

Errors About Repentance

It is wrong to:

1. tell unbelievers to repent of their sins without also stressing the primary importance of having trusting faith in Jesus Christ and of His death on the Cross.
2. tell unbelievers to repent of their sins in the months or days *before* their conversion. It is false to say to unbelievers that they cannot have a saving faith in Jesus Christ unless they have previously abandoned all their sinful thoughts and actions in the months or days leading up to conversion. This is an example of legalistic self-effort. Refer to the later section “Luther tried to repent without having true saving faith” for more details on this error.
3. say to unbelievers that the latter must abandon every one of their sins at conversion in order to be saved. At conversion, there will be many sins which are hidden from the converts’ awareness and which therefore cannot be knowingly abandoned at the time.
4. teach others that just feeling guilty about their sins is repentance. All humans will experience their consciences making them feel guilty at times (see Romans 2:15). This is regardless of whether they repent or not.
5. tell others that repentance is just:
 - feeling sorrow or regret about past sins.
 - saying sorry to God for their sins.
 - confessing their sins and
 - asking God to forgive us their sins.

True repentance is often accompanied by these Biblical things. But a person can do all of the above things and not really repent. For example, an alcoholic or adulterer can experience terrible regret about what they have done, say sorry to God, confess these sins to Him and ask Him to forgive them, but not really repent. They love their sin too much to be willing to *change* their thoughts, purposes and actions in relation to it.

6. tell the unsaved to “try” to repent. Acts 17:30 says that God now “**commands all men everywhere to repent**” and not “commands all men everywhere to try to repent.” God is willing to help unbelievers to do what He has commanded. So if they have not repented as yet, it is because they do not really want to do this.
7. think repentance is merely enjoying preaching which emphasises repentance. This is a common deception. Week after week, some churchgoers gladly listen to sermons about abandoning sin by God’s power, but never put this into practice. They are like King Herod who gladly heard John the Baptist’s preaching on repentance, but never abandoned his incestuous relationship with Herodias and his other sins. Mark 6:17-20 records: “**For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philips wife; for he had married her. For John had said to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brothers wife.’ Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, but she could not; for Herod feared John, knowing that he**

was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.”

8. lead unsaved individuals into totally relying on God or your faith in Him or your prayers to Him to enable them to repent. It is wrong to say to the unbeliever, “I know you have not been able to repent, but I’ll pray in faith to God for you. Then you will be able to repent.” It is good to tell an unbeliever you will pray for him in faith. This is as long as you do not give him the false impression your prayers or faith in God will result in Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit forcing him to repent. Otherwise, if the unbeliever does not repent, he will falsely use your prayers and/or your supposed lack of faith and/or God as the excuse for why he has not repented. Repentance is not a totally passive activity in which the unsaved sinner lets God take him over like a robot and force him to repent. Repentance is something which we *passively receive* from God by His grace and then *actively express*. Also, it is foolish to think that the Holy Spirit or Jesus Christ will repent for humans. Both *Jesus* and the *Holy Spirit do not repent* because They have never committed a sin. Instead they empower humans to repent.
9. pray for unsaved sinners as though they deserved to be pitied more than blamed. We can pray as though unbelieving sinners are unfortunate almost innocent victims of sin and Satan instead of guilty rebels deserving to go to hell. As a result, our prayers will give sinners impressions which encourage them to resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit about sin and eternal judgement.

May God give His Church a deep and powerful revelation of Biblical repentance in the 21st century! Also may we walk in true Holy Spirit-inspired repentance!

Luther tried to repent without having true saving faith

Martin Luther’s life is a classic example of the uselessness of trying to repent without having a trusting, dependent surrendered faith in Jesus Christ. As a Catholic monk prior to his conversion, Luther tried to obtain salvation through confession, prayers, fasting, self-imposed sufferings and fleshly types of repentance. Here is Luther’s own words about this:

*“I tried as hard as I could to keep the Rule (the Rule of the Augustinian Order of monks). I used to be contrite, and make a list of my sins. I confessed them again and again. I scrupulously carried out the penances which were allotted to me. And yet my conscience kept nagging. It kept telling me: ‘you fell short there.’ ‘You were not sorry enough.’ ‘You left that sin off your list.’”*¹

Luther used to confess *six hours* at a time to a confessor at the Catholic rite of Penance until the confessor became weary of his confessions. Despite such confessions of sin, prayers, fastings, self-imposed penance punishments and false repentance, Luther still knew he was under God’s wrath and eternally doomed.

Not some type of pre-conversion optional seeking after God

One version of the false “gospel” of easy believism claims that the type of repentance unbelieving sinners do occurs in the years, months or days *before* they are converted to Jesus

¹ Chadwick, page 450.

Christ by faith. Such repentance is claimed to be merely some type of optional seeking after God through going to church and/or praying and/or giving money to Him and/or doing some other religious activity. But this is a pitiful definition of the type of repentance God requires of unbelievers. In relation to unbelievers, the New Testament word for “*repentance*” – “*metanoia*” – refers to a change of heart about unbelief, sin, God, Jesus Christ, the Gospel and faith. Also note in Acts 17:30, Paul did not tell unbelievers at Athens that repentance was some optional extra which God only wanted some to do.

Conviction of sin is not repentance, but leads to it

Conviction of sin is not repentance or part of repentance. But conviction of sin is a *key preparation* for repentance. Acts 2:14-41 records that after many Jews were convicted of their sins, three thousand of them repented and turned to Jesus Christ.

Conviction of sin includes *spiritual, mental* and *emotional* responses to the influences of the Holy Spirit which in some cases results in repentance. Conviction also involves the Holy Spirit using unbelievers *consciences* to emphasise to them the *wrongs* they have committed against God and others and their associated *guilt*. Unbelievers can be very heavily convicted of sin, but still not repent of their sins. But it is exceptionally difficult or maybe even impossible to repent of sins without previously being convicted of sin. The great evangelist D. L. Moody said:

*“Experience has taught me that men who have very slight conviction of sin, sooner or later lapse back into their old life. For the last few years I have been a good deal more anxious for a deep and true work in professing converts than I have for numbers.”*²

Conviction about eternal judgement and about the need of receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour also precedes repentance but is not a part of it.

Penance is not equal to repentance

One false view equates repentance with what is called penance. Penance refers partly to earthly penalties or punishments which those believers who have sinned, supposedly have to undergo in order to avoid suffering in an imaginary place called purgatory after death. The English Catholic Douay Version of the Bible wrongly translates Acts 2:38 as “...Do penance; and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins...” and Acts 26:20 as “...and to the Gentiles did I preach that they should do penance and turn to God doing works worthy of penance.” But repentance does not include self-imposed penalties of penance such as punishing our bodies or saying a hundred Hail Marys or Our Fathers.

One example of an unbiblical substitution of penance for heart repentance is seen in one of the “Canons” of Bishops Patrick, Auxilius and Isernius from the 400’s A.D. in Britain: “A Christian who has committed murder, or committed adultery, or sworn before a druid as the pagans do, shall do a year’s penance for each of these crimes; the year of penance completed, he shall present himself, accompanied by witnesses, and then be freed of his obligation by a priest.”³

² D. L. Moody, “The Overcoming Life”, The Moody Press, Chicago, 1896, pages 37-38.

³ Ludwig Bieler (Translator and Annotator), “The Works of St Patrick”, Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1953, page 51.

Not an exceptionally general, hypocritical change of heart attitudes

Some argue that the only type of repentance required by God at conversion is a change of heart attitudes to sin, unbelief and rebellion against God in some sort of exceptionally general sense. They suggest that repentance at conversion never needs to include a change of heart towards known specific sins. Such attitudes encourage a form of *gross hypocrisy*. It is ridiculous to argue that someone is really having a change of heart about unbelief in and rebellion against God if the person is not willing to have a change of heart about whatever they know are blatant specific sinful expressions of this unbelief and rebellion.

For example, imagine if some murderers, rapists and child molesters believe that God approves of the type of repentance at conversion which involves a change of heart about unbelief and sin in general but no change of heart about their known sins of murder, rape and molesting little children. Also, imagine some Satanists and burglars thinking that they can be converted to Christ through having a change of heart about unbelief, sin and rebellion in general but not their Satan-worshipping practices and stealing.

If God approved of conversions like these, even Satan and demons could be converted. Also, the church would end up as one of the most hypocritical groups of people on Earth. Someone may say, "But you have only mentioned major sins here. People can be converted even if they do not repent of their less serious known sins like having sex with their girlfriend or boyfriend and shoplifting". But note the New Testament does not classify these as less serious sins.

As stated earlier, God does not require people to have a change of heart attitude at conversion to things which they do not know are sins. Also, no person experiences a perfect form of repentance at conversion. But it is very wrong to suggest repentance at conversion does not relate to peoples' specific known sins.

“Repent of just some of your known sins!”

Because it is impossible for us to reach a stage of permanent sinless perfection while still in this mortal life, many Evangelicals and Pentecostals wrongly believe it is not possible to repent by God's grace of all known sin. This is one reason why some of them fail to preach much about repentance. They somehow realise how hypocritical it would be getting up exhorting believers and the unsaved to repent of all their known sins if it is impossible to do this.

If they were honest, some should preach: "The Lord knows you can't possibly repent of all your known sins. But at least change your heart attitude to a few or some of your sins." Can you imagine revivalists such as Wesley, Whitefield, Finney, Evan Roberts, Torrey and Wigglesworth preaching nonsense like this?

Early Catholics excusing an absence of repentance from sin

The ridiculous concept of telling so-called "converts" that God does not mind if they do not repent of known sins at conversion was previously tried by the early Roman Catholic Church. Augustine of Hippo explained how sins of drunkenness and gluttony were indulged in by many Catholics at his city in honour of the birthdays of various so-called "Saints" and "holy

martyrs”. Augustine also said many church leaders had made a concession to this sinful practice at an earlier time in order supposedly to make it easier for heathens to be converted.

“When the day dawned on which they were accustomed to prepare themselves for excess in eating and drinking, I received notice that some, even of those who were present at my sermon, had not yet ceased complaining, and that so great was the power of detestable custom among them that, using no other argument, they asked: “Wherefore is this now prohibited? Were they not Christians who in former times did not interfere with this practice?” ...

*Lest, however, any slight should seem to be put by us upon those who before our time either tolerated or dared not put down such manifest wrong-doings of an undisciplined multitude, I explained to them the necessity by which this custom seems to have arisen in the Church; namely, that when, in the peace which came after such numerous and violent persecutions, crowds of heathen who wished to assume the Christian religion were kept back because, having been accustomed to celebrate the feasts connected with idols in revelling and drunkenness, they could not easily refrain from these pleasures so hurtful and so habitual; and it seemed good to our ancestors that for a time a concession should be made to this infirmity, that after they had renounced the former festivals they might celebrate other feasts, in honor of the holy martyrs, which were observed, not with the same profane design, although with similar indulgence.”*⁴

Here we see how false teaching about repentance at conversion led large parts of the Catholic Church into sin and backsliding. Such compromising may have *increased numbers* and produced *outward success*. But in reality, such things caused many Catholics in Hippo to become *very worldly* and *paganised*.

Do not limit yourself by secular findings

One major problem occurring in many Western churches today is the fact many are allowing their views of repentance to be *limited* by the theories of secular psychologists about how humans learn bad habits. Examples of such bad habits are drug-taking, drunkenness, addictions to pornography and gambling, smoking, violent anger, stealing, bitterness and so on. These secular psychologists do studies which supposedly prove such habits cannot be broken except possibly over many years.

On the basis of these secular studies, some gullible churchgoers have changed the meaning of repentance and its fruits to be something which is almost impossible for believers to do in relation to deeply conditioned sinful habits. They also alter repentance into a *future possibility* instead of *demand* of God for *now*.

If we say we cannot repent of known sin, we are not telling the truth. Acts 11:18 and 2 Timothy 2:25 prove God gives us the ability to repent.

Such secular attitudes ignore the gracious power of God working within believers to empower them to resist temptation. Such limited thinking does not really believe God’s Words expressed in verses like 1 Corinthians 10:13, Philippians 4:13, Ephesians 3:20, Hebrews 13:20-21 and 1 John 3:9. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says: **“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it”**. Ephesians 3:20 states: **“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.”** Refer to Chapter “Victory

⁴ J.C. Ayer, “A Source Book for Ancient Church History”, pages 400-401.

Over Temptation” for more details on the availability of the power of God for believers to resist temptation.

Most secular psychological theories teach people can only change their heart attitudes and actions when they are freed from the hurts, rejections and bad effects of their previous environmental influences. The Bible itself confirms we are all partly a product of our environment (see Ephesians 2:1-2). But the Bible also teaches God the Holy Spirit will give us His power to change. Verses such as Philippians 2:12-13, 4:13, Acts 11:18, 2 Corinthians 3:16-18, Ephesians 3:20 and Hebrews 13:20-21 do not come into the frame of thinking of secular psychology.

When the New Testament commands us to change our heart attitudes and behaviour, its underlying assumption is the Holy Spirit is willing to help us to change. The New Testament sees the Holy Spirit within us as being infinitely more powerful than all of the rejections and bad environmental influences we have undergone. Therefore, if we redefine the New Testament word **“repent”** to mean changing our heart attitudes some time in the future after we overcome all rejections and other bad life experiences, we have changed the Biblical meaning of this word to fit in with secular theorists. It is a *sin* to limit God and His Word by the changeable findings of secular researchers who have no concept of what the power of Jesus Christ can do in us by His Spirit.

The Bible does emphasise our growing in Christ. This includes confession of sin, receiving forgiveness and forgiving others. It also may involve Biblical counselling by church leaders and other things. But growing in Christ does not involve delaying repenting of certain known sins to some unknown future time.

The Apostle Paul did not say about the man at Corinth living in an adulterous relationship with his stepmother, “He can’t repent now. He has had many hurts and rejections in his life as a result of not living with his real mother. He is craving for love and acceptance. This is why he is now living in a sinful relationship with his stepmother. Maybe with much love, encouragement and compassion, he will be ready to repent in a few years.” Instead Paul insisted this young man repent NOW. Because this young man would not repent, 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 records Paul said: ***“For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged, as though I were present, concerning him who has done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”***

In Acts 3:11-26, we do not see the Apostle Peter saying to the Jews, “I know many of you cannot repent now because of the terrible traumas you have suffered at the hands of the cruel Romans. Hopefully in a few years, you may be able to repent.” Instead Acts 3:19 records Peter saying: ***“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”***

King David suffered terrible rejection and hurts throughout his life. His brother Eliab rejected him (see 1 Samuel 17:28-30). King Saul came to hate David and continually tried to kill him (see 1 Samuel Chapters 18 to 27). When later David sinned greatly by committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband, God did not command the prophet Nathan to tell David that God understood David had done these things because of being hurt and rejected so much previously. Instead, God told Nathan to confront David with his sin. Read 2 Samuel 12:1-14.

Modern blame-shifting

In modern times, *blame-shifting* has reached *epidemic* proportions. Almost every murderer and criminal appearing before courts have psychologists and social workers preparing parts of their defence by showing how the person has been abused emotionally, physically and/or sexually by others. In 1994, a man in Melbourne bought a rifle and murdered three unknown people. He was only given a minimum sentence for murder because a consulting psychologist successfully argued before the court that the murderer's actions were partly caused by his supposedly *low self-esteem* resulting from losing his job previously.

In numerous cases, it is true the criminals have been treated dreadfully by others. But even this is no excuse for doing evil. God holds all older people who lead children into doing evil responsible (see Matthew 18:6). But He also holds every individual who does wrong responsible, regardless of their behaviour (see Ezekiel 18:1-32).

Numerous criminals have been abused no more than countless others who do not commit crime. But many of these criminals make up a sad story to obtain the *sympathy* of the judge and/or jury and end up getting off with just a warning or a minor punishment. In his book "Forbidden Knowledge", Boston University's Roger Shattuck concludes his case studies by saying that knowing too much about a person's past creates an *empathy* response in us which can blind us to the atrocious crimes the person has committed.⁵ For example, most Americans excused the sexual immorality of their previous President because he was supposedly emotionally abused as a child.

It is true our past does affect our behaviour much. But regardless of this, God holds us responsible for every one of our sins, even the smallest, unless they are pardoned through Jesus Christ.

Bible Study Questions

1. List nine errors about repentance.
2. What error did Martin Luther make about repentance prior to his conversion to Jesus Christ?
3. Is repentance an optional pre-conversion seeking after God?
4. Explain the relationship between conviction of sin and repentance.
5. What is the difference between repentance and religious penance?
6. What is wrong with the idea that our repentance at conversion can involve just an exceptionally general change of heart attitudes to sin without any change of heart towards our specific known sins?
7. What were the results which Augustine of Hippo recorded, of the compromising preaching of many early Catholic leaders in relation to the sins of gluttony and drunkenness of some of their so-called "converts"?
8. What errors can occur when we base our views of repentance on the theories of secular psychologists about how humans learn bad habits?

⁵ "The Australian" newspaper, Tuesday August 3, 1999, Sydney, Australia, page 15.

9. When Paul and Peter ministered to people who were sinning, did God tell his ministers to command the people to repent now or to wait for months or years until after they had been healed of their hurts and rejections?
10. When Nathan confronted King David with his sins of adultery and murder, did God lead Nathan to say God understood that David had sinned like this because he had previously suffered so much hurt and rejection?

Be careful what you allow your mind to think

We must be very careful what we allow into our minds if we wish to limit sin in our lives. Our minds are imperfect and therefore open to suggestion. Here is a simple illustration: Ask a friend, “How do you spell ‘SILK’?” Then say, “What do cows drink?” You will mostly find the person will wrongly answer ‘MILK’.