

THE GIFT OF REPENTANCE

Lowell Bennion*

Except for the preaching of evangelists — whether of a Billy Graham or of the small holiness sects — one hears little of repentance in this secular age, and this is also true among Latter-day Saints. It is not that we lack admonishment to keep the commandments and to forsake some practices, but the prophetic cry, “Repent ye, repent ye,” in the spirit of an Amos or a John the Baptist is absent. Anyone speaking in this vein is likely to be labeled a fanatic if not mentally disturbed. Repentance is not considered a viable principle in contemporary society.

One reason for the neglect of this basic gospel principle may be that our interpretation of repentance has become shallow or superficial. The modern, pragmatic temperament tends to associate repentance with the breaking of undesired habits. This emphasis is illustrated in the frequent Sunday school discussion of the “R’s” of repentance: recognize the wrong, feel remorse, resolve to do right, make restitution, and replace wrong with right. This practical, step-by-step way of changing behavior has been described by secular writers like William James and Aldous Huxley, the latter of whom begins his *Brave New World* with these words:

Chronic remorse, as all the moralists agree, is a most undesirable sentiment. If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to behaving better next time. On no account brood over your wrongdoing. Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean.

This kind of advice makes good sense, even though it pertains to only one aspect of the principle of repentance.

In the Scriptures, repentance implies a whole new stance towards life, a transformation of a person in feeling, thought, conviction, and action. It brings a man into a new relationship with himself, with others, and with Deity. Repentance begins with a realization of one’s insufficiency, an awareness of spiritual need, and with a vision of a new kind of life that would fulfill one’s idea of what life should be. As one scholar has said, “Religion is always the enemy of self-satisfaction.”

Furthermore, repentance is not an isolated principle which one can follow or ignore according to whim. It is a basic response to life which is intimately related to other responses: to humility, faith, and love, among others. Gospel

*Lowell Bennion is Associate Dean of Students at the University of Utah.

principles — like life itself — hang together, building a mosaic of the religious life. Like the fundamental concepts of any science or art, religious principles are interrelated; they build on and enrich one another. One principle, such as repentance, is not to be understood save in the context of both life and religion. For example, repentance is unthinkable without humility. Jesus taught this in the first Beatitude when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” which has been translated by Goodspeed as “Blessed are they who feel their spiritual need.” It is followed by the second Beatitude, “Blessed are they that mourn,” which is believed by some scholars to mean “Blessed are the penitent,” or blessed are those who recognize and repent of their sins. Humility leads to repentance as naturally as blossoms turn into fruit.

Illustrations of the above interpretation of repentance will be provided from Judaism, New Testament religion, and the Restored Gospel, particularly the Book of Mormon. (Before turning to them, however, I wish to assert that this study is a mere beginning and purports to be simply an exploration of an old but neglected theme.)

Judaism, founded as it was on the Mosaic Law, has been endlessly defined by Pharisee and Rabbi. This trend, called legalism, has led to criticism by Christians, beginning with Paul’s famous dictum: “The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life.” Legalism, however, is only one tendency in Judaism and is an unfair and inaccurate description of Old Testament religion and even of the Law of Moses. Sin for the Jew was more than disobedience to a set of rules and commandments, and repentance was more than the breaking of habits. A Danish scholar, Johannes Pederson in *Israel, Its Life and Culture*, reports that the Hebrew word for sin denotes “failure” and “an infringement on the psychic totality.” He continues, “One cannot sin with a whole heart for sin is the very dissolution of the totality. If the soul is throughout sinful, then it means that it is entirely dissolved, decayed; then it is no longer to be reckoned a human soul” (p. 411). Sin is the opposite of righteousness, for a righteous soul is healthy and whole.

In the New Testament, repentance continues to mean a complete relationship to life. The Greek word translated into the English “repentance” means “to have a new mind.” Jesus said that a man must be born again of the water and the spirit and become as a little child if he is to see the Kingdom of God. Paul would settle for nothing less than for his converts to become “new creatures in Christ Jesus” or to “be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Paul’s own radical change of mind and hearts — as he embraced Christianity — served as a prototype to him of that which should happen to all men.

In Latter-day Saint theology, repentance is also far more than a psychological exercise in changing one’s habits. Here, as in the Bible, repentance is part of the whole process of accepting Christ by which believers learn humility which, when combined with faith, leads them to bear witness in baptism of their willingness “. . . to bear one another’s burdens, . . . to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of

comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . ." (Mosiah 18:8, 9).

The Book of Mormon provides fresh insights into the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel. The remainder of this paper will suggest and illustrate some of the Book of Mormon contributions to an understanding of the principle of repentance — one of the major themes of the entire record.

The Book of Mormon repeatedly links repentance to man's relationship to Jesus Christ. Amulek, for example, in discoursing on the atonement, says,

And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, *and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.* (Alma 32:15; emphasis added)

How does Christ give one the means to have the faith to repent? In the first place one cannot know Jesus without gaining a vision of life and what it might become. In the light of this new perspective, a person can recognize his own immorality and spiritual mediocrity. Repentance often begins not in recognizing the wrong, but by seeing the right which puts the wrong in perspective. One cannot come to know Jesus Christ in any real sense and remain the same person.

Secondly, after a person recognizes his sin and wishes to repent, he often makes the mistake of trying to lift himself by his own bootstraps. That is, he has an internal struggle fighting sin directly. Often the more he concentrates on fighting sin, the more he succumbs to his awareness of its presence. If lust, for example, is a man's problem, he will gain no victory just by thinking about it. This I learned as a young missionary through an unusual experience. A brother came to me after church services one evening in an utter state of despair. After his marriage, but before his baptism, he had committed adultery. His wife would not forgive him and reminded him continually of his low character. He had come to accept her estimate of him. Like David in The Psalms he was crying, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

I asked him, "What have you done to change your state of mind?"

He replied, "My brethren told me to fight it."

I replied, "There is a better way, for there is no strength in weakness." We prayed together. I gave him a book to read to get his mind on other things. And then quite by chance or inspiration, I asked him, "How would you like to prepare the Lord's table each Sunday morning?" He answered, "Do you think I am worthy?" My reply was, "No, none of us are, but I believe the Lord would be pleased to have you render Him this service." I also asked this brother to speak in church on a principle of the gospel of Christ that had come to mean something to him, which he did.

In these few ways, my friend began to relate to Christ. He served Him with his hands, his mind, and his heart. In three months he came to me

again after church services, bright-eyed, cheerful and grateful, saying, "I am a new man. I have a new mind." In the service of Christ he had risen above sin.

The Book of Mormon clarifies the meaning of the sacrament of the Lord's supper and introduces the prayers used in the blessing of the bread and water. The words of these simple but meaningful prayers also bring the sincere participant into a closer relationship to the Savior and tell him how he can fill his life with the Spirit of Christ which will lift him above his weakness. The blessing on the bread is as follows:

O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee, in the name of thy son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it; that they may eat *in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he has given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them.* (Moroni 4:3; emphasis added).

Anyone who will believe in Christ, engage in His service, keep His commandments, and always remember Him will find means unto repentance.

The Book of Mormon adds still another dimension to man's struggle to overcome sin through his relationship with Christ. King Benjamin, in a farewell address to his people, says of the Savior,

And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, *so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people.* (Mosiah 2:7; emphasis added).

It is a well-known Christian belief that in the atonement Jesus suffered for man's sins, but King Benjamin says He suffered *because* of them. This and other scriptures suggest something equally profound: Christ's love for men is continuous, and therefore so is his anguish for their failings; He not only suffered but still suffers because men sin. It pains Him to see the children of men destroy themselves. If a sinner understands this and loves Christ, he will be moved to reduce the Savior's suffering by repenting of his own wrongdoing.

The little book of Enos illustrates the power of prayer and the need to persevere in one's desire and search for a new mind. Enos writes,

And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for my soul; and *all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens.* (Enos 4; emphasis added.)

And when assurance came to Enos that he was forgiven of his sins, he asked in amazement, "Lord, how is it done?" And he was told, "Because of thy faith in Christ."

The whole-souled nature of the principle of repentance is also illustrated in this experience of Enos, for he wrote, "When I had heard these words I began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites; therefore, I did pour out my whole soul unto God for them." Repentance changed his relationship not only with himself and with God but also with his fellowmen.

A final idea from the Book of Mormon suggests that forgiveness, which is God's response to repentance, is a continuing experience — as is repentance — and that it is contingent on love and service to others. Benjamin wrote, "for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins *from day to day* I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor . . . administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally . . ." (Mosiah 4:26). Here repentance and forgiveness are linked with an ongoing Christian life. The same emphasis is developed in the words of Moroni at the close of Nephite history: "And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling of the commandments; *and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins . . .*" (Moroni 8:25. Note also verse 26; emphasis added).

This paper began with the notion that the word "repentance" is viewed by some as outdated in our secular culture, that it has been replaced by psychological and other pragmatic efforts to help people find themselves and cope with the world in which they live. Men everywhere are dissatisfied with life and are seeking self-renewal or self-actualization or whatever the latest expression for this phenomenon might be.

Repentance — as defined by the Hebrew prophets, Jesus and Paul, and Book of Mormon teachers — continues to offer a viable alternative to dissatisfaction. It invites a man to be born again through his love of God and neighbor and by his commitment to the teachings and mission of Christ.