

You Shall Know the Truth: The Challenge of Repentance

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“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

The First of Luther’s Ninety-five Theses

Recently a long-submerged memory floated, for some strange reason, to the surface of my mind. I was taken back to a fall morning in the mid-1960s, when, as a college freshman, I was sitting in my assigned seat at chapel. Attendance at daily chapel services was compulsory at my church-related school, and grim-faced monitors, like guards in an Albanian prison, patrolled the auditorium marking down the names of those who dared to be absent. The speaker that day was a guest, a professor from some major university, who had drawn the unlucky assignment of delivering a serious address to a captive audience of bored and restless late adolescents.

I have long since forgotten the brave professor’s name, but I have not forgotten what he said. “Over the doors of many libraries throughout the land,” he began, “are inscribed Jesus’s words, ‘Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ Those words are mostly not true,” he continued. He cited as evidence three of “humanity’s most profound myths”—Adam and Eve, Oedipus, and Faust. In each of those cases, he argued, the truth led not to freedom but to anguish and tragedy.

I had chemistry class immediately after that chapel service, and our professor, who took the Bible as literally as he did the periodic table, shelved his lecture on molecular compounds in favor of fifty minutes of desk pounding, harrumphing, and outraged rhetoric about any chapel speaker who could doubt the words of Jesus and who thought the Adam and Eve story was a “myth.”

But our guest chapel speaker was right. The truth, in the sense of the hard, cold facts of human existence, does not set us free. The full unvarnished truth about any human life and human society, can be terrifying, humiliating, shameful, a burden too hard to bear. This is a reason for so little real repentance in church or out. Those who truly repent must accomplish one of the most difficult of all human acts: naming and owning the painful parts of our lives and our society from which we are repenting.

The Rarity of Repentance

We can see all around us signs of the fear of the truth, the strenuous efforts to keep from having to face the truth, and the gaping holes where repentance ought to be found. When an insurrection that shook the foundations of government and the roots of democracy is dismissed by Mike Pence as just “one day in January,” and when an act of mob violence is described by Georgia Representative Andrew S. Clyde as like “a normal tourist visit,” the Scripture understands: “You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth” (Ps. 52:3). The damage done on January 6, 2021 is plain to see, but ye shall know the truth and the truth will be covered up, euphemized, wished away, and denied.

Sociologist Robert P. Jones’ book *White Too Long* is about the “willful amnesia”

of White Christians on the matter of racism. He writes,

Underneath the glossy, self-congratulatory histories that white Christian churches have written about themselves is a thinly-veiled, deeply troubling reality. White Christian churches have not just been complacent. They have not only been complicit; rather, as the dominant cultural power in America, they have been responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to protect white supremacy and resist black equality. This project has framed the entire American story.¹

Jones reports that early on a Sunday morning in 1906 in Springfield, Missouri, a mob of White men 3,000 strong lynched three Black men in the town square. That Sunday happened to be Easter. The community did not face up to the truth in the confidence that the truth would bring freedom. For over a century, the truth of what had been done was hidden, repressed. The community did not repent. Who could face up to such an action? Only in 2018, when the original perpetrators were long dead, was a memorial established for the victims. Arthur Hodge, who led the efforts to create the memorial, described what had happened in his town 112 years earlier: “They hanged them. They threw kerosene on them. They burned them to a crisp. And then they went to church.”²

One could say, of course, that there are signs of change. Memorials have been established, offending monuments have been removed, buildings have been renamed. But often such events are accompanied by the applause of those who feel righteous more than by the cries and laments of the repentant.

Four years ago, the Attorney General of Pennsylvania published a report from a two-year grand jury investigation that found that over three hundred priests in six Catholic dioceses in Pennsylvania had abused more than 1000 children. Among the victims described in the report was a man called “George.” When he was a young boy, George was among the children raped and abused by a group of priests. George told the investigators that each boy, after several incidents of abuse, had been given a gold cross to wear. The boys thought these crosses were gifts of affection, but the investigators found that the priests intended the crosses to be “a signal to other predators that the children had been desensitized to sexual abuse and were optimal targets for further victimization.” George still wears his cross today.³

The church has paid financial settlements to some of the victims. The Pope has made an official apology. Clergy have been removed from their positions. The hierarchy has instituted safeguards to prevent further abuse. But very few of the perpetrators have repented. Hans Urs von Balthasar, commenting as a Catholic priest as well as a theologian, said that these horrific acts committed by priests were even more grievous than the sins of the world because they were done by those who had received extraordinary grace in Christ. What they did to their victims, said Balthasar, was nothing less than a rejection of Christ.⁴

Many of these predatory priests have been caught, but few have repented. Many have been disgraced, but few have cried, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.... You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean” (Ps. 51:3, 6-7). As Balthasar observed, to repent would be to acknowledge a failure

of humanity so devastating and tragic that it would constitute fulfillment in our time of what Jesus said to his disciples: “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil” (John 6:70).

But What About “Ordinary” Sinners?

We have been citing extreme cases of human depravity—vicious racism, criminal violence, murder, sexual predation. No wonder repentance is rare. In order to repent of such sins, perpetrators would have to come to grips with the fact that their souls have become canker sores. But what about the ordinary round of sinners? Why is it that, even in the case of those who are quite willing to say “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) but who haven’t themselves committed murder or robbed a bank, repentance is still so rare? Or, to put it another way, why is repentance, when we do see it, so unexpected and striking, and why, when people repent in public, are we prone to doubt their sincerity (Bill Clinton, Mark Zuckerberg)?

In one of the primary liturgical resources of my own tradition, the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, this prayer of confession appears:

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have
left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

In your mercy, forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be, that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name.

Prayers something like this one are prayed routinely in Sunday worship, but notice how sweeping this prayer is. To speak this prayer is to confess that our thoughts, our words, and our deeds have violated our relationship with God, to admit that, though we are called to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37), we haven’t come close to acknowledging that we have been too self-centered to properly love our neighbors and to cry out to God for healing and the ability to live a new kind of life.

If we who worship took this prayer seriously, we’d have to do something—perhaps fall to our knees and rend our garments—not fold the bulletin and check our email while the children’s sermon is delivered.

But perhaps we don’t rend our garments because, as Stanley Hauerwas once suggested, we don’t believe these prayers, don’t really believe they are descriptive of us. Like the old soap opera character who said in a cough medicine commercial, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV,” maybe we say, “I’m not a real sinner, but I play one in worship.” Hauerwas said,

[T]hough we know we may be sinners, we have trouble taking that description of ourselves all that seriously. We know we are not perfect, but most of us think we are good enough. The truth is most of us are conventional people who lead good conventional lives. It is not at all clear to us that

we are all that sinful, but...we are willing to try to play being a sinner for God's sake—at least at Lent.⁵

Play acting at being a sinner and the emptiness of our acts of repentance may account for much of a trend in worship named by church historian Kenneth Appold, namely the gradual weakening of the language of prayers of confession. He writes,

A more surprising development has to do with the collective confession spoken by congregations at the beginning of many Protestant worship services—common in both the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. If one pays attention to these, and especially to how they have developed over the last 40 or 50 years, one notices a gradual softening of language. In some cases, the formulations are so euphemistic and vague that they can scarcely be called “confessions” at all; they are more like recitations of general platitudes than petitions for forgiveness.⁶

As a case in point, that Presbyterian prayer of confession quoted above, robust as it seems, is actually itself a considerably softened version of the prayer of confession prayed by John Calvin's Strasbourg congregation:

Leader: *My brethren, let each of you present himself before the face of the Lord, and confess his faults and sins, following my words in his heart:*

People (kneeling): O Lord God, eternal and almighty Father, we confess and acknowledge unfeignedly before thy holy majesty that we are poor sinners, conceived and born in iniquity and corruption, prone to do evil, incapable of any good, and that in our depravity we transgress thy holy commandments without end or ceasing: Wherefore we purchase for ourselves, through thy righteous judgment, our ruin and perdition. Nevertheless, O Lord, we are grieved that we have offended thee; and we condemn ourselves and our sins with true repentance, beseeching thy grace to relieve our distress. O God and Father most gracious and full of compassion, have mercy upon us in the name of thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And as thou dost blot out our sins and stains, magnify and increase in us day by day the grace of thy Holy Spirit: that as we acknowledge our unrighteousness with all our heart, we may be moved by that sorrow which shall bring forth true repentance in us, mortifying all our sins, and producing in us the fruits of righteousness and innocence which are pleasing unto thee; through the same Jesus Christ.⁷

That is tough, unrelenting language, and it is hard to read Calvin's prayer without imagining it in Darth Vader's voice. Hauerwas may be right. We can hardly imagine ourselves as these old prayers described us, “depraved” and “prone to do evil,” so we look for sunnier versions of the faith. We confess our sin, but do so untroubled. Some so-called “progressive Christians” even contrast their new, refreshing, and more upbeat anthropology with the older sin-centered versions of Christianity. As one spiritual life website puts it, “Traditional Christianity looked up to Christ as the perfect human being; in some denominations he is still regarded as the only begotten

son of God who died for humanity's sins. In Progressive Christian Spirituality, we are called to be Jesus every day of our lives...."⁸ No repentance necessary there, no garments must be rent, no beseeching of grace to relieve distress required. I am Jesus, and I play him every day.

A Little Topsy in the Forest

While there may be some validity to the idea that we cannot seriously imagine ourselves as sinners and are only play acting when we confess our sin, I think Kierkegaard's analysis of the human situation comes closer to the truth. For Kierkegaard, we are play acting, but the other way around. We know that we are sinners but are pretending that we are *not*. "The truth of the matter is this," wrote Kierkegaard, "all of us human beings are like a drunk man who is not completely drunk so that he has lost his consciousness—no, he is definitely conscious that he is a little drunk and for that very reason is careful to conceal it."⁹ Like a tipsy person trying to hide the fact, sinners try to hide their sinfulness under a veneer of respectability and self-justification. We are like Adam hiding from God in the forest, and the forest is conventionality and the apparent respectability of living what the world calls a good life.

But as we hide in the forest, that messenger of God called guilt finds us and summons us. So we press deeper into the forest all the more to hide, from God and from ourselves. We have, said Kierkegaard, in our "innermost being a secret anxiety about and wariness of the truth, a fear of getting to know too much."¹⁰

So when we hear the words of that prayer that "we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone," we pass them off not because we know they aren't true, but because we know very deeply that they *are* true. We can't let them sink in because to do so would be "getting to know too much."

Coming Out of Hiding

How do we come out of the forest of self-deception, the forest of hiding from self, others, and God. Perhaps there is help to be found in Martin Luther. No figure in church history was more focused on repentance than Martin Luther. "His own spiritual autobiography," observes Kenneth Appold, "...shows that he struggled profoundly in early years as a monk with his own guilt and with a seemingly relentless desire to unburden himself of it in confession." Some have wondered if Luther's obsession with penitence bordered on neurosis. Johann Staupitz, Luther's own confessor, probably growing weary of Luther's compulsive confessing, reprimanded him, suggesting that ceaseless recitation of sin could, in fact, be a sign of self-indulgence. Staupitz encouraged Luther to remember that God already knows everything and, thus, Luther should perhaps limit his penitence to the big stuff, leaving the rest to God's mercy.¹¹ But Luther was stuck. The more he confessed, the guiltier he felt, and that necessitated even more confession.

What cracked things open for Luther on repentance was a fundraising effort. In 1517, the Catholic Church launched a huge capital campaign to raise money to build St. Peter's in Rome. Preachers were dispatched all over Europe to preach repentance and to sell indulgences for the building fund. The sheer vulgarity of this forced Luther not only to question the place of indulgences but also to rethink the practice of repentance more deeply.¹² Ultimately, in a burst of illumination, Luther heard the as-

surances of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, that at the end of the penitential road stood not a stern confessor but a grace-filled Christ, who redeems by grace through faith. Repentance became for Luther not a perpetual hand-wringing over sin, but a life-long journey, under the sign of the cross, toward the merciful face of Jesus Christ.¹³

Theologian Arthur C. McGill observed that it really doesn't do any good to hound people to repent and to lead a better life:

[W]hether people serve themselves or serve others is not in their power to choose. That is decided wholly in terms of the kind of world in which they think they live, in terms of the kind of power they see ruling the roost. The issue lies at the level of the god they worship and not in the kind of person they want to be. In New Testament terms, they live or die according to the king that holds them and the kingdom to which they belong.¹⁴

To bring this home to the subject of repentance, people would be insane to repent publicly if repentance were an isolated act. To decry one's foul deeds and bewail the evil one has done as a naked event could only bring reproach and shame. That is why people do not repent. It is not that we do not know we are sinners; it is that we cannot live if that is the only thing we know about ourselves. Repentance alone, as Kierkegaard saw clearly, is "getting to know too much."

This is why the ancient baptismal liturgies contained a graphic enactment of repentance. Those being baptized would be told to face west. They would then be invited to spit on Satan and all of his empty promises. They vowed no longer to obey the rules and customs of the evil kingdom that once held sway over them. They would then be asked to turn toward the east, to "orient themselves," literally. When they did, they would be surprised to see that the priest had changed vestments. He would now be wearing a dazzling golden robe symbolizing the glory of God's heavenly kingdom. All was now clear. Repentance was a change of citizenship. They were renouncing allegiance to the kingdom of darkness and evil and becoming partakers in a land of light, freedom, joy, and glory.

It is only in the context of God's reign that repentance is possible, only when we keep our eyes on the prize and have in view that land toward which we are traveling. When Luther saw penitence as only a sacramental act of the church, it brought him only more shame and guilt. It was when his eyes were opened to see that on the other side of repentance was not merely the pardon of the confessor but the mercy of Jesus Christ that he was able to embrace repentance as more than a fretful attempt to work off guilt. Repentance became a representation of the whole Christian journey, the entire Christian life.

"Repent" was almost the very first word to come from the mouth of Jesus as a preacher. But it wasn't the first. The first thing Jesus preached was "The time is now! The kingdom of God has come near!" (Mark 1:14). No one repents into a void. Only when the kingdom of grace is at hand do we have the freedom and confidence to repent. That is what that chapel speaker said so long ago. "The truth shall make you free" is true," he said, "but only in the context of the One who said it."

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer railed at a superficial form of repentance-less Christianity he called "cheap grace." He said,

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. “All for sin could not atone.” Well, then, let the Christian live like the rest of the world, let him model himself on the world’s standards in every sphere of life, and not presumptuously aspire to live a different life under grace from his old life under sin....

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.¹⁵

Right at this point, Bonhoeffer turns to the contrast: costly grace. But he surprises us: “Costly grace,” including the act of repentance, is not a harsh disciple or a heavy burden, but a compelling treasure:

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.¹⁶

Notes

1 Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 6.

2 *Ibid.*, 197.

3 Office of the Attorney General, State of Pennsylvania, “Report I of the 40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury,” 235-236, available at <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov/report/>.

4 Stephen D. Lawson, “© 2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd The Apostasy of the Church and The Cross of Christ: Hans Urs Von Balthasar On The Mystery of the Church as *Casta Meretrix*,” *Modern Theology*, 36/2 (April, 2020), 280.

5 Stanley Hauerwas, “Repentance: A Lenten Meditation,” *Journal for Preachers* (Lent, 2019), 38.

6 Kenneth G. Appold, “Getting Repentance Right: Luther’s Reformation Refocused,” *Theology Today*, 75/2 (2018), 151.

7 “The Strasbourg Liturgy of 1545 (Part I),” <http://zioncornerstonepasig.org/2012/05/20/the-strasbourg-liturgy-of-1545-part-1/>.

8 Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, “Our Vision of Progressive Christian Spirituality: The Shape and Substance of a New Christianity for the Twenty-first Century,” <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features/view/22301/our-vision-of-progressive-christian-spirituality>.

9 Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself*, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 170.

10 Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 170. See also Jeffrey Morgan, “Guilt, Self-Awareness, and the Good Will in Kierkegaard’s Confessional Discourses,” *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 33/3 (2020), 352-370.

11 Appold, 143.

12 Appold, 145.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 92.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 43-45.

16 *Ibid.*, 45.