

- ii. no covering up out of shame or fear of consequences
- iii. no excusing, minimizing or trivializing
- iv. no shifting the responsibility elsewhere
- v. no whining and arguing with or blaming God for one’s failure to have or achieve what one feels one ought to have or ought to have achieved (see Jeremiah’s complaint and God’s response in Jer. 15:15-19).

These evasions must be contrasted with the prayer of repentance at the foot of Christ’s Cross (where faith and repentance take as their object and hope not oneself, but Jesus).

- d. Does their confession present an account of what happened that is complete in its relevant details, i.e. it is more than just a laundry list of outward actions that just happened to occur (or just happened to occur to them), but includes an understanding of how their own inward motivation and choice were an essential part of this.
 - i. Read aloud the relevant sections of the following articles and invite discussion:
 - 1. “Hotel Close Encounter,” *Grand Rapids Press* (Saturday, May 31, 2003), D22
 - 2. Barbara Walters, “Drake: ‘I Will Hunt Lindsey Down,” *Grand Rapids Press* (Monday, July 21, 2003), A4

(3) The person repenting must have a **firm purpose and a definitely expressed resolution immediately to break with this specific sin** (“I have hated my iniquity”)

- a. Not a vague readiness to do something or other, but a firm resolution regarding future action.
- b. The person repenting must be fully resolved to do whatever is necessary to break with this specific sin and to avoid it in the future; this resolution should be specifically stated in an explicit manner.
 - i. In repentance we reject and renounce doing this evil in the future. An apology or statement of repentance that does not include this cannot be accepted as a genuine apology and authentic repentance.
 - 1. Read aloud the relevant sections of the following article and invite discussion:
“Murder Charges Filed After Deadly Christmas Eve Attack,” *Grand Rapids Press* (Sunday, December 30, 2007), A5
 - ii. Claiming to be sorry for the past but having a hard heart toward the future is not true repentance.
 - 1. “False repentance is that exhibited by Pharaoh, who confessed his own sin ten times, received forgiveness ten times, enraged God ten times, and finally marched out against God’s will” (Nektarios, *Repentance*, p. 7)

- c. Is the person willing to open the whole of their lives to God out of love for God, submitting to God's wisdom, direction and uncontested rule?
 - d. Is the person willing to accept reproof and advice? Or do they believe change is impossible for them and do they show an unwillingness to make restitution or to keep themselves away from known sources of temptation?
- (4) The person repenting must have a **willingness to set right the harm done by sin** by making restitution (offering an **apology**; returning money or property that was wrongfully taken or was taken through deception; offering compensation for what was lost, damaged or destroyed; paying money that had not been paid though lawfully owing, etc.), wherever this is possible.
- a. Mt. 3:8 (Lk. 3:8): "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."
 - b. Acts 26:20: "...I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds."
 - i. In the Scriptures, there is often an outward, tangible form by which one's inward grief at sin and desire for forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation becomes visible (the myrrh of the repentant harlot, the tears of Peter, etc.).
 - ii. There is often a proportional logic which governs what is necessary and fitting in regard to setting right the harm previously done by sin. For example, in the case of sinful public speech, the same tongue that publicly tore down and accused others should also publicly make confession and offer apology. (Whatever means he uses, the Devil's aim is to destroy the work of God; however, God often uses this very same means to set right what was harmed or destroyed.)
 - c. See Ezek. 33:11-20, where "turns from his sin and does what is just and right" in v. 14 is defined in the next verse in terms of restoring what was wrongfully taken.
 - d. Restitution should be a consequence of repentance and love toward God (cf. Dt. 6:5; Mt. 22:37)
 - i. Cf. Lk. 19:8: "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."
 - e. Apologies made should be direct in stating the wrong and the harm that was done ("I was unfaithful. I was wrong and I am sorry I betrayed and hurt you"), but love should guide the extent to which details are disclosed at any one time.
 - i. For example, if one has been having an affair, it is right to say "I was unfaithful and I'm sorry," but it may be against the counsel of love to dump all the details on one's spouse at a single time (i.e. "I have been unfaithful to you for seventeen years with twenty different women, including your best friend").
 - 1. There is a time to reveal these things, but not necessarily all at once, at a single time. God will provide opportune moments when it is the right time to discuss these things, but God's timing needs to be respected and we may need help from a pastor to discern what we should say and when.

2. Sometimes excessively detailed confession that goes against love has more to do with the self-absorption of the person confessing, who has focused on fixing their own problems by confessing, but has forgotten about the feelings of the person they have wronged (who is further hurt by the thoughtless, excessively detailed confession).
 - a. Read aloud the relevant sections of the following articles and invite discussion:
 - i. Pauline and Jeanne Phillips, "Keep Mum About Love Affairs," *Grand Rapids Press* (Saturday, November 15, 2003), B11
 - ii. Jeanne Phillips, "Cheating Husband Confesses in Final Days, Upsets Family," *Grand Rapids Press* (Friday, August 4, 2006), D7

Read aloud and invite discussion of two summary case studies to apply what we have learned:

1. Vickie Chachere, "Disgraced Minister Returns to Pulpit Today," *Grand Rapids Press* (Sunday, November 30, 2003), A7
2. Charles Honey, "Don't Judge Couple's Problems, Clergy Say," *Grand Rapids Press* (Saturday, August 25, 2007), A4

Absolution: Speaking God's Word of Forgiveness to Those Who Are Repentant

God himself tells those who are repentant that their sins are surely, completely and finally forgiven:

- Is. 43:25: "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."
- Ps. 103:12: "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."
- Is. 38:17b: "...in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back."
- Mic. 7:19: "He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You [O God] will cast our sins into the depths of the sea."

When God took our nature upon himself in Jesus Christ, he spoke to the truly repentant, announcing to them that their sins were forgiven:

- Mk. 2:5,8,10: "...Jesus...said to the paralytic, 'My son, your sins are forgiven'...Jesus...said to them... 'That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...'"
- Matthew, in relating the same story, emphasizes the fact that God is doing this (pronouncing the divine forgiveness of sins) in and through Jesus' humanity, concluding the story with the words, "they [sc. the crowds] glorified God, who had given such authority to men."

Christ gave this same power (pronouncing the divine forgiveness of sins) to his apostles:

- Mt. 16:18-19 (to Peter): "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
- Mt. 18:18 (to all the disciples): "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
- Jn. 20:21-23 (to all the disciples): "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.'"

The Church therefore has the *authority* to tell the truly repentant that their sins are surely forgiven according to the power and promise of God.

The church is also *commanded* to do this, so that people who are repentant can have *full assurance* that their sins are forgiven and not be troubled and anxious about where they stand.

- Heb. 10:19,22: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in *full assurance* of faith, with *our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience* and our bodies washed with pure water."
- Cf. the connection made between arriving at full assurance and growing spiritually (becoming mature in Christ) in Col. 2:2 and Heb. 6:11.



For Meditation:

“As often as you might fall down in the marketplace, you pick yourself up again. So too, as often as you sin, repent of your sin. Do not despair. Even if you sin a second time, repent a second time...

Even if you are in extreme old age and have sinned, go and repent! For here there is a physician’s office, not a courtroom; not a place where punishment for sin is exacted, but where the forgiveness of sins is granted.”

--John Chrysostom *Homilies against the Anomoeans*

“If then, the time of life is time for repentance, the very fact that a sinner still lives is a pledge that God will accept whoever desires to return to him.”

--Gregory Palamas *To Xenia*

“He who commits sin does what is not pleasing to God; but he who repents of his sins does what is most pleasing to Him.”

--Robert Bellarmine *The Art of Dying Well*

“He who has repented travels toward the Lord” (freedom *from* sin → freedom to live with and *for* Christ)

--Theophan the Recluse, *Letter*

“This day you shall be with me in paradise.”

--Jesus (Lk. 23:43)

“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”

--Ps. 103:12

“...you have cast all my sins behind your back,” where you no longer see them.

--Is. 38:17

“Forgetting offenses is a sign of sincere repentance. If you keep the memory of them, you may believe you have repented but you are like someone running in his sleep.”

--John Climacus *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*