

INTRODUCTION

Repentance is about Christ freeing His people from sin's enslaving power. It is about increasingly knowing reprieve from sin's grip and tyranny as we mature in the Christian life. It concerns release from that which damages our relationship with God and with one another. This book, therefore, aims to explore various facets of repentance to help us come to value it as a blessed feature of the Christian life.

Because sin does damage to our relationship with God individually and to our relationships with one another, repentance is relevant at the level of individuals and of the church community. In other words, each one of us personally needs to be repentant, and our church community holistically needs to be repentant. The individual and the corporate sense of repentance are both necessary. These two layers of relevance inform how this book develops its case.

As the book progresses, our reflections on repentance will move from focusing on individual repentance to focus on why our church community should be characterized by repentance. The reason for moving from individual to corporate considerations about repentance concerns keeping

a balanced perspective about how to emphasize repentance. On the one hand, modern western culture has an impulse to locate sin within systemic problems. Although that outlook has fitting application to some issues, our initial focus on the need for individual repentance helps Christians to take personal responsibility for their sin without placing the blame entirely upon external structures. Every person is a sinner who needs to repent. On the other hand, a community composed of individuals who are repentant should grow in its collective outlook of repentance so that a posture of repentance paints the whole group. Repentance should be something that also develops as an ethos among Christ's people. To keep these perspectives in balance, this book tackles both by developing its argument, beginning with the individual aspects, and then shifting to the corporate dimensions.

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Thanks finally to the many personal connections who have given inestimable support to this work. The congregation of Oakland Hills Community Church (OPC) is an amazing community of believers, and I am so grateful to be their pastor. Their encouragement and love are of such ongoing help to me even as I strive to be a help to them. The Lord has

been kind to let me be their pastor. Thanks to the elders at OHCC for the ways that they practically support me to keep writing as a way to (I hope!) bless our congregation and the wider church. Thanks to my dear family, Sarah and Scott, for bearing with a sinful husband and father who often has to repent. You both are more of a blessing than I ever could deserve, but are the exact blessing that I need.

As I dedicate this volume to Harry Reeder, words escape me for how to express my appreciation for him and why I would try to honor his memory with this book. Harry was my pastor from 2008, when I joined Briarwood Presbyterian Church, until I was ordained in 2017 by the Evangel Presbytery, where Harry was also a Presbyter. He was a continual source of wisdom and kindness to me as I learned about Reformed theology, as I progressed toward ministry, and as I have grown as a pastor. Not a single week has gone by since his (from a human perspective) sudden and untimely death that I have not thought about him and missed his presence in my life. Before his passing, it often felt like I was merely pretending in pastoral ministry while the giants like him were doing it for real. I know how he would laugh at me for voicing that sentiment. Yet, whatever usefulness I might have for Christ's church, I know, at least in part, it owes to the mark that Harry has left on my life. Inasmuch as this book aims to point God's people to the riches of what Christ can do in your life, it seems the most fitting tribute to Harry that I am able to produce. He certainly did that for me.

Chapter One

THE BLESSING OF REPENTANCE

Sin makes us miserable. It ruins our present lives and, if we do not find salvation in Christ, it will—to put it mildly—ruin our lives for eternity as well. Sin's toll is high, casting long shadows over our whole existence. Sin wreaks havoc upon every fiber of our being and corrupts us to the core. We do our best to pretend that we are fine, but, at the end of the day, we all know that our sin has left us wanting.

Sin's bleak effects serve to spotlight this book's fundamental argument that repentance is a joyful aspect of the Christian life. Our focus is not on that hard fallout that comes from sin and its misery but on the beautiful freedom that comes from Christ in turning us away from sin. The Christian life is supposed to be a life of freedom, ever increasing freedom from sin's curse. Christ came and has provided deliverance for His people.

Spectacularly, Jesus provides freedom from both sin's penalty *and* power. Christ is our comprehensive Savior. This book is about how adopting the posture and practice of

repentance is a key way to increasingly enjoy that freedom from sin's power. Hence, we might sing:

Kind and merciful God,
In Christ's death on the cross you provided cleansing from sin;
Speak the words that forgive
That henceforth we may live
by the might of your Spirit within.¹

This hymn provides some perspective on how we might distinguish sin's *ruling* power and its power of *influence*. Christ has broken its *rule* over our lives so that we no longer *have to* sin (Rom. 6:15-23). Westminster Confession of Faith 16.3 explains that believers' "ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ," and further, "that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the grace that have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will, and to do, of his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). By the Spirit's influence, those who have already been saved by Christ can proceed to do imperfect but truly good works, which serve as "the fruits and evidences of a lively faith."² God, in His saving power, enables us to choose righteousness instead of sin. Nevertheless, sin also still exercises influence over us in all that we do. We are tempted and, in our fallenness, find sin appealing and enticing. In this respect, although God has broken sin's ruling power, repentance is a fight against sin's power of influence.³

1 Bryan Jeffery Leech, "Kind and Merciful God, We Have Sinned," in *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018), 180.

2 Westminster Confession of Faith 16.2

3 Thanks to Olan Stubbs for helpful insight on this distinction.

Part of why we might not enjoy the freedom which Christ provides for us is that we adopt a lopsided view of His saving work, wherein He provides forgiveness and the Spirit's empowering. This sort of skewed perspective often happens when we reduce the benefits of Christ to one aspect of what He has done for us, in terms of providing rescue either from sin's penalty or power. How does a lopsided perspective occur? How do we avoid it?

The Pastoral Burden for Christ's Twofold Benefit

The Reformed tradition has long cherished the distinction of the *twofold benefit* of Christ. Heidelberg Catechism 70 highlights these dual blessings, asking, "What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood *and* Spirit?" The answer first emphasizes how God pardons us in justification, as "To be washed with Christ's blood means to receive the forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, because of Christ's blood, poured out for us in his sacrifice on the cross." Further, God restores us as "To be washed with his Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life."⁴ This double grace, or the twofold benefit, of Christ, helps us to see that God provides a new standing with Him as well as true renewal of our lives.

On the one hand, God *justifies* us, meaning that He declares us righteous in His sight both by forgiving our sin on account of Christ's death on our behalf and by counting us as fully righteous on account of Christ's perfect record

4 All references from the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity come from Peter A. Lillback and Bernard Aubert (eds.), *Reformed Standards of Unity: The Historic Statements of Faith Confessed by the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches* (Westminster Seminary Press, 2023). I have modernized verb tenses in many instances. Emphasis added.

of law-keeping. God justifies us by applying both these aspects of Christ's saving work to us. This benefit is a legal benefit wherein we receive a new status with God. We are made right with God and adopted into His family only on account of Christ's work for us, received by faith alone. In this respect, God saves sinners apart from any works on their part, since "to the one who does not work but believes in him who *justifies the ungodly*, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). God's free grace removes sin's *penalty* in justification before and apart from any personal renewal or works of new obedience in the believer.

On the other hand, as Westminster Shorter Catechism 35 explains, God *sanctifies* us, meaning that He works in us to enable us to die unto sin more and more, and to live unto Christ. Although He brings us into a new relationship with Him apart from any renewal in us, God does provide that renewal of our lives. He, as Calvin put it, cultivates true (albeit imperfect) blamelessness and purity of life in us. This benefit of sanctification is a renovative blessing wherein God works real change in us. He continues to work in us because "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). God's free grace, therefore, also progressively removes sin's *power* in sanctification as He changes us to be increasingly like Christ our Redeemer. Christ, having broken sin's ruling power over us, also helps us fight its power of influence.

Lopsidedness comes when we fail to cherish these distinct benefits of Christ on their own terms for how they are blessings of God's grace, given to those whom God loves and rescues in Christ. We can fail to cherish these benefits in two ways that are relevant for our considerations about repentance. First, we might succeed in cherishing