

**Theology for Life**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church**  
Lesson 9: Repentance and Faith

**Opening Discussion:**

- What would you tell someone struggling with their faith, wondering if they really are a Christian?
- How do you strengthen your faith?
- Is repentance a work?

**Conversion**

Regeneration (God's work of effectually calling us) is distinguished from Conversion (our response in repentance and faith).

Is conversion our act or God's act?

Michael Horton writes, "*In regeneration, we are passive recipients of God's grace...In conversion, however, those now quickened by God's Spirit through the gospel respond in repentance and faith, though these too are the gift of God.*"

WCF 14 On Saving Faith

14.1 *The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.*

It is not God who believes in Christ, we do. We are active. The Holy Spirit enables us to act, but we must act. Repentance and Faith are commands.

**I. Faith**

Faith is putting your trust in what is said on the testimony of another.

- **Philippians 1:27** *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,*
- **2 Corinthians 4:13** *Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak,*
- **2 Thessalonians 2:13** *But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*
- **John 4:50** *Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.*

Faith isn't merely the ability to believe things that are hard to believe. It isn't a general trust that God exists or even that he will be good to me.

It is a response to the testimony of the Word of God concerning Jesus' work.

Christian Faith has...

- An Object: Christ
- A Content: Atoned for Sin
- A Subject: for me

WCF 14.2a. *By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.*

Saving faith is completely passive. It is passive with respect to God. But, it then becomes active in our obedience to the commands and promises of God.

WCF 14.2b *But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.*

Faith is more than knowledge or assent. You can believe in unicorns without needing to trust one at any point in your life. The Greeks believed in the existence of their gods, but did not need

Three Aspects of Faith

1. Ascent to the Truth (act of the intellect)

What truth do we ascent to?

- **Romans 5:1** *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- **1 John 1:8–9** *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*
- **Romans 2:23** *You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.*
- **Ephesians 2:8** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,*

2. Receiving

This is an act of the will. It is a conviction that I am a sinner and Christ is the only suitable savior for me.

This moves beyond learning the facts. Children can understand and state that Jesus died for sins. Faith receives that truth personally.

3. Resting

Conviction is important but is not faith until it moves to reliance.

C.R. Vaughan's Letter to Robert Dabney:

*You want more faith. Do you remember, in the stress of your trial, how faith comes? Let me remind you, although you know it. You know we are sanctified through the truth. Sanctification is just the growth of the particular graces of the spirit, of which faith is one. Just here is where Christians make a great mistake. When they want more faith, or want to know whether the faith they have is the right sort of faith, instead of looking at the things to be believed, they turn their eyes inward and scrutinize their faith. They want to see something in their faith to trust in, something that will certify their faith. Of course, self-examination is all right, but not when it practically substitutes faith for our Lord, grace and righteousness. Even a great theological thinker is as apt to make that mistake when he has come into the practical stress of this awful world as a common Christian.*

*Now, suppose a traveler comes to a bridge, and he is in doubt about trusting himself to it. What does he do to breed confidence in the bridge? He looks at the bridge; he gets down and examines it. He doesn't stand at the bridge-head and turn his thoughts curiously in on his own mind to see if he has confidence in the bridge. If his examination of the bridge gives him a certain amount of confidence, and yet he wants more, how does he make his faith grow? Why, in the same way; he still continues to examine the bridge.*

*Now, my dear old man, let your faith take care of itself for awhile, and you just think of what you are allowed to trust in. Think of the Master's power, think of his love; think how he is interested in the soul that searches for him, and will not be comforted until he finds him. Think of what he has done, his work. That blood of his is mightier than all the sins of all the sinners that ever lived. Don't you think it will master yours? Think of his great righteousness: will it not avail for all you hope to gain? That great work is enough; it needs not to be supplemented; it meets every demand. It warrants you to come into the King's very presence, assured of welcome, because you can come in the name of the King's Son...Think of the Master when you want your faith to grow...*

*Your brother,  
C.R. Vaughan*

### **Objective Faith**

*14.3 This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.*

We are not saved by the quality of our faith, but by the object of our faith. Faith always looks outside of itself.

**Luke 17:5-6** *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" [6] And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.*

### **Ordinary means**

*14.1 The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.*

How are these outward and ordinary means of grace (Word, sacrament, and prayer) different than methods you use to strengthen your faith?

## **II. Repentance**

Which comes first repentance or faith?

*“It is an unnecessary question... There is no priority. The faith that is unto salvation is a penitent faith and the repentance that is unto life is a believing repentance.”* John Murray

### **Errors in Understanding Repentance**

#### **1. Penance**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Century Latin translation of the Bible created a critical error in translating “Repent!” as “Do penance!”

The Roman Catholic teaching on penance is very far from biblical repentance. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church penance requires that you must recall and orally confess each sin you’ve committed. Then a priest determines a suitable action to perform to make satisfaction for the sin. Only then can you be forgiven.

Discovering this translation error in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was key to the Protestant Reformation.

#### **2. Modern Problems**

Modern Christians confuse repentance with a new effort to obey. And, they make the changed heart a prerequisite to faith. Obedience is a result not a condition of justification.

“Some Christians struggle to the point of despair over whether the quality and degree of their repentance is adequate for them to be forgiven as if repentance were the ground of forgiveness and the former could be measured by the intensity of emotion, resolve, and victory over specific sins.” Horton

- Rick Downs, “If you promise to do better, then Christ is of no value to you and you have no need for Jesus.”

WCF 15.3. *Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.*

### **Gospel Repentance**

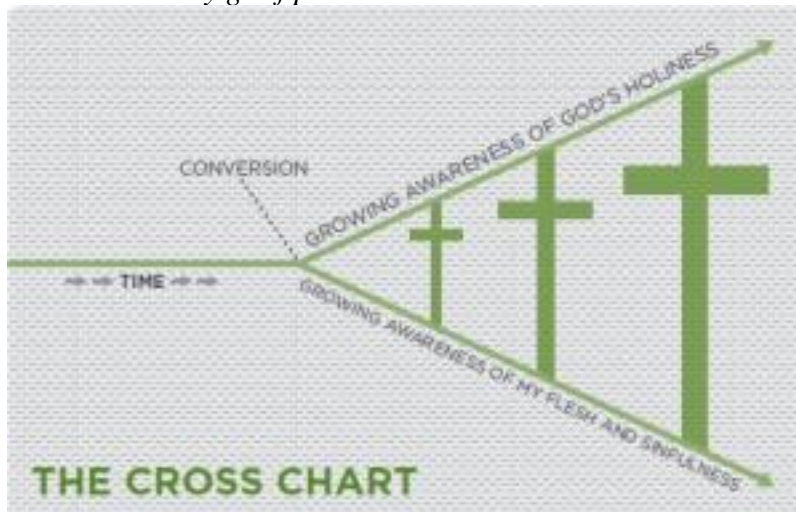
WCF 15.1 *Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.*

Repentance is not changing a behavior here or there; it is the hatred of our sinful condition, turning away from our old life toward new life in Christ.

“Legal” repentance is not Christian repentance. It expresses only fear of judgment and punishment and bears no fruit.

Groveling can be a form of legalism. To say, “I am a wretch and God doesn’t love me” is holding ourselves as victims and excusing ourselves from having to live with integrity.

**2 Corinthians 7:10** *For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.*



Worldly repentance is crushing and will lead to despair. Gospel repentance is a life-giving grace. It involves turning away from sin and self-trust to reliance on Christ.

Repentance is not biblical unless it includes Christ’s work of redemption. True repentance ends with joy and thanksgiving, not despair.

### **Repentance as a Grace?**

Repentance is a grace because it connects us to Christ. We turn from sin to Christ.

*WCF 15.2 By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.*

*WCF 15.4 As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.*

*WCF 15.5. Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.*

### **Repentance for Life**

How do you grow as a Christian? What answers do we give to young Christians who want to grow?

A new Christian wants to grow in his faith. We get him into a discipleship program. We should tell him to practice every day believing the gospel. You need to practice every day going to God and repenting; and repenting in the context of faith; and believing the gospel in the context of repentance.

We tend to believe that obedience comes from a rigorous application of the law or our traditions. God is the one who does the changing in our lives. We need to adhere ourselves to Jesus by faith and repentance, and he is going to work in me.

God wants a broken heart. Repentance is a matter of coming before God Himself. Seeing our sin and rejoicing in the gospel. Change becomes almost an **activity that we observe** rather than an **activity we perform**.

*Describe a recent “repentance” that was just a form of pain relief—an attempt to ‘get it over with’ as quickly as possible.*

Which counterfeit repentance do you often confuse with genuine repentance?

- Changing your outward behavior
- Making promises or resolutions
- Groveling
- Engaging in self-pity
- Beating yourself up
- Offering a sacrifice
- Having a brilliant observation or insight about yourself or your sins

Why are these detrimental to your faith?

### **Public Repentance**

WCF 15.6. *As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so, he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

*“Confess your faults to one another” (James 5:16.) He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners...so we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners!”*

Bonhoeffer calls this the “*final break-through to fellowship*.” It is the only way we can honestly function as a church family, when we can own up to that label.

Why is it necessary to confess before others? What happens when we don’t?