



"Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly."

—Francis Bacon

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Repentance: The Genuine Article (Part One)

In the American presidential campaign of 2008, eventual winner Barack Obama ran on a platitudinous platform of hope and change. His supposedly soaring rhetoric captured the support of more than half of the voters longing for a bright tomorrow, and if nothing else, for something different. More than two years later, the real results are beginning to be tallied, and the striking oratory has been replaced by stark reality: Our hopes are unfulfilled and the changes have not been for the better.

Christianity is a way of life of hope and change, and perhaps that is a reason why so many Americans, a majority of whom are professing Christians, voted for Obama. They saw in him someone who was speaking their language, and now many of them are disappointed because his policies run counter to his idealistic promises. Their hopes for a return to economic soundness have been dashed because his changes have accelerated rather than reversed American decline. Clearly, while our hopes can be grand and even pie-in-the-sky, reality is in the change.

In Christianity, change is most often discussed in terms of [repentance](#). Indeed, it is a life of repentance, of change, that mounts up—with a huge

assist from [God](#) through His Spirit—into the desired transformation into the image of [Jesus Christ](#) (see [Romans 8:29](#); [II Corinthians 3:17-18](#)). However, many professing Christians think of repentance merely as one of the first steps in the process of conversion and salvation, and they leave it at that. As we will see, repentance is certainly a first step, but it is also ongoing throughout our lives. To become a true Christian, we must repent—and then we must make it a continual practice as long as [sin](#) remains in us.

Sin is the problem. [The world](#) is full of sin and so are we. Though God "is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" ([I John 1:9](#)), we must be progressively turning from sinfulness in every area of life, building godly character so that Christ can "present [us] holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight" ([Colossians 1:22](#)). The goal, as [I Peter 1:15](#) reminds us, is "as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct." Deep repentance plays a key role in our becoming holy like God.

Even so, genuine repentance is impossible without God first acting in our lives. Nothing truly spiritual happens in our lives until God initiates a relationship with us. Jesus tells us plainly in [John 6:44](#), "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." His wording is definite: *No one* has the ability to approach Christ without God the Father first calling him, summoning him, inviting him, to draw near. One may think he is [seeking God](#) and the truth, but unless the Father has opened his mind, nothing will ever come of all his efforts.

Therefore, any purported repentance that occurs apart from God and His way of life is not a biblical, godly repentance. If someone who has not been called by God—say, a professing Buddhist or an atheist, to use an extreme—claims to have repented, he has simply altered his lifestyle, a human self-improvement. Positive though it may be, his "repentance" is mere change; God is not involved. A closer inspection of the situation will show that, despite improving in one area of his life, other areas continue to be ungodly, and in the case of the Buddhist or atheist, completely outside the bounds of Christian doctrine.

Unfortunately, many who say they are Christians also fit in this category, claiming to have repented of their sins, but their lifestyles argue against

them. Despite the Bible's clear teaching to the contrary, much of the Christian world believes that all they need to do to be saved is to believe in Jesus, and their initial remorse over their previous lifetime of sin fulfills the requirement to repent. From that time on, they believe, the blood of Christ covers their sins, so they have no need to keep God's commandments and to conform to God's way of life, since Christ did it all for them.

Yet, the apostle John writes in [1 John 2:4](#), "He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." [1 John 2:9-11](#) gives the example of a person claiming to be "in the light" yet continuing to hate his brother. The apostle says that such an individual is still "in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes." The fruit of his life shows that there has been no true repentance.

Sin is ever-present with us, even those of us who are under the covenant. Paul writes in [Romans 3:9](#): "What then? Are we better than they [the world]? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin." We are all sinners. The apostle says in [Romans 3:23](#), "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Earlier in the same chapter (verses 10-18), he had listed quotations from the [Old Testament](#) describing the sinfulness of man, beginning with "There is none righteous, no, not one."

For those of us who are truly called and converted, God has graciously forgiven us and cleared the long record of our past sins through the shed blood of Jesus Christ (see [Romans 3:24-26](#)), but even helped by the Holy Spirit to live righteously, we nevertheless continue to sin. Because sin still relentlessly dogs us, we must repent again and again. Why?

The simple answer is that, even though we have found the truth and started along the path toward the [Kingdom of God](#) and His righteousness, we are still very much human, reeking of human nature and constantly influenced by this present, evil world. To transform from sinful to godly is not a matter of divine fiat but a protracted struggle against self, [Satan](#), and this world, with countless turnings of the tide of battle while we surge ever closer to victory. Every time we give ground—after every sin, trespass, or transgression—we must repent and rejoin the fight.

This is not easy to do. In [Jeremiah 10:23](#), the prophet acknowledges, "O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps." Left to ourselves, we would not know how to live properly before God, and even with His help, it takes us years of study and experience to learn God's ways. We spend that time repenting of our own ways and taking on God's.

The same prophet records in [Jeremiah 17:9](#), "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" The track record of mankind has shown that we are quite adept at deceiving ourselves. We are especially good at considering ourselves to be in the right though all the evidence is against us. In most cases, God must work over years to show us that His way is best, and we spend much of that time repenting.

What, then, is true repentance? We will consider the answer next time.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

The church of God has a problem with empty externalism (accompanied by no inward change), a problem which led to its scattering. All of us, individually and collectively, were responsible for its demise. God has promised to hear our prayers if we humble ourselves and turn from our sins. Having the right doctrines is of no avail unless they are acted upon. After our conversion, our minds become a perpetual battleground against our prideful human nature, requiring that we sacrifice and humble ourselves in God's service. Romans 12-16 provide a checklist for overcoming and promoting positive relationships, developing tender affection toward one another. We must realize that we are mutually dependent upon one another, and that God has given gifts so that all may benefit or profit.

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