

Confession and Repentance

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Repentance is a change of life resulting from a changed attitude toward sin. One who has repented has turned from a life of sin toward a life of humble submission to God and His Word. There are many examples of this change of life found in the Bible. Such as the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). In other words, they had repented of their past sins. And then, as Christians, when they sinned in their association with and tacit approval of a man who was openly involved in fornication they were rebuked by Paul (1 Corinthians 5). Both the man and the congregation repented as we see in 2 Corinthians 7:9-11, "Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter." True repentance results from godly sorrow because of our sin and leads to a life of renewed dedication toward God.

The New Testament teaches that along with repentance, there must also be confession of sin. James 5:16 states, "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." The Greek word, *exomologeisthe*, here translated as "confess" means, "to openly agree to confess. The confession is not to be only to the elders but to 'one another,' i.e., probably to those they have wronged." (Fritz Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the New Testament*). The question then arises as to when a public confession should be made.

First, let us note that there are three categories of sins. In the first category are sins known only to the one who committed the sin and to God, a sinful attitude for example. In that case, simply acknowledging to God through prayer that you have sinned is all the confession needed. In the second category, are sins known to the one who committed the sin, to a limited number of others directly affected by the sin and to God. For example, we lied to friend about something and as a part of repentance we go to them and confess that we lied and tell them the truth (Matthew 18:15). If that sin is known only between a few

individuals and God, and confession is made to all parties (including God) involved then it need go no further. The third category of sins are those that are widely known due to their public nature. For example, a brother in Christ is arrested for driving while intoxicated. This is a public sin and in many places published in the local newspaper. When a brother or sister is involved in a publicly known sin, along with their repentance, there must be a public confession of sin before God and the congregation, as well as the community at large (if the community at large has knowledge of that sin). A general “rule of thumb” with regard to confession is, “As widely as the sin is known, so must the confession of sin be made known.”

Public confession of sins before the congregation does not always require that we “go forward” when the invitation song is sung, although there is nothing wrong with that. One can also simply speak to the elders or write a note or a letter to the congregation and ask the elders to read it before the congregation, or to publish it in the bulletin. The confession of sin is a commandment, but the manner in which a confession of sin is made known is an expedient.

One other aspect of repentance and confession must be noted. Confession of sins, by itself, does not equal repentance! Many are those who “confess” sin in their lives, ask for the prayers of the saints and then never make the requisite change of life. How often have we seen people “go forward” for sins such as “forsaking the assembly,” only to quietly slip back “out of duty”? Quite often, when the preacher reaches the conclusion of his sermon, a church member will be struck by their own guilt and “walk the aisle” to make confession of sin, but when the emotion of guilt fades in a few days, they all too often go right back to where they were before. Notice what God, through the prophet Jeremiah said to the nation of Judah:

The LORD said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: “Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. And I said, after she had done all these things, ‘Return to Me.’ But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense,” says the LORD. Then the LORD said to me, “Backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.” (Jeremiah 3:6-11)

In other words, having seen what happened to “backsliding Israel” (the northern ten tribes), Judah gave the pretense of repentance by their confession and reforms under the godly King Josiah, but it was not a genuine repentance. They “confessed” their sin of spiritual adultery, but did not change their ways. Their confession of sin, without a change of life to go along with it, was empty and led to their downfall.

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