

**Protected by Common Law Copyright**  
**This may be copied for personal use only.**

William P. Wilson, M. D.  
Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry  
Duke University Medical Center  
Durham, N. C.

Director, Institute of Christian Growth  
Box 2357 Burlington, N. C.  
27216-2347

## **ESSAYS**

### **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF REPENTANCE**

Christian psychotherapy requires the use of spiritual interventions. There is a triad of interventions that are of critical importance if we are to deal with sin in the lives of our patients. Confession is necessary to bring about repentance. Repentance is necessary for forgiveness to be given. It is only with these interventions that the person can be cleansed of the residuals of their sin. The primary residual is guilt. Of greatest importance is repentance.

Repentance is a term that in the minds of most persons has religious implications. To the person who has no religious commitment, the concept of repenting is expressed in a kind of contrition that is designed to lessen the likelihood of retaliation or rejection if the act has caused the offended person pain. When a person has disobeyed the law, it's aim is to lessen the likelihood or the severity of expected punishment. In any case, repentance in the unregenerate man is not likely to result in any profound change in his behavior. To say, "I'm sorry" is often a social convention even though there is a meaningful use of the term "I'm sorry" when unintentional or accidental slights or hurts have occurred and man wishes to acknowledge his empathetic response to the pain he has inflicted.

In contrast, Christian repentance is defined as "The act or process of repenting; contrition for one's sin together with dedication of oneself to the abandonment of unworthy purposes and values, and to the amendment of one's life." There is then greater depth to the meaning of repentance for the Christian. We do, therefore, expect the psychological consequences of Christian repentance to be greater. If we search the literature, we do not find an analysis that helps us understand the process. We must then examine our experience which reveals that there are at least three psychological events that occur in the act or process of Christian repentance:

1. The cognitive event is to recognize the origin of the painful emotions that occur when a person sins. The natural and unregenerate man views sin as causing himself or someone else pain when he disobeys the law. All men know what is "right" and they are taught that if they disobey the law they deserve punishment. In a like manner, they also know that they are free to do wrong. An intellectual understanding of sin or wrong doing is necessary for repentance.

2. The emotional component of repentance is to experience, as a result of the recognition of his sin, one or several of the emotions of fear, shame, confusion, pain and emptiness. Here sinful man finds himself reflexly responding to the results of his transgressions and any or all of the above emotions may occur. Man does not like pain so he must do one of two things. He must avoid it or inhibit it. If the load is too great he cannot inhibit it, so he has to seek to avoid it. This he can only do if he behaves differently. To do this though, he must hide from the opportunity to misbehave or he must change his patterns of behavior. The natural man will at first inhibit his pain, then try to hide from it, but if he is to be rid of it, he must manage the stimulus that causes it. Most often he does not know how. If the cause is sin, he must turn from it. Seeking an answer to his problem, he may encounter God. Realizing that he has sinned against God, he becomes remorseful. Being remorseful, he develops a desire to be changed and behave in a manner acceptable to God. To do this, he has to develop a submissive, humble, and contrite attitude.

3. The behavioral component of repentance begins when he humbly confesses his sin and submits himself to the Lordship of Christ. In this act, he surrenders his will. All shame, fear, sorrow, pain, disgust, and emptiness are detached from the memories of his misdeeds because he has been forgiven and knows it. At the same time, anger is attached to wrong (sinful) ideas in order that they may be inhibited. Finally, in the process of change the Holy Spirit fills him with love which energizes God's directions for his life. Thus an intimate relationship with God is restored and the individual is made whole (1).

It appears that for the natural man, the psychological process of being sorry is structured so as to alleviate pain by recognizing its origin in his misdeeds and then by increasing the intensity of the painful emotions that result from this recognition, he can hopefully expiate his guilt. Unfortunately, true forgiveness is not available so that expiation cannot be complete. The world does not seem to care about his pain so he continues to carry his guilt or shame with him. Because he does not change his values, the natural man realizes that he cannot change his behavior and he, therefore, must live with the fear that he will do the same things again. This creates despair.

Knowing that he cannot control himself and knowing that these transgressions are wrong, the guilt can reach such magnitude that he will be overwhelmed. No defense mechanism is adequate. Projection, displacement, rationalization, etc.,

do not suffice to relieve pain. There is no way out! To be healed, man must realize that spiritual "repentance" is a necessity.

The use of the adjective spiritual to modify the noun repentance implies that in some way man's spirit is involved in the act. The act of repentance involves the man's will. Man says, "I will", to God's commands when he has "turned around." Will is a compound function of the spirit of man and his intellect. Man's spirit drives him to activity and when his spirit is joined to God's spirit, it is channelized into God's activity and the life that results is truly spiritual (2). This is in contrast to the unregenerate state where man's spirit is directed by his intellect and can be either good or bad. The life that results is human.

Others in discussing the subject of repentance confirm a definite relationship between the recognition of sin, repentance, the spirit of man, and the alleviation of pain. Repentance, to be more than a futile natural-emotional exercise seems to require a reconciliation of man with God. With reconciliation, there is a joining of the spirit of man to the spirit of God which results in increased inner harmony and peace. This spiritual union often tested, sometimes strained, but forever unbroken may be described as the most "intimate" relationship between two beings.

The desire for repentance is a consequence of suffering. Suffering is defined as an unremitting emotional state that arises as a consequence of some external or internal stimulus that elicits sustained painful emotions. Colquhoun (3) has identified the emotion as sorrow. Erikson (4) considers them to be shame and disgust. I have identified them as shame, pain, sorrow, disgust, fear, anger, and emptiness (5). Whatever the emotion, there is pain and pain needs to be relieved so that homeostasis is restored. If the pain (6) is the anguish that arises from the "wages of sin," it is in the final analysis a direct result of a separation from God and can only be alleviated when man and God are reconciled.

In ordinary existence, man can deal with painful emotions if he has adequate coping mechanisms. If these fail man will suffer. It is, therefore, necessary to recognize the reality of sin if we are to understand the need for repentance. Sin is always against God. Jesus made this clear when he related the prodigal's confession to his father. "I have sinned *before* you and *against* God. David in Psalm 51 said, "Against thee and thee only have I sinned." Therefore, transgressions whether they involved only ourselves or others are transgressions against God and repentance must then be directed to him. It is by His forgiveness that we obtain relief. Man then does not obtain relief by confessing his contrition to other men. He must bring his "humble and contrite heart" to God if he is to be healed.

Unregenerate man finds this difficult. His difficulty arises out of his refusal to recognize the honor and glory that belong to God and his role as judge. Nevertheless, he will consider the possibility of appealing to God. When he does,

his decision is not usually out of faith but out of a need for relief from his unremitting pain. Since his appeal does not usually include a commitment on his part, relief is not obtained. When he does not obtain relief, he will question the existence of God or muddle his way through each crisis burdened by his ever increasing load of painful emotions. Under this burden, man often wonders how a supposedly loving God can let him suffer (7).

Martin (8) has commented on God's role in the origin of suffering. He believes that biblically there is no reason to doubt that God is also the author of suffering. The question is for what reason and when. Usually man can recognize that suffering is a result of transgression, therefore, he will attempt to explain it as follows: considerable numbers of people believe that all suffering is retribution for wrongdoing. That is, life continuously and immediately pays out in just measure what we deserve.

This is a very early and persistent Old Testament idea. The people of Israel believed firmly that God punished iniquity and rewarded righteousness. Look for example at Deuteronomy 11:26-28, "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day. And the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God." Or at Jeremiah 17:4-8, 10, "Thus says the Lord: Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched place of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by the water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. . . I the Lord search the mind and try the heart, to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings."

Suffering here is something above what is deserved. In essence, it is limited in quality and quantity. Instead it may not "fit the crime" in that it can be too severe as may occur with the loss of a loved one or it may last too long as may occur when a person is permanently blinded or paralyzed.

In either instance, unregenerate man has difficulty in understanding and accepting punishment. Therefore, he lashes out at the "system," or mankind, or the establishment. Sometimes he even rails out at God who he also sees as unjust. Justice to him is being free of pain even though he has transgressed.

No matter what he does, it is a fact that man does suffer. Therefore, it is a worthwhile endeavor to attempt to understand the mechanisms by which man moves from sin to suffering to relief of the suffering through repentance.

Unregenerate man has only his past life with its memories as spiritual resources. Since his spirit has the capacity to be directed toward both good and evil ends, it is likely that he will continue to suffer simply because he cannot stop sinning. If he examines his life, he quickly becomes aware of his inability to stop his self-defeating behavior. His coping mechanisms fail him and in response, he becomes angry. If he can project his anger, he will, but this is also self-defeating since it provokes retaliation or rejection. If he projects it onto God he cannot hurt Him, so he receives no satisfaction. At this point, the person will experience what Cramer has called "frozen rage." Frozen rage gives rise to sorrow (depression) and a sense of personal disappointment that arises out of an inability to control the pain. The frustration makes him feel hopeless, so hopeless at times that he may commit suicide.

Sorrow is an outgrowth of the man's loss of self esteem, a feeling of a loss of love in this instance for oneself. Cramer has pointed out that sorrow of Judas was a human sorrow that grew out of his disappointment in Jesus who failed to submit to the pull of the mob, the Sanhedrin, and the Romans. Judas turned the "frozen rage" on himself. Judas did not repent and change his direction, instead he died by his own hand.

The high frequency of suicide among alcoholics and drug addicts is an outgrowth of this hopelessness. I have witnessed this many times. It was most poignantly expressed by a black heroin addict that I once encountered. I was asking him about his life and part of my examination related to his anticipation of the future. I asked him, "What hope do you have for the future?" He replied, "Doc, I gotta have hope." "But man that's not the question. Do you have hope?" "Doc, I gotta have hope!" "Come on, man, tell me. *Do you have hope?*" At this point he grabbed my hand and pulled it to his cheek. As the tears trickled down his cheek and across my hand, he sobbed, "Doc, there ain't no hope! Doc, tell me there is hope!"

If, however, the suffering is not intense enough to bring the sinning man to repentance, he will dodge it. Davies (10) has noted that this person is an egocentric who has not been able to acknowledge his sin or yield to God and so remains entrapped in his sin. He suffers because of his egocentricity. Reality for him is two dimensional. (1) His body and its needs and (2) his soul - his intellect and his emotions. With these, he attempts to resolve his pain. He does not recognize the spiritual origin of his suffering. Faith to him is something that the primitive and superstitious man has to possess. A belief in the transcendent is for the weak and inadequate. "Modern" man does not need such a crutch.

The spiritual dimension does not exist for unregenerate man except as a transitory consideration, a grasping at straws, a futile superficial attempt to cope. He grasps, reaches out, but at the same time he denies the efficacy of true "repentance" to relieve his pain and suffering. This man with all his pain and suffering has no interest, will, desire, or inclination to surrender emotions and

memories for what he considers some "pie in the sky" religiosity. And so he remains in the state of despair, pain, suffering, pride, selfishness (11).

Unless and until the unregenerate/unrepentant man yields, his sin, his suffering, his painful emotions will increase in intensity. At the point at which his pain becomes intolerable, the unregenerate man is in despair. It is the failure of egocentric man to achieve his own fulfillment (12). Lewis points out that unregenerate man is without spirit cognition or spiritual recourse (13).

Cherbonnier, expounding on "hardness of heart", saw man's refusal to repent in somewhat different terms. "Repentance is the one thing that men involved in sin find most difficult to accomplish. They will go to any length to avoid it. They are in this case the authors of their own justification and therefore their own deception (14)." They do, therefore, lack humility.

Uleyn (15) believes that humility is a necessary prerequisite to repentance; "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted," (Luke 4:11) by God's judgment of sin. "This is how God speaks to you: Your sin must in any case be punished, either by yourself or by men. Sin, therefore, is punished either by the man who repents or by God who condemns!" Without humility the painful emotions which were referred to earlier can evidence themselves in full force; singly, or in concert and rise to a crescendo of inward directed anger, self-hate, confusion, and fear (16).

Here the humble, remorseful man is literally impelled to ask, "What is 'repentance' if not indignation against oneself?" Uleyn continues with, "We have to make a judgment. . . which becomes a judgment in the first person: I have sinned."

Acceptance of the judgment, despite the pain and suffering that sin involves indicates a true awareness of the inadequacy of self and the probable solution which is a humble appeal to God for relief. This appeal to God is the moment in time when remorseful man experiences a psychological change in personality. Remorse, accompanied by the development of humility, and a desire for a change in direction, brings about the sequence of confession, forgiveness, acceptance, and salvation through Jesus Christ. This process is always preceded by true "repentance."

Uleyn observes that "authentic and existential self accusation is an extraordinarily painful but honest process. Remorse requires that we know we need to be made over completely and that we must be changed in order to become a new person. It is an enormous struggle for prideful man to humble himself and see himself as he really is. Still the self-examination which remorse evokes is a new revelation in which one comes to the realization that evil as he is nevertheless known and sustained from beyond himself (17). The assurance that he is known and sustained, comes as a gift of God to unregenerate man. There is no longer only a desperate cry to God for help, or a momentary glance in the

direction of God, but a profound change." With this realization comes the desire to confess, to bring out into the open all of his dirty laundry and lay it before God.

Louis Monden observed that "confessing one's guilt is an archetypal experience, one so deeply enclosed in the very structure of the human psyche that the need for it will never disappear." But Monden also observes, "Modern, unrepentant man no longer sees in the confession of sins a real admission of his guilt (18)." It is, therefore, necessary that he be brought to the realization that he will have to come before the judge and that there he will indeed be judged. Jesus emphasized the certainty of judgment and if a man is to be truly repentant, he has to accept this certainty.

With confession, there is an expected response by an infinitely merciful God. He forgives! (I John 1:9) With forgiveness we are made whole and we can then accept ourselves just as we have been accepted by God. We are saved from death, from our slavery, and from future slavery. We are set free!

But salvation has not set us totally free, for our human nature is still living within us and if we are not vigilant there will be lapses in our behavior. We will try to control our own lives, we will be selfish, and our desire to be free of all chafing restrictions will lead us to go our own way. When we do this, we grieve or quench the Holy Spirit and we are once again separated from God. We immediately feel the loss. Until we restore our relationship with repentance and confession, our separation continues and we live in the loneliness of our self imposed isolation. We will then, as we have before, cry out once again to God for relief and restoration of our relationship. God will always be faithful if we are truly repentant (19).

The pastoral counselor, psychologist, and psychiatrist often see symptomatology which in a regenerated man may manifest itself in mood swings that suggest manic depressive illness. In reality, these individuals are clinging with an almost superhuman effort of will to the one thing that gives "meaning to life." This regenerate man frequently can be found to have an area of conflict between his human nature and his understanding and knowledge of God's will for his life. His alternating moods result from the relative dominance of his will, in which case he or she is depressed, and God's will, in which case he or she has peace. Because the person has not repented about this unsundered part of their life, the Holy Spirit continues to try to guide him on to the right path.

We have observed from our clinical experience and from the scholars we have quoted, that the dimensions of repentance appear to be cognitively psychospiritual. Faith which is a sure knowledge that all is controlled and progressing to a favorable outcome seems to facilitate the process of repentance. True repentance results in movement from painful emotions and psychological distress at one end of the continuum along the spectrum to psychospiritual awareness, to spiritual cognition, to homeostasis.

The process of true repentance involves the whole person and is not only intellectual, emotional, or spiritual. The fact of "human being" incontrovertibly incorporates three dimensions--body, mind, and spirit. Pain as a negative stimulus always elicits a response. The stimulus of pain may be physical, psychical, or spiritual. The response to pain is not always limited to a single dimension but is always multifaceted. Therefore, because pain arises from many causes and the response to it is varied, differentiation of the cause and effect of pain can sometimes be difficult to diagnose and treat. It is then necessary that the spiritual dimension of man be included in treatment plans. The need for repentance has to be made apparent and the willingness to repent be exercised if healing is to take place.

The psychological dimensions of repentance can be a paradigm for "life" or conversely a paradigm for "death". The choice is clearly a determination of the free will of the human being.

The importance of repentance can be best illustrated by describing its effect in the treatment of patients with psycho spiritual problems. We include among these criminal behavior, alcoholism, drug addiction, adultery and homosexuality.

Tom was one of two sons of a truck driver and an epileptic mother. His father worked in a distant town and was home only on weekends. He grew up in a happy home but did not learn self-discipline simply because his mother was often unable to enforce discipline. He grew up, enlisted in the service, and eventually began to use drugs. Caught, he was sent to prison. There he had to fight to gain the respect of the other prisoners. He did so because of his willingness to be hurt. He still bears the scars of these encounters.

In time, a Christian witnessed to him about God's love and forgiveness. Because he was in pain he became increasingly aware of his wrongdoing and he was remorseful. Finally, he understood this willful wrongdoing and was sorry that he had disobeyed man's and God's laws. He confessed his sin, accepted his forgiveness and was healed. He was released from prison, married, is going to college and works in the prisons at every opportunity to help others.

Mary was a girl who never liked herself. Even though she was attractive and had great charm she nevertheless found that the only way she could feel worthwhile was to give herself sexually to every man who wanted her. As her load of guilt and shame increased, she became increasingly more remorseful and finally had to be admitted to the hospital. She confessed her sin, but although she knew that she had to repent to be healed, she was afraid to give up her sexual liaisons because she did not think that a man would like her if she did not submit to him. In time, she lived with a man and once again her load of guilt and shame became unbearable. Finally, she realized the necessity to repent--to be sorry for her willful disobedience and to sincerely desire to behave differently. As she prayed, she began to sincerely plead with God to forgive her and set her free of her

slavery to her sexual desires. She literally washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair as she sobbed, "You've got me, you've got me, you've got me, I'm yours!"

Jack was homosexual. He saw his homosexuality as a stumbling block for he had recently become a Christian and found that he still could not control his sexual problem. He struggled for several years and then finally came for treatment. After we had determined the family dynamics and how he had become homosexual because of them, he was still unable to control his desires. Finally, I said to him one day, "You have apparently never repented of your homosexuality. Are you sorry that you are homosexual?" "Yes," he said. I suggested that we pray and he could tell God that he was sorry and could ask Him to take away his sexual desires for men. He began to pray and with recognizable sincerity told God how he thought and felt about his problem. Suddenly, he sat up and said, "I'm on fire, I'm on fire!" I said, "Where?" He said, "Inside, I'm being refined. God is cleaning me up." And he was! He has had no further desires for homosexual encounters since that day.

Repentance is necessary if psychological healing is to take place.

### **Conclusions**

We have in the foregoing observed that the unrepentant and unregenerate man is unable to separate his painful emotions from his evil and/or painful thoughts, therefore, pain is likely to be a constant problem in his life. The need for repentance, i.e., remorse and a desire to turn away from their wrong activity, can only be brought into awareness by the Holy Spirit. Once the remorseful man acknowledges and depends on God to relieve his painful emotions, repentance is effectuated. There is then a detachment of the painful emotions from the memories of wrongdoing and their catharsis or removal. God's supply of pleasant emotions (love and joy) is then attached to right values and ideas so that psycho spiritual homeostasis is achieved. The recipient having become aware of the source of happiness and peace seeks to enhance and retain the established intimate relationship with God resulting in an awareness of further wrongdoing. Because sin quenches the Holy Spirit's fire in the life of the believer there is a desire to restore the relationship. Remorse, repentance, confession, forgiveness and acceptance then follow. The relationship is restored. Pain is no longer a problem.

There is then psychological validity to the theology of repentance. The entire Bible teaches repentance as a necessity if man is to have a right relationship with God and our fellow man. Jesus, therefore, taught repentance, confession, and forgiveness as a method of restoring wrong relationships.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. John Wesley, *Survey*, Volumes II, VI, VII.
2. Lewis, Clive S. *Miracles*. A Preliminary Study. London: Collins Fontana Books, 1967, Appendix A.
3. John Colquhour, *Repentance*. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965.
4. Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1963, p. 251, ff.
5. Wilson, William P., M. D. Professor of Psychiatry, Lecture Series, Christ and Mental Health, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC
6. Martin, James. *Suffering Man, Loving God*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969, pp. 29, 34, 35.
7. Lewis, Clive S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1962. p. 90.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
9. Cramer, Raymond C. *The Psychology of Jesus and Mental Health*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959, pp. 68-77.
10. Davies, David C. *The Art of Dodging Repentance*. London: Canterbury Press, 1952.
11. Quentin O. Hyder. *The Christian's Handbook of Psychiatry*, Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1971, pp. 74ff.
12. Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1971, p. 1.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 7
14. Cherbonner, Lab. E. *Hardness of Heart*. A contemporary interpretation of the doctrine of sin. Garden City: Doubleday, 1955, p. 125ff.
15. Uleyn, Arnold. *The Recognition of Guilt: A Study in Pastoral Psychology*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1969, pp. 34-36, 69-71.
16. Lloyd-Jones, Martin. *From Fear to Faith*. Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967.

17. Stinette, Charley R. *Anxiety and Faith: Toward Resolving Anxiety in the Christian Community*. Greenwich, CT: Seabury Press, 1955, pp. 107-113.
18. Monden, S. J. Louis. Chapter 8, Confession: Psychology is Not Enough, pp. 167ff. *The Mystery of Sin and Forgiveness*. Michael J. Taylor, Ed., Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1971.
19. Tournier, Paul. *Guilt and Grace: A Psychological Study*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962, pp. 143-151, 190-197.