

YOU NEED TO REPENT: WHAT REPENTANCE IS
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LIFE AND MINISTRY

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART I: DEFINING REPENTANCE.....	2
Repentance in General Terms	2
Contrition and Faith	4
Repentance Part I: Contrition	5
Repentance in the Narrow Sense	9
Repentance Part II: Faith	10
Conversion and Daily Repentance	12
Erroneous Teachings of Repentance	13
Transformation of Life and Will	13
Requirements of Contrition	15
Fruits of Repentance	19
Repentance Causes Forgiveness	20
PART II: REPENTANCE IN OUR LIVES.....	23
Why repent?	23
God Commands Repentance	23
God’s Gracious Will	26
How We Repent	27
Passages That Inspire Contrition	30
Describing Sin	30
God’s Justice	32

Scriptural Commands	33
Devotional Works	34
Passages Which Encourage Faith	35
The Use of the Sacraments	38
Baptism	38
The Lord's Supper	39
What Repentance (Might) Look Like for Us	39
Practical Suggestions for the Public Ministry	42
Private Confession	43
Confession between Members	45
Public Confession	47
Corporate Worship	49
Christian Education	52
Evangelism	54
Counseling	56
CONCLUSION.....	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	58

ABSTRACT

This thesis began primarily as a doctrinal endeavor to deepen my knowledge of biblical repentance, but at a certain point, my focus began shifting towards how all the information I was learning might be applied. I became deeply impressed by my own need to repent and the need for a repentance-focused ministry. The reader will find that the structure of this thesis progresses in a similar direction, beginning with a brief overview of the biblical doctrine, proceeding from there to answer the question, “Why is the need for repentance so urgent? This is by no means an exhaustive study on the doctrine of repentance. If the reader is interested in such a study, Chemnitz’s *Examination of the Council of Trent: Vol. II*, Gerhard’s *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, and his *Commonplace XVIII: On Repentance* are excellent resources. It is the goal of this paper and my prayer that God will move the reader to see the necessity of making repentance a regular part of our lives and ministries.

INTRODUCTION

You have a serious need to repent. Spoken to the head, these words are not even a little bit debatable. Say them to the heart, and you've got a controversy on your hands. That I am a sinner and that sinners must repent is not at all an intellectually challenging proposition; it can be easily proven from Scripture. We all get it. But why, then, do we auto-pilot our way through the Confession and Absolution Sunday morning without really thinking about it? "Holy and merciful Father I confess that I am by nature sinful and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions.... For this I deserve your punishment both now and in eternity." I don't know how those words can be simultaneously believed with all our heart and spoken without a thought. And why is it such labor and toil for the preacher to make God's Law directly applicable to us? Why, when we pray, do we so often have a hard time coming up with things to confess? Why does the daily practice of repenting so easily become an afterthought, "Oh yeah, I forgot to recognize the fact that I'm a sinner today"? "You need to repent" is one of the most elemental of all biblical truths—and yet—the stiff-necked, self-important Pharisee within us all is not so convinced. He believes that repentance is important, but for others, not for him. He may concede that we ought to be living in a certain vaguely repentant state, where we officially recognize from time to time that we are sinful. But that we have a dire need to sincerely repent of our sins today, right now—well, whatever for? Let us now, by our study of repentance, endeavor to prove him wrong.

PART I: DEFINING REPENTANCE

Repentance in General Terms

Before we discuss its necessity, we must first establish the meaning of repentance. Scriptures often express the action of repenting in Hebrew by the verbs *šûv* (Ezek 18:30-32) and *nāḥam* (Jer 31:19), and in Greek, often by the verb *metanoēō* (Lk 13:3). The general idea of repentance is change, a change that occurs in the heart¹ (Joel 2:12-13; 2 Chr 6:37-38, NIV) which results in a change of life and behavior for the better.^{2 3} Especially in those passages that use the Hebrew verb *šûv*, a certain turning action is implied, where the sinner turns away from sin towards God.⁴ The words *nāḥam* and *metanoēō* imply a change that occurs in the mind, as an individual rejects one thing and chooses its opposite.^{5 6}

Of what does this change consist? The results of repentance help us answer that question. In Acts 2:37–38, after the Pentecost crowd heard Peter’s sermon, they were cut to the heart and asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.” According to Peter, repentance

1. Johann Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, ed. Rachel K. Melvin, trans. Elmer Hohle, (Malone: Repristination Press, 2013) 171.

2. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 172.

3. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 217.170.

4. Francis Brown et al., *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2015) electronic copy.

5. Brown et al., *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, electronic copy.

6. Frederick W Danker, William Arndt, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) electronic copy.

results in the forgiveness of sins. Likewise, Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3, and Luke 24:47 understand the forgiveness of sins as a result of repentance. Elsewhere, repentance is said to result in life (Acts 11:18), salvation (2 Cor 7:10), and knowledge of the truth (2 Tim 2:25). And according to Jeremiah 5, forgiveness of sins is actually impossible for those who do not repent. The prophet describes Israel's refusal to repent and the Lord declares, "Why should I forgive you?" (5:7). "Should I not punish them for this?... Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?" (5:9). Therefore, we conclude that repentance directly results in the forgiveness of sins, and no sinner obtains forgiveness of sins without it. Now, we return to our question: of what does this change in repentance consist? It consists of whatever may be necessary for obtaining the forgiveness of sins. According to Scripture, the two things that must take place in the heart of a sinner in order to receive forgiveness are contrition, and faith which trusts in Christ for forgiveness.^{7 8}

A quick note is appropriate. This paper in no way intends to deny the doctrines of objective justification or universal justification. Objective justification teaches that completely apart from any contrition, faith, action, or merit of the sinner, Christ's death on the cross forgives sins and justifies a person. Universal justification teaches that this has taken place for all people. Scripture says that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19). Thus, we confess with the apostle that the sins of the world have been forgiven, and this was not caused by our repentance, but by the sacrificial death of the Savior. However, Paul still finds it necessary to urge the Corinthians to become reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:20). True, God has forgiven the sins of the world, but this is a gift that must be received. Until they, through repentance, receive the forgiveness of sins offered to them in

7. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, Vol. II, 172.

8. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Augsburg Confession*, 45.3-5.

Christ, sinners remain in an unreconciled relationship to God and carry on in their hatred towards him, ultimately resulting in God's punishment.

Contrition and Faith

Consider now the following examples from Scripture that demonstrate the two parts of repentance, contrition and faith. In 2 Samuel 12, the Lord sends the prophet Nathan to bring David to repentance for the sins he committed against Uriah and his wife Bathsheba. Nathan confronts David with his sin, and pronounces God's judgment upon him and his household. Moved by Nathan's powerful testimony, David displays contrition for his actions when he confesses, "I have sinned against the LORD" (verse 13). Following his confession, Nathan replies, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die," and David gives every indication that he believes it, expressing his confidence in the words of Psalm 32 and 51.

Daniel's repentant prayer in Daniel 9:4–19 bears this same two-fold mark of contrition and faith. Interestingly, Daniel is actually confessing the sins of Israel, but he appears to claim ownership of those sins for himself and identifies himself among the sinful by his simple use of the pronoun "we" rather than "they." Verses 4–17 of his prayer belong to contrition, as Daniel confesses the sin (vs. 5–6), expresses shame over the sin (7–8) as well as God's justice in punishing them (11–14). And in the midst of this confession, we see Daniel's faith, as he places his confidence in the Lord's forgiveness (v. 9) and his "great mercy" (v. 18).

The necessity of contrition and faith for true repentance also becomes apparent when we consider the two-fold nature of God's message for human beings ever since the Fall into sin. It consists of Law which produces sorrow and anguish in the heart over sin, and the Gospel which produces faith in the forgiveness of our sins. God spoke this way to the very first sinners, Adam

and Eve, by proclaiming both the seriousness and consequences of their sin (Law) and offering the gracious promise of an offspring that would crush Satan's head (Gospel) (Gen 3:15–19). We observe that this double proclamation of Law and Gospel produced contrition and faith by the fact that Adam and Eve raised up godly offspring who worshiped in faith and “called on the name of the LORD” (Gen 4:4; 26; Heb 11:4). Consider also the message of John the Baptist. The gospels record him preaching about the wrath of God and urging repentance (Matt 3:7–11) as well as pointing the crowds to “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). The entire Word of God can be divided into these same two parts, Law and Gospel. And as Gerhard says, “The Holy Spirit uses these two chief parts for the purpose that He may work repentance in the hearts of people.”⁹

Even God's own attributes indicate that repentance involves contrition and faith. God is both righteous and merciful. As we contemplate his righteousness, his deep hatred of sin, and our deep involvement in sin, this must produce contrition in us. God's righteousness demands it. And as we contemplate God's mercy, that is, his promise of forgiveness in Christ, faith in this mercy will take root.¹⁰ How else could a sinner become reconciled with the one true God who is both righteous and merciful, without taking to heart the relationship between our sin and God's righteousness and mercy?

Repentance Part 1: Contrition

We have been defining repentance based on the fact that it results in the forgiveness of sins. Whatever is necessary to receive the forgiveness of sins, we have said, must be an essential part

9. Johann Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, ed. Rachel K. Melvin, trans. Elmer Hohle, (Malone: Repristination Press, 2013), 177.

10. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 176.

of repentance. And as Walther says, “There is no question but that contrition is necessary if a person wishes to obtain forgiveness of his sins.”¹¹ But what is contrition?

Peter wept bitterly (Matt 26:75); the entire city of Nineveh (animals included!) covered themselves in sackcloth (Jonah 3:8); the crowd at Pentecost was cut to the heart (Acts 2:37), and the unnamed sinner at Corinth was at risk for developing an overwhelming, excessive sorrow (2 Cor 2:7). The essence of contrition is, as Melancthon writes in the Augsburg Confession, a terror of conscience over sin (45.3-5). Chemnitz defines contrition as a “serious fear of conscience that recognizes the wrath of God against sins and is sorry that it has offended God by this kind of sin.”¹² In his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Chemnitz goes into greater detail: The sinner begins to understand the magnitude of his sins, he realizes the judgment of God against his sin, and is moved to terror at the wrath of God. The conscience grieves deeply that it has offended God and begins to hate sin.¹³

We must be cautious, however, about describing contrition too specifically, lest an especially conscientious person begin to doubt whether his contrition was real or not. Furthermore, contrition may be motivated by many different feelings and emotions. For example, believers will often feel contrition because it pains us to know that we have displeased our good and loving God, whereas a person who has not yet been converted will experience contrition simply out of fear that God will punish her. Wherever it comes from, this much is

11. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 249.

12. Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981) 65.

13. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Vol. II*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 587.

certain: the essence of contrition is a disturbance of the conscience which leads the sinner to desire forgiveness.

We should not suppose however, that contrition is a feeling we can conjure up with our own mental effort in order to get the repentance process up and running. Chemnitz asks, “Can a man of himself and by his own powers begin and effect the things that are required for true contrition? Not at all.¹⁴ Attempting to do so only results in a hypocritical sort of contrition. In his Smalcald Articles, Luther calls it a contrived, feigned contrition, which we attempt to produce in ourselves. Instead, contrition must be passive, an anguish which we ourselves feel in the heart, but which is nevertheless caused by God.¹⁵ Jeremiah 23:29 says, “Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” If our heart is to be broken into pieces over sin, God’s Word is the tool for the job.

And if our repentance is to be true, then our heart must be broken. Scripture amply demonstrates that contrition is absolutely indispensable to true repentance. First of all, God commands it. “Rend your heart and not your garments” the prophet preaches (Joel 2:13). The sermons of John the Baptist, Christ, Peter, and Paul, condemn the sins of their listeners or otherwise expound the Law to the effect that their listeners have no choice other than to stop their ears or take heart and grieve their sin. Furthermore, we observe that contrition is present in every repentant individual in Scripture. Manasseh called upon God out of a distressed and humbled spirit (2 Chr 33:12); Peter’s audience was cut to the heart (Acts 2:37); the returned exiles wept as Ezra read from the Book of the Law (Neh 8:9); and following his confrontation with Nathan, David penned: “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart

14. Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, 66.

15. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Smalcald Articles*, 312.2.

you, God, will not despise” (Ps 51:17). On the other hand, whenever contrition is lacking, we read that the offenders are not repentant and not forgiven. Recall the example from Jeremiah chapter 5: “You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent (v.3)...Should I not punish them for this? (v.9).”

But do not think that contrition is some good or pleasing work by which we satisfy God’s wrath and make amends for our sin. That is not the reason for its necessity. Walther points out that contrition is not even our work; it is God’s work in us which he accomplishes through the preaching of the Law.¹⁶ Rather, contrition is necessary “on account of faith, which apprehends the forgiveness of sins.”¹⁷ As we will later prove, faith is that specific aspect of repentance by which forgiveness of sins is obtained, and faith cannot take place in a person’s heart unless there is contrition. “For a true saving faith has no existence in a proud, haughty and self-assured heart. Instead, true saving faith exists solely and alone in a humble, crushed, and repentant heart.”¹⁸ As Walther says, no one has interest, much less faith in the Savior of sinners until he has “been reduced to the state of a poor, lost, and condemned sinner.”¹⁹ Jesus himself commented, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matt 9:12). Just as no one seeks nor applies a

16. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 250.

17. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 249.

18. Johann Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. I*, ed. Rachel K. Melvin, trans. Elmer Hohle, (Malone: Repristination Press, 2006), 10.

19. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 249.

remedy who does not feel sick, no one seeks or embraces God's mercy in Christ who does not sincerely consider God's wrath against his sins.²⁰

We close our discussion on contrition with one final note: there is no measurable level of contrition which the sinner must meet. For, as we mentioned before, contrition is not a good work on our part that elicits an act of love from God nor does it merit the forgiveness of sins.²¹ Some have argued that contrition must reach a significant intensity, because God will not forgive a sin that is treated lightly. But, as Walther points out, God's Word does not prescribe any degree of contrition that is necessary to be forgiven. In fact, it describes rather diverse degrees of contrition among various people, all of whom receive the forgiveness of sins.²² Therefore we must maintain that there are no required degrees of contrition, rather, if a person merely desires forgiveness through Jesus, she has it.²³

Repentance in the Narrow Sense

Here, it is worth a brief mention that there are a few examples in Scripture where the word "repentance" appears to be synonymous with contrition.²⁴ Walther refers to these as repentance in the narrow sense.²⁵ According to his definition, repentance in the wide sense is inclusive of

20. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 583.

21. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 200.75.

22. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 252.

23. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 251.

24. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 249.

25. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 278.

both contrition and faith,²⁶ and that is how the word will be used for the rest of this paper. Several passages, however, such as Mark 1:15 and Acts 20:21 seem to speak of repentance in the narrow sense. In Mark 1:15, the Savior proclaims “Repent and believe the good news!” If Jesus were using the word “repentance” in the sense that includes contrition and faith, his encouragement to believe the good news would be “tautological.”²⁷ Similarly, in Acts 20:21 Paul says that he “declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” Here again, repentance appears to refer to nothing more than contrition, otherwise his encouragement to “have faith in the Lord Jesus” (to some interpreters) seems redundant. Thus, wherever repentance is placed alongside of faith, it is likely referring to just contrition.²⁸ Once more, this is not the sense of repentance that will be used for the remainder of this paper; rather, it is repentance as contrition and faith which we will be discussing.

Repentance Part II: Faith

We recall that repentance results in the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Jesus testifies in Luke 24:46–47, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” From this it naturally follows that faith is a necessary component of repentance, since faith in particular, is that which justifies and receives the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ For, “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness

26. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 277.

27. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 278.

28. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Formula of Concord*, 582.8.

29. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 192.36.

of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). Paul says that faith is the way by which may have peace with God and approach him” (Rom 5:1–2). The writer to the Hebrews adds that it is impossible to please God without faith (Heb 11:6). Therefore, any turning toward God which is said to result in the forgiveness of sins is incompatible with Scripture’s testimony unless this turning is accomplished and completed through faith in Christ. Gerhard deems it absurd to teach repentance without faith, and Scripture compels us to agree.³⁰ In fact, we may say that faith is the most essential part of repentance. As Gerhard says, faith is the “soul” of repentance.³¹

Consider the examples of Judas and Peter. Judas was “dreadfully contrite,”³² yet failed to receive the forgiveness of sins (Acts 1:25). Peter also committed a grave sin by his threefold denial of Christ and was moved to bitter remorse. And yet, he received absolution from the risen Christ’s own mouth and was encouraged to follow him once more (Jn 20:19; 21:15–19). What was the difference between Judas and Peter? “Judas did not believe and did not find strength through the gospel and the promise of Christ,”³³ whereas Peter was restored through faith to take hold of the promise of forgiveness.³⁴ Thus, faith is that part of repentance which makes all the difference.

In fact, we find in Scripture that the preaching of Jesus and his apostles had this as its entire purpose, namely, producing faith in the heart of contrite sinners. Jesus began his ministry proclaiming the good news of God, urging people to repent and believe it (Mk 1:14–15).

30. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 203.

31. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 163.

32. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 189.8.

33. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 189.8.

34. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis, Vol. II*, 202.

Likewise, John the Baptist urged repentance while, at the same time, pointing the crowds to the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). When Jesus commissioned Paul, his stated purpose was for Paul to turn Jew and Gentile, in repentance, “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18). According to Paul’s own words, that is precisely what he did: “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21). Whenever Christ and the apostles preached repentance, therefore, faith was always the goal.

Conversion and Daily Repentance

By this point, the reader may have gotten the impression that repentance is essentially synonymous with conversion. In fact, it often is. When Jesus uses the word “repent” in Luke 13:3, he is clearly talking about conversion.³⁵ But as Walther reminds us, repentance must also be a daily occurrence in the life of Christians after they have been converted.³⁶ Luther’s Large Catechism says that a believer’s repentance is daily launching “an earnest attack on the old creature and an entering into a new life,” by the grace, strength, and Spirit that we received in our Baptism.³⁷ By “old creature” he means the sinful nature inherent in us all. Later in the paper, we will discuss the urgent need to combat this “old creature” through repentance.

35. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Formula of Concord*, 582.7.

36. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 254.

37. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Large Catechism*, 466:75-76.

Erroneous Teachings of Repentance

Few Christians would deny that repentance leads to salvation, that it is the process by which a sinner receives forgiveness and is saved (Lk 24:47; Acts 11:18). And Lutherans rightly confess faith as that part of repentance which obtains the forgiveness of sins. Other Christian denominations however, fall into various errors which overemphasize other aspects of repentance. I argue that the failure to recognize faith's central role in receiving the forgiveness of sins is the root cause of the majority of errors concerning repentance.

Transformation of Life and Will

Lifehopearandtruth.com is a website managed by the Church of God, a prominent Pentecostal church body. The website features numerous articles on repentance, most of which exclude all talk of faith. Consider the following statements from their article entitled "What is Repentance?" written by Don Henson. "Repentance involves a complete change of thought, attitude and action. It's like making a U-turn in life.... It involves a determination to stop sinning and not to sin in the future.... It is looking at something that you did in the past, recognizing that it was sinful—that it broke God's good and beneficial laws—and concluding you need to change for the better."³⁸ Nowhere in the entire article is there any mention of trust in the forgiveness of sins.

This kind of emphasis on the transformation of our lives steals all the attention away from faith in Christ's atoning work. For example, take this statement from Glen Scorgie:

"We should certainly celebrate being justified and declared righteous in God's eyes by our faith in Christ alone.... But we undermine authentic spirituality when we make justification by faith the central idea in our understanding of the Christian life. We need to see justification as one important aspect of something even more central. And what's

³⁸ Don Henson, "What Is Repentance?" <https://lifehopearandtruth.com/change/repentance/what-is-repentance/>.

even more central? Our supernatural union with Christ through the Holy Spirit's work in our lives.... And so, when you start to see union with Christ as central, then you can no longer be indifferent or ignore the godly impulses, the godly power that flows into our lives. Indeed, to ignore that is very dangerous."³⁹

But Scripture very clearly emphasizes that justification by faith is the central and most important aspect of our salvation (Eph 2:8; Rom 4:3–5).

And yet, some Evangelicals will insist that the change in a person's will is what makes repentance true and life-saving. André van Belkum comments on David's repentance: "This frame of mind and commitment to live in accordance with God's instructions pleased God, who out of the abundance of His mercy forgave David."⁴⁰ He goes on, "Repentance is more than being sorry for past sins; it is a total change of mind leading to living a new way of life. It is turning away from being concerned solely for the self and turning to obedience to God and having outgoing concern for our fellow humans (Matt 22:36-40)."⁴¹ It is obvious that the important thing to van Belkum is not faith in Jesus' sacrifice for sin, but a change that must occur in the human will, from an attitude of disobedience to one of obedience. In fact, van Belkum only mentions Christ's sacrifice twice. The first time, it is preliminary to the discussion of repentance. The second time, (the only time it is mentioned in connection to the repentance process), Jesus' cross is only useful to make us feel guilty and hate our sin. It is used to manipulate the will into becoming more obedient.

39. Glen Scorgie, "Living with Disciplined Intent," 10th lecture of "Dynamics of Christian Spirituality," Biblical Training, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/seminar/dynamics-christian-spirituality/glen-scorgie>.

40. Andre van Belkum, "Please Forgive Me—I Have Sinned," *Life, Hope & Truth*, n.d., <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/change/repentance/please-forgive-me/>.

41. Andre van Belkum, "Please Forgive Me—I Have Sinned," <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/change/repentance/please-forgive-me/>.

The change that occurs in the human will must not be considered something that causes God to be merciful to us. As humble and resolute as a person feels, our commitment to submit our will to God's is always imperfect and divided. Paul admits in Romans 7:21, "So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me." As long as we are in the flesh, the human will is a battle ground. The extent to which our spirit is winning against the flesh is no basis for God's mercy, nor can it give us any certainty of salvation.

Requirements of Contrition

But many Christians insist that true repentance requires a complete and sincere transformation of the will, and in order to achieve such transformation, they feel constrained to produce a certain kind of contrition. And fearful contrition, according to C.H. Spurgeon, is not it. Commenting on the so-called repentance of Pharaoh (Ex 9:30), he says that Pharaoh's insincerity was due to the fact that he repented only out of fear of divine punishment. He compares Pharaoh to a sailor who, in the midst of a terrible storm out at sea, repents of all his wicked ways only to return to wickedness the minute he sets foot on solid ground. "The repentance that was born in the storm died in the calm."⁴² A fearful contrition, according to Spurgeon, is not true contrition, because it effects no lasting change in the will to obey God.

True contrition must instead be born of godly sorrow, Paul Carter asserts.⁴³ "Having a right kind of sorrow will lead a person to a changed heart. God can then grant that person

42. C.H. Spurgeon, The Spurgeon Center for Biblical Preaching at Midwestern Seminary, "Confession of Sin—A Sermon with Seven Texts," <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/confession-of-sin-a-sermon-with-seven-texts/#flipbook/>.

43. Paul Carter, "Godly Sorrow," <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/change/repentance/godly-sorrow/>.

repentance.”⁴⁴ He cites 2 Corinthians 7:8-11 in support. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Cor 7:10). And godly sorrow, according to Paul (the apostle) is about much more than fear. It produces earnestness, eagerness to clear oneself, indignation, alarm, longing, concern, and readiness for justice. And this kind of sorrow, as opposed to worldly sorrow, produces the kind of repentance that leads to salvation.

We must remember, however, that Paul is addressing believers in whom the Holy Spirit currently dwells (1 Cor 6:9). One might expect the contrition of believers to be about more than just fear. Yet Paul Carter expects the same contrition also of unbelievers who do not yet have the Holy Spirit. This is unbiblical, and frankly, impossible. The fallen will of mankind is not able by its natural powers to work in itself true, godly sorrow over sin.⁴⁵ Rather, “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires” (Rom 8:5) and “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Rom 8:7).

Thus, fear of punishment must be allowed as a valid cause of true contrition. There isn’t much else in the sinful, unbelieving heart that ever can motivate a person to repent. Chemnitz recognizes this. “What then, is contrition?” he asks. “It is in a sinner a serious fear of conscience that recognizes the wrath of God against sins and is sorry that it has offended God by this kind of

44. Paul Carter, “Godly Sorrow,” <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/change/repentance/godly-sorrow/>.

45. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 587.

sins.”⁴⁶ Such contrition is never good enough though, for those who wish to say that true contrition merits God’s gracious action.

In fact, nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the Catholic sacrament of Penance. Penance “involves a conversion of our hearts to God, a confession of sins to a priest, the forgiveness of our sins, a penance to make some amends for sin, and reconciliation with God and the Church.”⁴⁷ It is made up of two elements: 1) the acts of man, which include contrition, confession to a priest, and satisfaction; and 2) the act of God through the bishop, as he pronounces forgiveness and determines the proper satisfaction to be made.⁴⁸ This is what is meant by “going to confession.”

The sacrament of Penance is intended to offer comfort to the contrite sinner, but in fact it does the opposite. Penance leads the penitent “away from faith in the obedience, suffering, and satisfaction of Christ, to confidence in his own act of contrition, confession, and satisfaction.”⁴⁹ In Penance, the priest pronounces absolution according to the measure of a person’s contrition. Thus, any confidence that a person is forgiven ultimately rests on how sorry she was,⁵⁰ which as Gerhard points out, is absurd.⁵¹ Confidence of forgiveness ought to rest on Christ’s atoning

46. Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, 65.

47. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), 236.

48. “Catechism of the Catholic Church,” https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM, par. 1449.

49. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination*, 557.

50. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination*, 623.

51. Johann Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*: Vol. II, 203.

sacrifice and nothing more, but the Catholic church has effectively gutted repentance of its faith in Christ, and replaced it with faith in contrition.

Suddenly, it becomes very important for contrition to have some especially virtuous qualities. Our sins greatly offend the Almighty God; if we want to be reconciled with him, we cannot just offer up any old contrition. And so, the Council of Trent denies that true contrition may consist of “terrors struck into the conscience by God,” because that would simply not be a very good work, certainly not meritorious of God’s forgiveness. Contrition must instead be a voluntary sorrow over sin which we assume entirely of ourselves.⁵² To do so, the sinner must ponder over the “seriousness, multitude, and foulness of his sins.”⁵³ If this contrition arises from a love “by which God is loved above all else,” it is called perfect contrition, and remits venial sins all by itself.⁵⁴ Combine perfect contrition with a resolution to go to confession, and it even remits mortal sins.⁵⁵ But if contrition is imperfect, that is, if it comes from fear of punishment, it does not obtain the forgiveness of sins by itself.⁵⁶ Imperfect contrition merely “disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.”⁵⁷ At this point it becomes necessary that those who have imperfect contrition confess each and every mortal sin to the priest. Those who fail to

52. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination*, 576.

53. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination*, 581.

54. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1452.

55. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1452.

56. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1453.

57. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1453.

do so are not forgiven by God.^{58 59} In Rome's view, there is no other way to receive grace and forgiveness after Baptism,⁶⁰ and a priest cannot pronounce absolution for a sin if it is not confessed to him.

Naturally, Lutherans object that confession of every sin is impossible and unnecessary. "But who can discern their own errors?" asks the psalmist (Ps 19:12). And Chemnitz points out that "special enumeration of all transgressions to be made to the priest is not commanded in the Word of God, nor has it any example there."⁶¹ In fact, the tax collector in Jesus' parable failed to list even one specific sin; a general confession of sinfulness was sufficient and he went home justified before God. But to these objections, the Council of Trent replies with its *anathema*.⁶² And why wouldn't they? According to Catholicism, forgiveness is received not through faith in the promise, but rather through the priest's word of absolution based on contrition and confession. And to them, God's justice requires that this be done a certain way.

Fruits of Repentance

Another error we must discuss is how some include the fruits of repentance as an essential part of repentance itself. This results in a doctrine of salvation by works. The Roman Catholic church in particular, commits this error by including works of satisfaction in their sacrament of Penance. Works of satisfaction refer to certain works prescribed by the priest which the sinner must

58. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1456.

59. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination*, 591.

60. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1446.

61. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination*, 578.

62. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination*, 591.

perform to make amends for the damage his sin has done to relationships with neighbor, church and God. These are necessary in order to complete the sacrament and the sinner's reconciliation with God.⁶³ In fact, they are just as essential to the sacrament as God's work of pronouncing forgiveness through the Church.⁶⁴ This teaching stands in plain opposition to the words of Scripture that we have been reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Rom 5:10–11).

In response to this error, we make a simple distinction. The life of good works which we lead after we have received forgiveness is certainly neither optional nor unimportant. Romans 6:18 testifies that those who have been set free from sin have become "slaves to righteousness." John the Baptist urges us, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8). That being said, good works in no way merit the forgiveness of sins (Gal 2:16), and therefore, they cannot be considered part of repentance proper. Good works follow repentance and the forgiveness of sins. They demonstrate the sincerity of a person's repentance (Acts 26:20), but are not part of repentance itself.

Repentance Causes Forgiveness

Up to this point, we have been primarily concerned with the failure to recognize faith as the part of repentance which obtains the forgiveness of sins. We must be careful, however, to say that repentance *obtains* forgiveness, and does not itself, cause forgiveness. That work belongs to Christ's atonement for the sin of all mankind. But some Christian denominations fall into the error of making repentance the cause of our forgiveness, especially those that teach the "sufficiency of the cross."

63. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1440 and 1459.

64. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1448.

The sufficiency of the cross is a doctrine taught by some Evangelicals which states that Jesus' death was sufficient to forgive the sins of the whole world, but it did not *actually* forgive every sin. Thus, the doctrine of objective justification, is denied. But how then, can a person's sins *actually* be forgiven if Christ only potentially forgave every sin? The responsibility is placed squarely on the sinner to ask for it in true repentance. Bill Mounce explains the doctrine of the sufficiency of the cross. Note how it relates to his view of repentance:

All we have to do is repent. All we have to do is confess. That's all we have to do. "Dear God, once again, you're right and I'm wrong. Once again, I went my way; it was the wrong way. I am truly sorry. And God, because he's a God of grace and mercy, he will sweep through us and will remove our sin from as far as the east is from the west, and our relationship and the peace and blessing of God will be restored. This is part of the doctrine of the sufficiency of the cross...where Jesus Christ's death on the cross was sufficient to cover all of the sins of the world, for all who cry out to him for forgiveness—their sins are covered ... And no matter how much I do, and no matter how bad it is and how many times I commit my favorite sin, (and we all have them, don't we) no matter how many times and how bad it is, the cross is sufficient to cover your sins. And if you go to Christ and ask for forgiveness, he will forgive your sins. The downward spiral will stop.⁶⁵

Let the reader understand that Mounce sees the forgiveness of our sins as an occurrence taking place not at the cross on Good Friday, but at the moment of our repentance. It is an event conditional upon our repentance. He states the position even more clearly: "When Jesus cried out 'It is finished!' he is saying, 'My work is sufficient so that everyone who believes in me, I will grant them eternal life...such that if you believe in me your sins *can be* forgiven.'⁶⁶ Thus, Mounce makes repentance, specifically the faith in repentance, to be a cause of our forgiveness. Indeed, the doctrine of the sufficiency of the cross leaves him with no other option. If God did

65. Bill Mounce, "Walking with God," 10th lecture of "Life Is a Journey," Biblical Training, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/life-journey/bill-mounce>.

66. Bill Mounce, "What Jesus Did," 8th lecture of "Life is a Journey," Biblical Training, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/life-journey/bill-mounce>.

not—in the past and totally apart from all human contribution except Christ’s merit—forgive our sins, then there remains some task for us to perform in order to become forgiven. For Evangelicals, that task is repentance.

This error is unlike the others in that it does not completely undermine the role of faith in repentance. It does, however, undermine the object of true and saving faith. That object of saving faith is the redemption wrought for all sinners in Christ’s blood, a redemption that is not conditional on anything. This truth universally applies to every human being, and is what gives us the confidence to pronounce unequivocally to every and all sinner, “Your sins are forgiven.” When a person speaks of forgiveness as something that *can* happen, as long as a person repents and turns to Jesus, the object of faith becomes faith itself. That is, a person begins to trust in her own trust. But if she is burdened by a guilty conscience, she may begin to question whether or not she repented and trusted wholeheartedly enough to have her sins forgiven. Instead, a proper preaching of repentance ought to direct people away from themselves towards Christ. Forgiveness was Christ’s doing, not ours.”⁶⁷

67. Richard D. Balge, “Preaching Repentance and Remission of Sins—With Application to Personal Witnessing—Luke 24:47” (Paper presented at the Nebraska—Colorado District Missionary Conference, Overland Park, KS, 8 November 1977), 7.

PART II: REPENTANCE IN OUR LIVES

Why Repent?

This thesis began with the claim “You need to repent!” But why is it so urgent for us to repent if repentance does not cause our forgiveness? We will now answer that question directly.

God Commands Repentance

If for no other reason, we may say that repentance is necessary because God commands it. And he commands this not only of unbelievers, but of believers as well. Paul testifies in Acts 17:30, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” Note the universality of this command; “all people” leaves no room for exceptions.^{68 69} This call to repentance is stressed throughout the entirety of Scripture, in the sermons of Christ, John the Baptist, and all the apostles and prophets.⁷⁰ It is part of God’s “unchangeable, sincere desire” for all people, including ourselves.⁷¹

But why the urgency? What is it about us that moves the Lord to command repentance so repeatedly and earnestly? Look at the world through God’s eyes. “The LORD looks down on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt, there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps 14:2–3). The sin that infects us all is no petty flaw; it is corruption. Human beings are naturally hostile towards

68. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, Vol. II, 153.

69. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Smalcald Articles*, 317.35.

70. Cf. Jer 3:7,12,14; 4:1; 25:5; 35:15; Ezek 18:30–32; Hos 12:5; 14:2-3; Joel 2:12–13; Jonah 3:8; Mal 3:7; Matt 4:17; 3:2; Mk 1:15; 6:12; Lk 3:3; 24:46–47; Acts 2:38; 3:19,26; 5:31; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20.

71. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, Vol. II, 153.

God (Rom 8:7). That is not merely how we feel, or how we occasionally tend to think; it is our natural, default setting. We were born God’s sworn enemies. And we continually add to the offense by our sinful, wicked behavior, for “there is no one who does not sin” (1 Kgs 8:46). If the Lord were to keep a record of our sins, none of us could stand (Ps. 130:3), for our sins separate us from God’s gracious presence (Eph 4:18; Isa 59:2). And if anyone supposes that he is not so crooked and depraved, he should ask himself if he is holier than the apostle Paul. “For I know that good itself does not dwell in me.... Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me....What a wretched man I am!” (Rom 7:18–24). As Luther says, neither “hide nor hair of us is good.”⁷²

This is why God commands every human being, including us, to repent. We are so steeped in sin that if we do not repent, we may be certain that we will all perish in God’s judgment (Lk 13:3,5). Some object, “I do not need to repent because I am baptized. My sins have already been forgiven on account of Christ, so there is no need to worry about my sinful flesh or actions.” Granted, confidence in Christ’s atonement and in our baptism is certainly appropriate, but using this confidence to talk oneself out of repenting is not. Chemnitz cautions, “If in this life the baptized commit actions against their conscience, they do not retain but cast out faith and the Holy Spirit, lose the grace of justification and life, and become subject to the wrath of God and eternal damnation, unless they are again converted and repent.”⁷³ Luther’s testimony agrees.⁷⁴ Gerhard comments sharply, “An unrepentant person is an enemy of God. For the holy angels, an unrepentant person is a monstrous beast, a bodily-owned slave. And he is a latrine for the devil.

72. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Smalcald Articles*, 317.35.

73. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 553.

74. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Smalcald Articles*, 319.43-45.

He is an abomination to all creation. An unrepentant person takes from God the glory that is rightly God's (Rev 16:9)."⁷⁵ Finally, "Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God," Paul solemnly warns (Gal 5:21).

Add to all this the fragility of our lives, and our uncertainty of the day and hour when Jesus will return in judgment (Mk 13:32), and Gerhard finds it powerful motivation to repent. He says, "From God's Word, we can be certain that we shall obtain God's grace and forgiveness through true repentance. But whether we will live through tomorrow—of that we have no assurance. That's why it is foolish and dangerous for a person to postpone repentance until the next day.... Then later would be useless for one to repent."⁷⁶ Paul testifies, "But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom 2:5). Thus, a secure attitude that is comfortable with sin is wholly out of place. No one, not even the baptized have the luxury to neglect repentance. Rather, let us heed Gerhard's advice: "Our old man should, through continual contrition and repentance, be dampened, killed off, crucified, and buried, so that our new man daily arises with and in Christ. If the evil lusts of the flesh reside, rule, and arise in you, then immediately utilize this spiritual burial of the old man, and hastily bury him through the power of the Spirit."⁷⁷

75. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 165.

76. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis, Vol. II*, 168.

77. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. I*, 62-63.

God's Gracious Will

Let us not lose sight, however, of God's gracious will toward us and the vastness of his love and patience that all lies behind his call to repent. Romans 2:4 testifies that God's kindness and patience "is intended to lead you to repentance." If God were to immediately sentence us to an eternity of torment, that would be completely fitting and right. This is what we merit every single day. Yet he is patient and eagerly desires our repentance (2 Pet 3:9). When we turn from our sins in heartfelt contrition, and receive by faith the forgiveness that he has always promised us, his heart fills with pleasure (Ezek 18:23).⁷⁸ What is more, all the angelic court of heaven joins him in exuberant celebration over one single instance of our repentance (Lk 15:7,10)! Yes, God punishes the unrepentant, but he far prefers that in repentance, we receive the forgiveness of sins and righteousness that our Savior has so dearly bought for us. God the righteous one even begs us through his holy apostles: "Be reconciled to God! God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:20–21).

We recall that repentance is neither a transformation of the will nor some noble sort of grief over sin that moves an angry God to look at us with mercy. He is merciful and gracious completely apart from our repentance, and has stored up numerous blessings that he wishes to bestow on us through faith. They have been secured for us on account of Christ's merit, and through the Spirit-worked faith of repentance, we receive them from his hand.⁷⁹ These include: God's gracious presence in our lives (Mal 3:7; Isa 59:20); rest for our souls (Matt 11:28); the protecting service of angels (Heb 1:14); justification (Lk 18:14); the indwelling Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); the forgiveness of sin (Ps 32:5; Acts 3:19); and eternal life (Acts 11:18), just to name a

78. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 154.

79. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis, Vol. II*, 163.

few! Scripture even presents us with the possibility that through repentance, we may receive deliverance from the temporal consequences of our sin. Consider the examples of Israel (2 Chr 12:7) Rehoboam (2 Chr 12:12); Manasseh (2 Chr 33:12–13) and Nineveh (Jonah 3:10), and the “Jezebel” of Thyatira (Rev 2:21–22). That being said, the Lord may also allow a repentant person to live for the rest of her life in the consequences and shame of her sin.⁸⁰ If so, we may still be sure of God’s gracious will toward us and take comfort that these consequences are for our good, likely to prevent us from further straying. For we know by Scripture’s testimony that through repentance, the sinner can receive nothing but the most wonderful and gracious blessings God’s hand.

Once more, we reiterate that repentance does not merit these blessings. Repentance is not a work by which we earn the forgiveness of sins.⁸¹ Rather, we recall that the forgiveness of all our sins has already been accomplished by Christ before we ever asked for it⁸² and that this gift is received by all who believe, independent of the frequency and intensity of our repenting. Yet it is still necessary for repentance to occur on account of faith. For faith, which does not exist in the unrepentant heart,⁸³ is how we personally receive the forgiveness of sins.

How We Repent

Therefore repent! If we don’t, we can be sure that we will eventually lose the faith and salvation with it. Here I must strongly emphasize, however, that repentance is not our work. God the Holy

80. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, Vol. II, 164.

81. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, Vol. II, 163.

82. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Large Catechism*, 452.88.

83. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, Vol. I, 10.

Spirit is the one who causes us to repent; repentance is his work through and through. It is something God must grant (Acts 5:31; 11:18). To say otherwise, I would not be able to escape the charge of synergism. “Synergism” is the false notion that man cooperates with God in some way, big or small, to accomplish his salvation. And if we give ourselves even partial credit for repenting, we give ourselves partial credit for our salvation, making us synergists.

But Lutherans are not synergists, because the Bible does not teach it. We have already considered in the doctrinal portion of this thesis how impossible it is for the fallen will of mankind to work up in itself, true sorrows over sin. Romans 8:7 says, “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” The mind governed by the flesh is the mind we are born with, and since it struggles so fiercely against God’s Law, how then could it honestly feel sorrow for breaking it? Any kind of sorrow that sinful man tries to conjure up by his own natural powers must be a “counterfeit and an abomination in the sight of God.”⁸⁴

This is what makes “You need to repent” such a difficult statement to prove to ourselves. Our sinful nature struggles mightily against this concept, and will not acknowledge its own wickedness, nor the harm done by breaking God’s Law. Try talking yourself into repenting sometime. Try convincing yourself that you are one of the greatest scoundrels and most wicked rogues to bear the name of Christ, that you are, as Paul says, “the worst of sinners” (1 Tim 1:16). If you do not back this truth up with testimony from God, it will not work. God must speak, or we will not believe.

However, it is also true that the mind of believers is not “governed by the flesh.” Rather, it is governed by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:5,9). The Formula of Concord testifies that part of us

84. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 367.

does indeed cooperate with the ruling and guiding of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵ Theologians call this part of us the “new man.” Our “new man” struggles and wages war against the stubborn unrepentance of the sinful nature, just as Paul describes in Romans 7. Does it follow then, that we play a part in moving ourselves to repent? We must carefully keep two things in mind: 1) Paul admits that although he struggles against his sinful flesh, and desires to do what is good, he “cannot carry it out” by his own natural powers (Rom 7:18); also, 2) The new man within us which submits to the governing power of the Spirit is one hundred percent God’s product, and any doing or desiring of our new man is also, a complete gift from the hand of our gracious God.⁸⁶ He moves believers to repent. The Holy Spirit convinces believers of the awfulness of their sin, and he shows them their need for forgiveness. And “if God would withdraw his gracious hand from such people, they could not for one minute remain obedient to God,”⁸⁷ for it is God alone who works in us “to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Phil 2:13). All our good works have been prepared in advance by God (Eph 2:10). True, our new man is not hostile to the guiding and governing of the Holy Spirit. We are active in repenting; it is not something that we are passive or indifferent about. But all godly activity, repentance included, is caused by him, and not us. The Holy Spirit is responsible for our continual repentance, and therefore, is responsible for our preservation in the faith and our eternal salvation. Any other explanation which assigns man even the slightest responsibility for his repentance and salvation, this thesis roundly rejects in unity all with the heavenly host. “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Rev 7:10).

85. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Formula of Concord*, 556.63-68.

86. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 551.39.

87. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: Formula of Concord*, 556.66.

So, what now? Do we wait in silence for the Holy Spirit to speak up and make us repentant? Certainly not, for the Holy Spirit works through means.⁸⁸ As Walther says, “We must only apply to ourselves the keen Word of God, and we have the first part of repentance. After that, an application of the unqualified Gospel will produce faith in us.”⁸⁹ “Aha!” the Pharisee inside us exclaims, “I have found the manner in which I may contribute to my own salvation! God must motivate me to repent, but I must diligently apply myself to study his Word and use the Sacraments.” We have already spent ample time proving this false. It is God who works in us and moves us to use the Means of Grace.⁹⁰ He urges the foot that steps toward a church; he guides the hand that turns Scripture’s pages. And we follow his guidance willingly. Let us now, through the Holy Spirit’s working, consider those words of God which motivate us to repent.

Passages That Inspire Contrition

Describing Our Sin

First, there is the simple fact that our sins are an incomprehensible multitude. Psalm 40:12 says, “My sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me.” An accurate knowledge of what Scripture condemns as sin coupled with an honest evaluation of our lives yields dizzying results. Our sins overwhelm us; they produce crisis and failure in hearts as stout as David’s. God’s Word testifies that we have hidden sins and outward sins, sins of weakness and sins of wickedness. And how often do we make someone else

⁸⁸ Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 191.

⁸⁹ Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 367.

⁹⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 549.26.

become a participant in our sins?⁹¹ Consider the following condemnations from Scripture; they are but a small sampling.

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person” (Matt 15:19–20) Among that list we find sins as common as lust, lying, hatred, and gossip, and Jesus says that they defile a person, that is, they make her filthy. “He (Satan) was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44) Lying is the devil’s native tongue. When one person deceives another, he carries on the ancient murderer-deceiver’s most cherished tradition. “Does the ax raise itself above the person who swings it, or the saw boast against the one who uses it? As if a rod were to wield the person who lifts it up, or a club brandish the one who is not wood!” (Isa 10:15). When we boast, we exalt ourselves over the one who made us and wields us, thus pride is condemned as the wickedest, most backwards folly. “But a man who commits adultery has no sense; whoever does so destroys himself. Blows and disgrace are his lot, and his shame will never be wiped away” (Prov 6:32–33). How many of us has have committed this sin in our hearts, not to mention with outward actions? Blows and disgrace... And about deliberate, repeated sinning, God’s Word reserves the harshest of all judgments. “How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Heb 10:29). These passages are only a small sampling of specific condemnations; one need only look around for a bit to find whatever pet sins plague him most.

91. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 195.

God's Justice

Passages dealing with God's justice are also useful for producing contrition in a person. We consider his holiness, described by Isaiah chapter 6. Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord, "high and exalted, seated on a throne" (6:1). Above him are seraphim calling to one another, covering their faces and their feet in reverence, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (6:3). The holiness of the LORD so overwhelms Isaiah that he cries out, "Woe to me! I am ruined" (6:5). If we saw what Isaiah saw, would we not faint in terror, due to the sinful impurities of our past? God's holiness cannot abide with sin, rather it moves him to burning anger, "for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Heb 12:29). And "Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him" (Nah 1:6).

Such is the terrible wrath that those who refuse to repent store up for themselves to be experienced on Judgment Day (Rom 2:5). When we feel secure in our sins, or sure of our own holiness, we might do well to consider what God says about that day. 1 Corinthians 4:5 says that God will "bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart" (1 Cor 4:5). If God were to proceed against us according to all the secret deeds, thoughts, and motivations that will be exposed, we would not be able to stand before him (Ps 143:2).⁹²

Some may object that fearful thoughts about Judgment Day have no place among Christians, since "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). And of course, I agree that we may look forward to Judgment Day with eager and expectant joy, confident that our sins are covered by Christ's blood. And yet, the Bible very clearly intends stern warnings of judgment for the ears of believers (1 Pet 4:17–18), because we all have a sinful

⁹². Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis*, Vol.II, 197.

flesh that daily strives to minimize the seriousness of our sin. Even Jesus warns us: “And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where ‘the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched’” (Mk 9:47–48). Jesus would certainly have us take confidence in the atonement for our sins; he spilled his blood for that. But for the sinful flesh within us that strives to rise up, take control, and oust the Spirit from our hearts, the Lord has nothing but the most dreadful threats of judgment.

Scripture’s Commands

Scripture also produces contrition in a person by describing what God would have us do. When King Josiah heard the commands of God which were read to him from the Book of the Law, he tore his robes, and said, “Great is the LORD’s anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us” (2 Kgs 22:11–13). When Ezra read the Book of the Law to the returned exiles, it produced a similar effect and all the people who were listening wept. A person wonders if this wasn’t Jesus’ intention when he told the rich man to give away all he had in order to “have treasure in heaven” (Mk 10:21). Jesus knew better than anyone that man is unable to achieve eternal life by works; the impossible command Jesus had given served to demonstrate this (Mk 10:27). Thus, the commands of the Law often have this effect of dashing all our hopes of attaining righteousness for ourselves. Seeing the numerous and impossibly holy works that God would have us do, we become saddened that we have not and cannot perfectly obey.

Devotional Works

I have also found certain devotional works to be of great benefit. Only God can make a person contrite and he does so through his Word, not through the ideas of man. That being said, written devotions can be very helpful tools. As long as they are grounded upon God's Word, and are rich with Scriptural truths, we can be sure that God speaks to us through them as well. I have found Gerhard's *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II* and his *Sacred Meditations* to be outstanding in that regard. They are written precisely for the goal of encouraging repentance. Consider this excerpt from *Sacred Meditations*:

Wherever you turn your eyes, there you find a reason for sorrow and gaze upon the remedy of security. Lift up your thoughts to the God whom we have offended. Look down to the hell that we have earned, back to the sins that we have committed, forward to the judgment that we fear, inward to the conscience that we have soiled, outward to the world that we have loved. See where you have come from and be ashamed, where you are and sigh, where you are heading and tremble."⁹³

Gerhard is a master of arranging and summarizing Biblical truths in a way that cuts the heart. His *Schola Pietatis* contains some rather memorable depictions of sin. "Every time a person is tempted by sin, he likewise sits with Pilate upon the throne of judgment. There stands before him on the one side, Christ, upon the other side, Barabbas. If he willingly and deliberately sins, he condemns Christ and releases Barabbas. For sin is a true murderer of souls."⁹⁴ Also:

For as many creatures there are in this world and as many members as there are in your body, that's how many witnesses there are to God's blessings. Is it not then wrong and a damnable thing that you repay God the Lord for so many blessings with so much wickedness, that you think such evil of all of his benefits, that you with your sin so grossly enrage your most gentle Father and beneficent Lord?⁹⁵

93. Johann Gerhard, *Sacred Meditations*, trans. Wade R Johnston and Gaylin R Schmeling, 2nd ed. (Saginaw: Magdeburg Press, 2011), 124.

94. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 194.

95. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II* 196.

That's the kind of meditation you will find everywhere in Gerhard's devotional works. He displays both an encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture and a profound distress over sin. But the ultimate goal of his writings on repentance is faith in Christ, and so we gladly now turn to the "soul of repentance,"⁹⁶ faith.

Passages Which Encourage Faith

As difficult as it is for our sinful hearts to be moved to true, heartfelt contrition, it may be even more difficult for some to trust the promises of forgiveness, especially once they have felt the weight of their sin. Contemplating sin can produce a great deal of anxiety, fear, and sorrow in a person. The deeper we think about it, the more awful it becomes, and the less possible it seems that God will ever look kindly on us again. Once more, we find it necessary for God to take the witness stand and testify to the certainty of his mercy. And the divine testimony reveals that God's mercy is immeasurably greater than our sin.⁹⁷ After committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband, David found the courage to ask the Lord for mercy. On what basis? On the basis of his "unfailing love" and his "great compassion" (Ps 51:1). Isaiah 54:10 says, "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you." God's love never fails. No sin can shake it nor remove his covenant of peace from us. And

96. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 163.

97. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 210.

how many times does the Lord need to tell us that “his love endures forever”?⁹⁸ Gerhard makes an interesting comment that “sin is the work of the devil and of sinful, errant humanity.” But grace is a work of the immeasurable and unending majesty of God. “How could it be possible for that which comes from the devil and from mankind to overturn that which comes from God?”⁹⁹ Rather, as Paul says, in Romans 5:20, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.”

Consider also the incredible power of Christ’s suffering and death. The blood that Christ shed in payment for our sins was no ordinary blood. It was the very blood of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Jn 1:7). What stain could endure such a holy, divine washing? It was God himself who was “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities (Isa 53:5).”¹⁰⁰ It would be sheer arrogance to think that our sins are so great and so many that not even God in the flesh could atone for them with his life!

We also have in God’s Word many wonderful depictions of Christ’s kindness. He is the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the open country to seek the one that has lost its way. And when he finds it, he slings the dear little sheep over his shoulders and carries it home with a grin, calling gleefully out to friends and neighbors, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep!” (Lk 15:4–6). Why would we ever hesitate to request forgiveness of such a kind shepherd who finds such joy in our repentance? When we have gone astray, he sets out not to

98. Using the Bible software Logos, I searched for this phrase in the NIV and received 178 results. This phrase is repeated in all 26 verses of Psalm 136.

99. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 210.

100. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 211.

afflict and beat us for our sins, but to tenderly carry us home. This shepherd will never drive us away (Jn 6:37).¹⁰¹

Perhaps, the thing about Christ's kindness that makes us most confident to apply it to ourselves is the fact that it's for everyone. "God wants all people to be saved" (1 Tim 2:4), not just the pious and diligent Christians. Even if we have strayed from God's grace, sullied ourselves with sinful deeds, and positively sold ourselves to the devil, we can still be sure that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for us. He "gave himself as a ransom for all people" (2:6). God wants "everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9), and in Christ he was reconciling the entire world to himself, not counting one single sin against anybody (2 Cor 5:19). No sinner, no matter how foolish and perverse their rebellion, is excluded from the Gospel promise; all are eligible. God leaves us no room for misunderstanding: If you are a sinner, then forgiveness is for you—no exceptions.

Nor are God's promises ever made lightly. He made the promise and intends to keep it; in fact, being God, he cannot go back on it. "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged" (Heb 6:17–18). Numbers 23:19 asks about God, "Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" The implied answer? Certainly not! God does not lie and does not change his mind. In view of the greatness of our sin and the intensity of his wrath over sin, it may seem outrageous, at times, that God should make so bold a promise. But outrageous or not, the promise of forgiveness on account of Christ has been made to everyone, no exclusions, and it is as

101. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 212.

irrevocable and unchanging as God himself. We cling tightly to this truth as an “anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Heb 6:19). It is impossible that we should ever be disappointed by this hope.

The Use of the Sacraments

Baptism

Finally, God has given us the sacraments as even further assurance that our sins have been forgiven. They offer the same promises, and are “just as powerful and blessed a means whereby God the Lord wants to work, increase, and sustain faith in us as the preached Word.”¹⁰² Think of God’s gift to us in baptism. A thesis on repentance could hardly be considered complete without mentioning it! When we were baptized God gave us salvation (1 Pet 3:21), clothed us with Christ’s righteousness (Gal 3:27), and washed our sins away (Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5). Whenever we feel sorrow over sin, we may promptly and gladly return to this covenant of grace that God made with us in baptism.¹⁰³ Baptism contains a promise of forgiveness that remains forever.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the Large Catechism ties repentance and baptism so closely together that living in repentance is essentially the same thing as walking in Baptism, launching an attack on one’s sin and returning to the grace that was offered to us in Baptism.¹⁰⁵

102. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. II*, 208.

103. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Vol. II*, 569.

104. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Large Catechism*, 466.77.

105. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Large Catechism*, 466.75.

The Lord's Supper

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is also a useful means for awakening the faith of repentance. Beforehand, silently confess your sins to the Lord. Then, step confidently forward to the Lord's table and prepare yourself for what you are about to eat and drink, the Lord's own body and blood that was given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins (Matt 26:28). In this meal, Christ gives you himself as the word of absolution; as you receive his true body and blood with your mouth, know that you also receive complete forgiveness for all of your sins. In Paul's words, the cup we drink is a "participation in the blood of Christ" and the bread we break is a "participation in the body of Christ" (1 Cor 10:16), and whenever we eat and drink, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

The Lord's Supper, as Baptism, is pure grace. Whoever, under the burden of her sin, feels hesitant to apply the Lord's promises of forgiveness to herself may meditate on the grace offered in these two sacraments and gladly use them often.

What Repentance (Might) Look Like for Us

There is no one-size fits all description of what repentance looks like for a person, nor are there Scripturally defined steps for how exactly one must go about it. Repentance will look different depending on the circumstances of the sin and the emotional disposition of the sinner. Some are by nature, melancholy people, and others seem to always have a smile on their faces. It should not surprise us for one repentant person to undergo an intensely sorrowful and prolonged period of contrition, while another repentant sinner sincerely, but briefly acknowledges his sin and proceeds to exult in the glorious riches of God's grace. There is no required length of contrition, and in the same way, no required degree of confidence or joy that one must experience. That is

why this section is entitled “What Repentance *Might* Look Like for Us.” What follows are a handful of descriptions of repentant individuals in Scriptures, that are in no way intended to prove how repentance must always be experienced. Rather, they prove the diversity of repentance.

To those who were confident of their own righteousness, Jesus told a parable about a repentant tax collector who went up to the temple to pray (Lk 18:10–14). This tax collector did not confess his sin in the hearing of the other worshipers, but stood off at a distance. The only one who heard him was God. Interestingly, he does not even list any specific sins; he only confesses his sinful condition. Yet in this confession, he displays deep sorrow and humility as he refuses to look up toward heaven and beats his breast. We also observe that he does not show an abundance of confidence or joy in God’s mercy, only just enough faith to ask for it and humbly go his way. “I tell you that this man,” Jesus says, “went home justified before God” (Lk 18:14). From this we learn that interpersonal confession is not essential to repentance, nor must we confess every sin in order to be forgiven. Nor is a gleeful disposition any essential characteristic of true repentance; faith may express itself simply in a humble request for mercy.

Fascinatingly, we see in another tax collector, a chief tax collector at that, an almost completely opposite set of emotions as he repents of presumably the same exact sin. Zacchaeus, in Luke 19:1–10, exudes excitement and joy. As Jesus passes through Jericho, accompanied by crowds, we see Zacchaeus, short little man that he was, straining his neck just to get a glimpse of the Messiah. Finally, unable to get a good look, this very wealthy man (probably wearing very nice clothes) dashes ahead of the crowd to a sycamore-fig tree and climbs it! Climbing that tree would have been both an embarrassing admission of his lack of stature and a totally unbecoming activity for so distinguished and wealthy a man, but he is far too eager to care. When Jesus

reaches the spot, he beckons Zacchaeus down and invites himself over to his house. Zacchaeus comes down immediately and welcomes Jesus gladly. When the rest of the crowd sees this, they mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner,” and at this point it becomes apparent to the reader that Zacchaeus has not yet publicly demonstrated any sorrow over his sin. At the very least, he has not openly turned from it, judging by the crowd’s commentary. Very much like the tax collector of Jesus’ parable, his contrition was not a public affair. But unlike that tax collector, he became an exceedingly eager and joyful individual as soon as Jesus even addressed him, and probably before, as soon as he had heard that Jesus was coming through Jericho. In the end, he does give a public demonstration of his repentance as he gives away half his possessions to the poor and pledges four-fold restitution of all his dishonest gains on the spot. And what does Jesus say? “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (Lk 19:9), that is, this man has repented and come to faith in the Gospel! Thus, we learn that it is not always correct to expect outward signs of contrition, nor should we doubt the sinner’s sincerity on account of his joyful reaction to the Gospel. Finally, we also catch a glimpse of how powerful true repentance can be in causing a person to change his life. Zacchaeus immediately pledges away what would have been an enormous sum of ill-gotten gains (Lk 19:8).

But we should not discourage ourselves from publicly expressing our contrition to others, as God’s Word presents this as a very good and fitting practice. When John the Baptist baptized at the Jordan, the people did not merely confess to him their sinful condition, but their specific, individual sins (Mk 1:5). They were open about their faults, and verbally expressed their sorrow. James 4:9 likewise encourages outward expressions of contrition. “Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.” Visible, audible expressions of sorrow can sometimes be the only appropriate thing for a person to do. God’s Law often strikes a

person so hard that nothing but gloom and tears appear on her face, and nothing but a sob rises from her throat. Again however, we emphasize that while God's Law often inspires a person to openly mourn, this is by no means a requirement of true repentance.

Practical Suggestions for the Public Ministry

Many Christians today see repentance as something that should only take place between the sinner and God. Only God needs to know the sin because only God can forgive the sin. We should not forget, however, the great usefulness of the public ministry for bringing people to repentance. Chemnitz tells the story of an exchange between Emperor Constantine and Acesius the Novation, who was attempting to argue against the absolution pronounced by priests: "Hope of forgiveness is not to be expected from the priests but only from God, who alone has power to remit sins," Acesius said. Constantine answered, "Therefore, O Acesius, fetch a ladder and climb up to heaven, seeing you take away the use of the ministry."¹⁰⁶ The point here is that God ordained the public ministry and the preaching of the Gospel to be the means by which he forgives sinners (Jn 20:23). God indeed is the one who does the forgiving, but how can sinners know about this forgiveness unless someone declares it to them? They could either "fetch a ladder and climb up to heaven" or hear the word of absolution pronounced by God through his public minister. Of course, there is the third option that a repentant sinner may simply read for himself the Gospel promises in the Word, and we have already said much about the benefit of doing so. The problem is, we struggle to take to heart and understand the promises of the Word, to say nothing of reading them diligently. Thus, the public ministry remains a necessary tool for bringing about true repentance.

106. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Vol. II*, 554.

Private Confession

I believe that pastors (and their members) have a lot to gain by encouraging private confession in their churches. A prospect¹⁰⁷ that I spoke with during my vicar year who attended regularly at the Catholic parish down the street, told me that there were a lot of things she had come to appreciate about our Lutheran church, especially the worship, the Bible studies, and the fellowship. Private confession was one thing, however, that the Catholics had which we did not. She cherished the opportunity to unload her sins and personal problems one-on-one with a priest. Of course, as I told her, this opportunity does exist in Lutheran churches. What pastor isn't eager for a chance to meet individually and share the Word with his sheep? But perhaps we could do more to make this a normal practice for our members, and not just something they reserve only for the worst of spiritual crises.

I hope that at this point, the reader can already guess as to why it would be valuable for us to make this a regular practice in our churches. Repentance is essential for the life of a Christian, and private confession with a pastor is a great way to facilitate it. Chemnitz lists five compelling reasons for private confession:

1. Pastors can learn about the doctrinal misunderstandings of their members and will have the opportunity to address them specifically and directly.
2. Pastors will be able to determine if their members should be admitted to the Lord's Supper, and may teach them about repentance.
3. Pastors will learn about who and what their parishioners are putting their trust in, and will have the opportunity to teach them about faith.

107. For those unfamiliar with the term, a "prospect" is an individual who has visited or otherwise become acquainted with the church, but has not yet become a member.

4. Pastors will observe how seriously their parishioners are pursuing a life of obedience to Christ.
5. In private, pastors have the best opportunity to offer specific, specialized comfort to the troubled conscience.¹⁰⁸

Finally, Chemnitz emphasizes, “The rite of private confession is retained and used in our churches chiefly for the sake of absolution, namely so that it might be rightly and salutarily sought, received, and used in earnest repentance and true faith.”¹⁰⁹ Note especially the benefits for a Law-Gospel centered ministry. Private confession is the pastor’s best chance at appropriately applying God’s Law to his parishioners, and offering forgiveness for the specific sins that plague their consciences most.

But what are some practical ways a pastor could implement private confession? There are many hurdles to overcome. For one, many people would feel too ashamed to confess their most serious sins. Others may fear developing a reputation if they are seen visiting the pastor too often, as if there were some grave secrets they were hiding. Still others simply do not see the importance of setting aside time in their already hectic schedules to talk sin and grace with their pastor. Finally, many Lutherans will of course see the practice as being “too Catholic.” Having one year of experience as a vicar, zero as a pastor, and not having conducted any interviews or surveys concerning this topic, I do not have any brilliant suggestions as to how the pastor may address these difficulties. Perhaps one might consider setting aside a time, one afternoon or evening each week, when he makes it known through bulletin announcements and signage that he is available to meet? And in order to get rid of the stigma of shame and “Catholicness” that

108. Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, 136-137.

109. Chemnitz, *Enchiridion*, 137.

surrounds private confession, he might consider setting aside time in Bible classes and sermons to discuss the value of repentance and confession? The pastor would also need to cultivate a certain image of compassion, trustworthiness, and eagerness to listen, so that his parishioners know, “This is a man I can approach with any sin, no matter how dark.”

Confession Between Members

Perhaps interpersonal confession between members would also be a valuable practice to encourage. People may feel far more comfortable confessing their faults to trusted friends and family than to their pastor. James 5:16 tells us of a surprising benefit this can have: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” This is a frequently overlooked concept. James instructs the believers to confess their sins to each other with the purpose that they may pray for one another, and specifically, pray that they may be *healed*. I cannot say confidently whether James has the healing of forgiveness in mind, healing from sinful habits, or healing from some malady that God intended as fatherly discipline for a sin—perhaps all three could be in view. However, the principal is clear. Confess your sins to one another so that righteous prayers may be offered up to God on the sinner’s behalf. Should any sinner feel troubled by her spiritual condition, let her confess her sin to fellow believers that more and more petitions may be promptly sent to the throne of God for her deliverance.

Perhaps we could do a better job of facilitating interpersonal confession among the family of believers? This could be accomplished through small-group Bible studies, which tend to be more intimate and less threatening. Also, pastors may strive to preach and teach in such a manner that encourages the development of a climate of compassion and humility, where people

do not feel the need to hide their sin or maintain a façade. Perhaps the best way of accomplishing this is if the pastor himself breaks the ice. When parishioners witness the transparency of their pastor as he confesses his faults and seeks forgiveness for his mistakes, the average member shouldn't be far behind him. If the spiritual leader is honest about his sinful vulnerabilities, why should anyone else feel the need to fake it?

The late Pastor Paul Brug who served as religion instructor at Shoreland Lutheran HS, would give his students the assignment of keeping a journal as a kind of spiritual self-examination, and then they shared their journal with at least one peer and one parent.¹¹⁰ As Dr. Brug related, the students would often make a surprisingly honest confession of sin in their journals. Hearing that made me wonder: if journals can work among high school students, who make up possibly the most self-conscious demographic of our society, why not among grade school students or in an adult Bible class? When people keep journals, they tend to be rather honest with themselves, and sharing their journals with others could be a good way of training them to open up to other Christians about their struggles. It would be important of course to leave the assignment pretty open, so that the students don't feel as if they have to list a certain number of sins or talk about anything they're not quite ready to talk about.

This also brings to mind a certain habit my 2nd grade teacher instilled in our class, something which isn't unique, but could still be more encouraged in our circles. Whenever one of us students apologized to our classmates, the offended classmate would often respond with the usual "It's alright." My teacher would then correct us, instructing us to say instead, "You are forgiven." She reasoned that when we say "It's alright" we are implicitly minimizing the wrong,

110. This story was told to me by his father and my thesis advisor, Dr. John Brug, in a phone conversation on November 13, 2020.

and not actually forgiving it. And she was right—that way of speaking is incompatible with true repentance. Repentance calls the sin what it is and then receives complete and total forgiveness for it. Why shouldn't a proper understanding of repentance become a fundamental part of every Lutheran's vocabulary? Why shouldn't it replace the oft-used, theologically inaccurate phrase "It's alright"? The word "forgiven" cannot be spoken too much in our classrooms, churches, and homes. It would be a beautiful thing for our children to regularly pronounce Christ's forgiveness of their siblings, and for our members to habitually declare God's gracious attitude toward one another with the simple yet sin-defying phrase, "You are forgiven."

Public Confession

This is a custom that I found intriguing in my research, however, I feel cautious about suggesting its implementation. Chemnitz writes that when an individual committed a gross, public sin, the early church observed the custom that the offender would confess his sin publicly to the congregation, and demonstrate by outward signs that he was truly sorry for what he had done. This was done so that the offender might communicate the sincerity of his repentance, so that the sin would not become contagious to others, to avoid causing offense for weak Christians, and to keep the church from developing a reputation of harboring wicked behavior.¹¹¹ During my vicar year, a member told me about a similar practice at her grandmother's congregation which she often visited, a Laestadian Lutheran church. Any who felt burdened by a particular sin would come forward at a designated point in the service and confess openly to the whole congregation,

111. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Vol. II*, 598.

usually something rather serious. The entire congregation would then absolve the sinner. It was reportedly, a rather moving scene to behold.

I wonder if there could be a place for this among some of our WELS congregations? Public confession is a chance to testify to all present our unanimous, unequivocal rejection of whatever sin is being confessed, be it adultery, lying, divorce, neglect of the Means of Grace, etc. But even more importantly, it would send the message that our congregation believes that all sins, no matter how grievous or shameful, are forgiven by the cross of Christ, and that neither are we, therefore, too high and mighty to forgive the wayward sheep and accept them back into our loving fellowship. The custom has potential for a powerful proclamation of sin and grace.

There are some reasons for caution, however. Chemnitz reports that Origen counseled in his *Homily 2* on Psalm 37 that we should be careful about confessing certain sins in public. Some in the early church had apparently used the occasion of public confession as an opportunity to slander and ridicule the penitent.¹¹² I can easily imagine the same thing happening among our congregations; as far as gossiping goes, we're no better than our predecessors. Whereas the intent would be restoration and reconciliation, public confession could ruin a person's reputation and drive a wedge between them and their friends in the congregation. A few questions may be necessary to ask. Is the sin to be confessed something that people need to know about? Such may very well be the case when a couple in the congregation gets a divorce for reasons of marital unfaithfulness. It may be necessary to clear the innocent party. One might also ask, "Is the congregation spiritually mature enough to handle the confession? Are they ready for this practice?" And, "Does the confessor have a leadership role that would be needlessly damaged by

112. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Vol. II*, 600.

his confession?” We tend to understand best those sins with which we ourselves struggle, casting an uncharitable eye upon sins which have never been a problem for us. Should the situation be appropriate for public confession, however, I can hardly think of a more beautiful way for the congregation to confess its rejection of sin and its faith in forgiveness.

Corporate Worship

There is much to be said about the value of corporate repentance, that is, repenting all together as one assembly. The prophet Joel called for it:

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, LORD... (Joel 2:15–17).

Notice how he encouraged the participation of all social groups from nursing infants to elders, and how the call was so urgent that it superseded the importance of wedding preparations—imagine that! Of course, the circumstances of Joel’s day were special: famine, drought, locust plague and/or foreign invasion (depending on your interpretation). They really needed everyone to get together and repent. But think for just a few moments about the spiritual issues that plague our parishes and the broader Christian church. Is there any reason we don’t need this—and regularly, at that?

Confession and Absolution ought to be afforded a high priority during worship. Luther comments about the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, and he really gets at the whole point of praying for forgiveness.

“Dear Father, forgive us our debts. Not that he does not forgive sins even apart from and before our praying; ... But the point here is for us to recognize and accept this forgiveness. For the flesh in which we daily live is of such a nature that it does not trust and believe God and is constantly aroused by evil desires and devices, so that we sin daily in word and deed, in acts of commission and omission. Thus, our conscience

becomes restless; it fears God's wrath and displeasure, and so it loses the comfort and confidence of the gospel. Therefore, it is necessary constantly to run to this petition and get the comfort that will restore our conscience.¹¹³

If this is true for the regular worshiper, what about those in attendance who have not been to church for weeks and months, who have become surrounded and isolated by the deceitfulness of the world, having zero interaction with other believers and hardly any with God's Word? But regular worshipers need repentance no less. And so, when we do this as a group, we confess together our common need for forgiveness and declare with Luther, loud and clear: "Let none think that they will ever in this life reach the point where they do not need forgiveness. In short, unless God constantly forgives, we are lost."¹¹⁴ Thus we drive home the point that in God's church, there is not one single individual who does not need to repent.

But the best and highest purpose of Confession and Absolution is itself, the Absolution. In the Absolution, the minister performs one of the most marvelous functions, a function which is abused or neglected by much of Christianity. He says on behalf of Christ, "Your sins are forgiven," and Christ in heaven forgives every single sin (Jn 20:23). This is a fulfillment of Christ's mission to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations (Lk 24:47). Really, the minister is just declaring in the Absolution a fact that has already been firm and established since Christ completed his redemptive work on the cross. But to declare forgiveness unequivocally to every worshiper present takes a kind of bold confidence in justification that is really quite unique to Lutherans. Christ's forgiveness of *all people* is something we may be proud of and declare often.

113. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Large Catechism*, 452.88-89.

114. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Large Catechism*, 452.91.

But as we noted in the introduction of this thesis, we have a tendency to take Confession and Absolution for granted and mumble through it like some dry meaningless formula. I encourage pastors to call special attention to this part of the service, so that their members may take it to heart and cherish it. Conduct the Confession and Absolution as you call to mind your deepest, darkest struggles; doing so will render your presentation heartfelt and thoughtful. And incorporate the words and concepts of Confession and Absolution into your Bible classes and sermons. Impress upon the parishioners their desperate need to repent. If this part of the service ever becomes old hat, it will happen because we have allowed it to, not because we have lost our need for it.

A word now about sermons—I am by no means qualified to give a homiletics lecture, so I will keep this brief. Might there be value in allowing our Law proclamations to sting and cut a little bit more? Chemnitz says:

“He [Jesus] indeed wants to have the Gospel proclaimed, but to the poor; He wants to heal, but those who are crushed; He wants to proclaim freedom, but to the captives; He wants to lead forth and set free, but those who are bound, that is, those who are held captive under sins...He wants to crown with mercy and compassion, but the head that is bowed down, not one that is inflated with pride...”¹¹⁵

I am not saying that this should be the goal of our sermons. As faith is the soul of repentance, the Gospel is the soul of the sermon. But our Gospel proclamations may be better served by harsher condemnations of sin. I’ve heard plenty of sermons that did not produce anything in my heart that would even approach true contrition. As a result, the Gospel message was all but lost on me. I didn’t feel like I needed it that morning. I confess, the fault lies in the hardness of my sinful heart that is so loathe to apply God’s Law to myself and so mentally slow when it comes to remembering my own failures. If I listened to every sermon with an honest and humble heart, the

115. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Vol. II*, 583.

preacher's task of proclaiming the Law would be so much easier, and his proclamation of the Gospel so much sweeter. But alas, I struggle, and I think I'm not alone.

How might a stronger proclamation of the Law be accomplished? That is largely a question for the homiletics textbooks, and there is neither time nor space to include that here. One thing that has helped me, however, is simply engaging myself in the repentance process as I write the sermon. I have listed many passages in this thesis which I've found helpful for demonstrating the seriousness of sin; meditate on these when you write! Also, most sermon texts themselves will show us our sinfulness if we only take them to heart. Spend enough time meditating on the Law inherent in the text, and disgust and sorrow will naturally bleed into your writing.

Christian Education

In my own experience with teaching Catechism class and conducting Bible studies, I have noticed two related issues that I particularly struggle with, and I don't think I'm the only one. The first is that oftentimes, the Gospel most certainly does not predominate the lesson. Last year, I led a Bible class on the minor prophets, and most of our discussion revolved around questions of "What is the historical context?"; "What is the prophet condemning?"; "Where do you see similar sins committed today?" Far too many times, God's good news for sinners became nothing more than an afterthought, a brief, shallow discussion which did not seem to fit, but nevertheless made the Bible study "Lutheran."

This issue I believe was brought about largely as the result of another: failure to let the Law produce contrition. When the Law element in the text was a condemnation of sin, we often failed to apply it to ourselves. It's amazing how many times we passed over such a basic element

of Bible study, focusing instead on the “speck of dust” in someone else’s eye, whether it was pop-culture, the government, or rich people. But that was the more comfortable route to go. And again, when the text presented a command, I would opt for the comfortable route. I was so eager to explain certain commands of God in such a way that made them feel more palatable and less extreme, something that “other people” might have a hard time with but that everyone in the room was actually already doing, or could do by making a few minor adjustments. I did not wish to burden God’s people with something that was difficult for them, something that just might compel them to change their lives. I wanted God’s Law to seem easy and doable, and this attitude was altogether wrong.

In its pristine, natural state, God’s Law tends to look a lot like extremist dogma to our sinful eyes. And so, if we find ourselves explaining God’s Law in such a way that suddenly makes the whole Bible class feel very uncomfortable, might it be possible that we’ve actually got it right? That is the Law’s purpose! That is its intended effect upon the sinful will. Of course, let’s be careful not to make laws for people that God never intended. Let’s guard ourselves against extreme, inaccurate interpretations. But on the other hand, we must also guard against our natural inclination to put a nice, tame spin on God’s Law. God’s Law is impossibly difficult, and understood correctly, it will make us feel bad about our conduct and lives.

If we can refrain from softening up the Law, if we allow God to wield it against our stubbornly secure sinful nature with its full force, the first issue I addressed should all but disappear. Far from becoming an afterthought, the Gospel will become the main concern of the entire lesson. To a room full of sorry, uncomfortable sinners, discussing the Gospel will feel as natural and refreshing as turning on the A/C in August. And no one will want to turn it off!

So, what is my practical suggestion? Try modeling some of your Bible classes, Sunday School or Catechism lessons after repentance. Keep the two dynamics of contrition and faith in mind as you structure the lesson and plan your questions. Strive to bring about contrition in your students; expect them to feel uncomfortable about God’s Law. Then be ready with that Gospel A/C to awaken faith in their hearts, faith that despite their inability to live up to God’s Law, his grace is nonetheless certain.

Imagine that someone in your class raises their hand and asks, “I do such and such a thing pretty much every day—does this Bible passage mean that I’m sinning?” Stop and think before you tell him that he is fine. Even if what he is doing doesn’t seem that bad, you will do nobody any disservice by admitting that there might be something sinful about his thoughts or deeds. We believe that sin saturates our thoughts and deeds. As Luther says, true repentance wastes no time debating what is sin and what is not. “It simply lumps everything together and says, ‘Everything is pure sin with us. What would we want to spend so much time investigating, dissecting, or distinguishing?’... Rather, there is plain, certain despair concerning all that we are, think, say, or do, etc.”¹¹⁶ But after this is admitted, always be ready to follow up with the Gospel. The Gospel is the reason why we have no problem with allowing people to feel uncomfortable. It is God’s perfect, unailing remedy for any and every sin.

Evangelism

Have you ever felt somewhat deflated when all your worked-up courage and mental preparation results in a brilliant and heartfelt confession of faith that is met with nothing more than flat indifference? Scripture warns us that our testimony of Christ crucified will always be foolishness

116. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 318.36.

to the unbelieving world (1 Cor 1:23), but I would argue that this is even more the truth when we attempt to share it without considering repentance. I remember one occasion when I shared with a friend that Christ's death on the cross had won unconditional, universal forgiveness for the sins of the whole world, and that yes, he could consider himself included. He responded, "Why isn't everyone saved then?" To this I said, "Forgiveness is a gift that is received through faith. The reason some are not saved is that they do not have faith and they reject the gift." "I don't know" was his reply that day and just about every other time since then. Why was he so hesitant to believe? Might part of the reason have been my failure to mention his sinful condition? Believing is impossible enough for people, how much more when they do not even see the need to believe? At first, I was frustrated and confused at his lack of belief—my confession was so clear! Now, what frustrates me is that I ever expected him to have saving faith in the first place without contrition.

We recall from the doctrinal portion of this thesis, that "a true saving faith has no existence in a proud, haughty and self-assured heart. Instead, true saving faith exists solely and alone in a humble, crushed, and repentant heart."¹¹⁷ No one has interest, much less faith in the Savior of sinners until he has "been reduced to the state of a poor, lost, and condemned sinner."¹¹⁸ That's why Jesus says that he came to call the sick, not the healthy. The "healthy" are unafraid of a life without Christ; they have no need for a doctor (Matt 9:12). Before the Great Physician can get to work and heal the sick, the sick must see that they are chronically and fatally ill. Contrition and faith is the God-ordained way for a sinner to receive the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. We should not expect success in evangelism if we neglect God's order.

117. Gerhard, *Schola Pietatis: Vol. I*, 10.

118. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 249.

I'm not suggesting that the Law should dominate our personal evangelism efforts, nor that we should share the good news if and only if the people we witness to are positively weeping. The Gospel needs to predominate the message. I merely suggest that when we preach the Savior of sinners to people, we do our best to make sure they know why they need one.

Counseling

Finally, there is much to be said about integrating the two parts of repentance, contrition and faith, into pastoral counseling. In fact, there is too much to be said for this thesis. Suffice to say, there is a "Repentance Model" first developed by Alan Siggelkow, which seniors are taught at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in their pastoral counseling course. The Repentance Model follows this basic structure: 1) preach objective justification; 2) discuss what the Bible has to say about the sin in question (Specific Law); 3) offer forgiveness for the sin in question (Specific Gospel); 4) discuss fruits of repentance (Law as guide). There is a lot to commend for this counseling model since it addresses the root cause of every single problem ever experienced: sin. For a closer look at this model, I direct the reader to *Doctor of Souls*, pages 287–290.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

If you're a parent, your family needs to repent. If you're a pastor, your members need to repent. If you're a teacher, your students need to repent. If your friends are sinners, they need to repent. If you're a sinner—well, you get the idea. The contrition and faith that occur in repentance are

119. John Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017).

crucial aspects of every Christian's life, and essential for salvation. It is the entire goal of the Bible that we learn to sorrow over our sin and gladly receive the forgiveness our Savior has dearly bought and freely offers. For these reasons, repentance deserves a central place in our lives and in our ministries; it should never become an afterthought, nor some indifferent practice where we walk ourselves through the motions. True, heartfelt repentance is a necessity for every day of our lives.

The reader may have noticed that the "Practical Suggestions for the Pastoral Ministry" portion of my thesis was not backed up by any great amount of research. My research revolved primarily around doctrinal concerns as opposed to practical, and most of the practical suggestions came out of my own head, motivated and inspired by the interaction between my doctrinal study and my personal experience as a Christian. If the reader is interested, and especially if a doctrinal thesis or conference paper is in his future, my work has left ample room for a study of the practical issues. How might repentance inform our preaching style? How does biblical repentance interact with the concerns and issues of pastoral counseling? What does repentance mean for the Christian's daily devotional life? God's people would be greatly served by such studies.

Finally, why did I write this thesis in the first place? Why did you set aside your precious time to read 57 pages describing what repentance is, what it isn't, and why it might become a more integral part of your life and how? While we all technically understand the necessity of repentance, we also rebel at the notion that repentance is really *that* necessary for me apart from the few times I mess up really bad. The necessity of repentance is something we must continually prove to ourselves, time and time again. I pray that if writing this thesis accomplishes anything, it has proven to some very righteous person out there that she needs to repent, and that

it has given her some practical ideas for how that might be done. That is precisely what researching and writing this thesis has accomplished for me and my hyper-righteous, sin-darkened heart. God bless us all with continual repentance, every day of our lives. May he grant us grief over our sin, and may he bestow upon us a humble confidence in the wondrous things which he has done for our salvation.

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