

Can a Believer Repent?

SUMMARY: We recognize the great hope of the gospel as extending equally to believer or unbeliever alike in regards to true and godward repentance.

At The Village Church, we believe that true faith necessitates and creates repentance.¹

The issue is not adding something to the faith, but rather recognition of the nature of this faith as the instrument which God uses to accomplish our salvation. By its very essence, saving faith produces contrition, sorrow, and a changed perspective on our past sins and present dispositions, leading to ever-reforming attitude and action. We confess that we believe in faith without works,² but that true faith is never without works.³

As this new life in Christ is ever-reforming, we do not understand salvation to have produced a life of consistent, visible and static perfection, but rather a continued process of being conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴ Therefore, we understand the need not only for initial repentance during the season of conversion, but also continued reflection and subsequent restoration in the light of known sin.

No doubt we all have skeletons in the closets of our lives. By God's grace we all should hope and pray that our shadows will come to light through His mercy. Some of us are haunted by the ghosts of a life lived prior to being met by the risen Lord. Others have erred and wandered since that initial experience and reality of salvation. In the case of the former, we are quick to recognize the conversion of Paul⁵ as a type of our own experience, having once engaged in egregious sin, but now restored unto belief and life.

For the latter, sometimes there is a struggle with how God could possibly forgive one who has willingly engaged in known rebellion after having come to knowledge of the truth. At The Village Church, we recognize the great hope of the gospel as extending equally to believer or unbeliever alike in regards to true and godward repentance.

This hope for the latter is not only seen in the broad overview of the doctrines of grace, mercy, forgiveness and salvation, but also is seen fleshed out in the pages of Scripture.

Especially relevant is an account of Peter, one of Christ's inner three disciples/apostles.

While the chronicle of his repeated denial of Jesus prior to His resurrection⁶ has some bearing, it is perhaps not the most exact

1 Luke 24:45-47; Acts 11:18, 17:30-31; Hebrews 6:1; et al.

2 Romans 3:28; Ephesians 2:8-9

3 Galatians 5:6; James 2:14-26

4 Romans 8:28-30; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2-3

5 See the account of his pre-conversion deeds in Acts 7:54-8:3, his conversion in Acts 9 and his consequent ministry as an apostle, authorship of 13 of the books of our New Testament and role as missionary.

6 Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:17, 25-27 – for the symbolic restoration see John's account of

analogy given the fact that such took place prior to the giving of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.⁷ Rather, I see Paul's account⁸ of his opposition to Peter over the division between Jew and Gentile in Antioch as bearing most appropriately in the discussion. Within this account we have a foundational apostle who is found to be engaged in sinful action in direct conflict with the expressed will of God regarding the breakdown of the wall between Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ.⁹ Obviously this narrative details the fact that a believer who has fallen into sin can be restored through the gracious gift of repentance. The only ways that we could argue that this incident is not relevant to the conversation would be to:

1. argue that Peter never found repentance for this action
2. assert that the action, while opposed by Paul, was not actually and necessarily sinful, but was rather an issue of wisdom and therefore needed only correction but not repentance

Position 1 – Peter never found repentance in regard to his action at Antioch

This seems to be a rather absurd position given Christ's blessing in Matthew 16, Peter's role during Pentecost, and his enduring ministry, especially as an inspired author of scripture, continuing until his death as a martyr for the name of Jesus in Rome some decades later. There really is no justification for such a position.

Position 2 – The action was one of wisdom and not sin

This position also is weak given the language (using the ESV) of the text. Terms such as "stood condemned," "hypocrisy," "not in step with the truth of the gospel," and "led astray" seem rather forceful in describing the action as explicitly sinful (opposed to the purposes of God). Also, the fact that Paul "opposed" Peter (not encouraged, exhorted, or other such language which would be more in line with what we would expect of mere correction) leads us to conclude that Peter's action were not merely unwise, but were indeed an expression of sin. This is clear especially given Peter's own testimony of

God's revelation of Acts 10 regarding Jew and Gentile interaction in the kingdom.¹⁰ As this expression in Galatians 2 is clearly

Peter's 3 affirmations of love for Christ in 21:15-17

7 Acts 2

8 Recorded in Galatians 2 starting in verse 11. The subsequent discussion (at least through chapter 3) is quite relevant to the issue of restoration and continuing in salvation.

9 Later (having been written after the events took place) discussed in Colossians 3:11 and in many other passages.

10 Acts 10 records Peter's vision leading to God's revelation of the gospel going out to the Gentiles. Given that Paul argued forcefully in favor of his natural Jewish understanding of the ethnic distinction and was explicitly corrected by God ("What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."), it cannot be argued

sinful, this position also does not hold up to scrutiny.

I suppose there is also the possibility of seeing Peter's sin as somehow less sinful than something that we might have committed and to therefore argue that while he could find repentance, we cannot. However, with the exception of the sin(s) mentioned in Matthew

12 and 1 John 5, there does not seem to be any distinction to be made in the levels of unrighteousness between various sins. Regardless, most interpretations of the two instances of sin mentioned above view them as somehow involving a continued resistance to the work of the Spirit, apostasy and such.¹¹ James 2:10 and other relevant texts seem to level sin and not allow us the option of judging various levels of unrighteousness between individual sinful dispositions and actions.

Given that Peter was guilty of sin and yet found place for repentance, we can see that such is certainly not impossible in God's plan of redemption. As those who have been saved by absolute grace, we confess and proclaim that salvation was not conditioned upon our actions prior to conversion and that continuing in such salvation will not be conditioned upon our actions subsequent to it (salvation). As Paul writes in Galatians 3:3 "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" The thrust of the question is quite clear in attributing any understanding of salvation which is dependent upon subsequent works as deficient and misleading. We have been saved by grace and grace will definitely and effectively keep us in this salvation.

For more biblical perspective on the issue of finding repentance for the believer, read James 5:16-20. It is a beautiful confession of the possibility of falling into sin and yet finding restoration. The context demands that we assert that the one in view is a believer ("one among you", "one another") and makes it quite clear that the issue is one of sin. Verses 19-20 put it quite succinctly in acknowledging the potential of wandering from the truth (notice the relation to the language of Peter's action in Antioch) and yet being brought back and saved, having a "multitude of sins" covered.

While we certainly confess that God's grace is abundant and overflows to the unbeliever (beckoning him into salvation) and the believer (calling into reflection and repentance), we do not want to presume upon His kindness or use grace as an excuse or license for sin.¹² We must always remember that repentance, while certainly involving our own will, is primarily a gift of God's grace.¹³ In an extreme and quite terrifying case, we even have a record of someone who desperately sought repentance and yet "found no place" for it.¹⁴

The above truth should always lead us not to despair and

that Peter was in anyway ignorant of God's will on the matter. He had received direct revelation of God's purpose in the matter and yet acted contrary to this desire in his dealings in Antioch.

11 Read Wayne Grudem's discussion of these passages in *Systematic Theology* as a good starting point on this topic.

12 Romans 6:1-2; Jude 4; et al

13 Romans 2:4

14 Hebrews 12:15-17

hopelessness, but rather to focus on the grace of God. As long as we have the desire and ability to repent, we must make every effort to do so. God is not to be mocked by our sin and we have no guarantee that we will not grow dull in the light of continued rebellion against God's commands. If we have truly repented of our pasts, let us forget them and press on toward the great joy of obedience, faith and love.¹⁵ If we are still holding on in some manner to the fleeting pleasure of sin, let us let go with all of our might and will¹⁶ and beg God to rid us of any sinful disposition. Having been freed from the past let us enjoy and believe that our sins have been covered and that He counts them against us no more.

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15 Philippians 3:7-16

16 Hebrews 12:1