

The Doctrine of Repentance

We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. (Article of Faith 4)

Many of us learned this in Primary, all of us should recognize it as the fourth Article of Faith. Although the Articles of Faith are not complete with regard to the gospel, they are key. This article includes principles and ordinances, which will allow us to start on the gospel path. The principles are what interest me today – Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and Repentance.

The root of the word from which we get “repentance” has to do with a change of mind¹. In fact, in the Old Testament the word is frequently used with simply that meaning². However, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, repentance is converted into a doctrine of the gospel, dealing specifically with the concept of changing our mind with respect to our standing before God. The concept is distinct from the Old Testament teaching, which emphasizes change of behavior, and deals instead with a change of heart. Christ spoke of conversion³ as this basic change of heart, and made it one of the hallmarks of gospel life. The gospel takes carnal humans and makes them something new. The process is achieved by understanding and believing Christ's mission, then depending on the power of his atonement to become new creatures. Repentance is the name for the mechanism used; conversion is the consequence.

There are, however, some common shortcomings in our understanding of the doctrine of repentance which limit our ability to benefit fully from its power. The two that have troubled me the most deal with repentance as an action, and actions as part of repentance⁴.

Frequently when teaching about repentance it is convenient to emphasize the change one undergoes as a consequence of one particular sin. We speak of the steps of repentance, usually given as recognition of sin, sorrow for sin, asking forgiveness, making

1 See [Bible Dictionary](#), “Repentance”

2 See, for example, Genesis 6:6 and Exodus 13:17

3 See Luke 22:31, 32

4 OK, that is very convenient wording. That was an accident, believe it or not. I knew what the two things were I wanted to describe; when I looked for words for them, I realized they fit this way.

restitution, and ceasing from the sin. These are all parts of repentance. However, I believe it is a mistake to consider repentance of a single sin to fit the repentance that is described in the Article of Faith. Repentance as there mentioned describes a change of our entire being, a change in how we are going to live in the future. Repentance for a single sin or misdeed is a part of it, but it is not to be confused with the entirety. Doctrine and Covenants 82:7 teaches this doctrine:

And now, verily I say unto you, I, the Lord, will not lay any sin to your charge; go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God.

All of our sins are linked to a rejection of God. Any sin opens the door to returning to that rejection, and endangers our entire salvation. Therefore, it is not sufficient to feel remorse for a single sin; rather, repentance signifies relinquishing all desires for evil, and erasing every form of rebellion we can recognize in our lives. Repentance can then be viewed as an ongoing process, and not an isolated action.

The second misunderstanding is, I think, more insidious; that is, misunderstanding the role of actions in repentance. Certainly, ceasing from the sin is a part of repentance. In fact, if we continue in the same sin after claiming to repent, it should certainly call into question the reality of our repentance. But, is cessation from sin repentance?

A telling example comes from the experiences of Alma the Younger. In Mosiah 27 we read the story of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, how they began in wickedness, and were stopped by a miraculous intervention. Alma in particular was left in a coma for two days. Verse 24 relates what happened when he awoke:

For, said he, I have repented of my sins, and have been redeemed of the Lord; behold I am born of the Spirit.

If we consider action as a necessary part of repentance, I would ask, what actions did Alma take during those two days? He was unconscious! In fact, there was nothing in his behavior which changed during those days. His actions in the remainder of his life were a powerful testimony to the changes he had made, but the actions were not repentance. His own account of the experience in Alma 38:8 to his son Shiblon helps explain:

And it came to pass that I was three days and three nights in the

most bitter pain and anguish of soul; and never, until I did cry out unto the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy, did I receive a remission of my sins. But behold, I did cry unto him and I did find peace to my soul.

What changed was not his behavior, rather the basis for his behavior. Once he cried unto Jesus his sins were gone and he was free.

And that is precisely what makes the emphasis on behavior such an insidious heresy. If repentance works remission of sins based on our behavior, then we have no need of a Redeemer. It is sufficient to cease from sin, and we are saved. When we put it that way, it is obviously an incorrect doctrine. But it is not usually presented in so many words. That is why I began by linking the first two principles of the gospel. We begin with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, together with a correct understanding of his mission and his power. Then we are able to come to the true repentance, which involves submitting our hearts and wills to him, and acting in accordance with any plan or desire he has for us.

Before concluding I wish to emphasize that neither repentance for an individual sin nor cessation from sin should be ignored as important concepts. They are both necessary as we progress towards being like Christ. The only reason why I have singled them out here is because they are not, by themselves, the entirety of repentance. They are a part of what comprises this key aspect of discipleship.

Repentance, then, truly is central to the doctrine of the gospel. The gospel is intended to transform us into Celestial beings. Such a transformation cannot take place based on temporal concerns, but must arise from the central fact of the gospel, the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we exercise faith in Him we then begin the process of changing our hearts and minds so that we become His, we are cleansed from sin, and we ultimately receive that eternal life which has been prepared for the righteous.