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Foreword

When I started reading Jack Miller's *Repentance*, I felt as speechless as the guy in Matthew 22 who finds himself at the wedding banquet (having somehow slipped security checkpoints) only to be escorted to the exit for want of the required garment. He should have known better; there had been announcements.

I should have known better too. A quarter century after the fanfare of a conversion experience, I realized I had become a Christian without authentic repenting. I suppose there had been announcements along the way of the need to be broken over sin. But for some of us it never ran deep. We limited ourselves "to a generalized confession of sins during worship that amounts to little more than a solemn liturgical formula. I have rarely seen anyone undergo fundamental change through it" (p. 38).

It's like Miller read my mail. And not only mine, evidently: "Much of the church resembles a desert," he writes. "Frankly, I know of very few confessing Christians who have

ever shed tears over their sins. Or if once they wept over their sins, they are careful never to do it again [because] they see no one else doing it . . .” (pp. 41, 86–87).

The book’s title is *Repentance*, but this is no ivory tower exercise about where repentance fits into the *ordo salutis*, whether before or after faith and regeneration. It is nothing less than an attempt to reclaim biblical Christianity from a modern powerless variety that downplays or ignores the robust repentance that was the gateway to salvation in the Great Commission (Luke 24:44–47).

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A Note to the Reader

MY PURPOSE in writing down these things was not to produce a book with a formal outline, but to shape the truths God has taught me into an informal essay. What you have here, then, is something of a single letter from my heart to yours. It expresses a twofold concern for God's people today. First, many who call Jesus their Savior are loaded down with pretense and evasion, and they have no heart for confessing and forsaking their ways as God commands them (Prov. 28:13, 1 John 1:8–10). Second, many others have an awareness of their guilt, but do not know how to go to Christ and rid themselves of their dark blots. In their secret heart God is viewed as an unsympathetic tyrant, not as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

From my good friend Kefa Sempangi I have heard about the working out of these principles in Uganda, where a revival which began in 1938 has continued up to the present. Kefa reports that the believers there have an unusual honesty in confessing sins, and as a consequence the whole church has been filled with great joy. In practice this means that a

grim-faced brother may be stopped on the street and asked by his fellow Christian, “My brother, have you confessed your sins today? Have you seen the cross of Christ today?”

According to Kefa, believers are expected to “see the cross” when they confess their sins and to leave their burdens there. My heart’s desire is the same for you who read this treatise. Do not attempt to confess and forsake your old ways apart from the love of God manifested in a crucified Lord. Instead, look to the risen Savior who intercedes at the Father’s right hand for you. As the Spirit exposes the evils of your heart, observe the wounds in Christ’s hands. They are the absolute, unshakable promises of the Father guaranteeing full access to the crushed in spirit. Therefore, as you read, believe, and He will wash your tears in the blood of the Lamb.

. J

Repentance: The Foundation of Life

MOST of this study on repentance I wrote at a time when God had made me aware of the greatness of His love in a new way. This new consciousness of His everlasting mercy came as I learned to confess my own sins more forthrightly and to turn from them with deeper hatred for every evil impulse in my heart. The joy and relief this gave my struggling soul is simply beyond words. At that hour something of the glory of the cross appeared before my eyes with transforming and healing power.

What we all desperately need to see is that the love of a holy God is manifested covenantally at the cross. In the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, the Father *promises* to receive contrite sinners on a daily—no, hourly—basis. The cross says, “No matter what your sins, unlimited mercy is available to those who turn to God through Jesus’ merits.” Thus, at Calvary we behold the infinite nearness and compassion

of the infinitely majestic God. The Father, in the gift of His Son, has put Himself under eternal obligation to returning children. Having satisfied the demands of His own holy law, the Father *must* open His mighty arms and embrace every returning child. And He must do it every day. He has promised to do it (Luke 15:11–32, 1 John 1:8–10), and God cannot lie (Heb. 6:13–20).

To be near God and to have God near us is the whole purpose of human life.

But without sincere repentance there can be no face-to-face fellowship with the Father of lights.

An unrepentant heart is self-satisfied, proud and cold. God resists such a heart. Scripture says flatly, “God resists the proud” (James 4:6).

But the Lord cannot resist the broken heart that has experienced true repentance. He will not, He cannot, stay away from repentant sinners. He says, “Be zealous and repent.” Then as the door of repentance is opened by His almighty grace, He comes in and eats with the contrite ones and fills them with the joys of His friendship (Rev. 3:19–20).

It is not easy for us to understand this, otherwise the Lord would not repeat it so often in the Scriptures. His Word says, “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart” (Ps. 34:18). Awakened from his terrible lapse into carnality, David cries, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. . . .” (Ps. 51:17). And the prophet Isaiah is told by the high and lofty One, “I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit” (Isa. 57:15).

No sentimentalist inviting sinners to self-pity, this holy Father sees humanity in all its nastiness and is yet given to strange, tender excesses. His love explodes into joyous ac-

tion whenever a convicted sinner turns toward home. A glimpse of the exile is enough. The Father quickly goes forth to receive the penitent one into His arms. What He has to give, He gives: the ring and the shoes of family relationship, the feast of heavenly joy and—best of all—Himself (Luke 15:22–24).

Yet few contemporary Christians understand the importance of repentance in the reconciliation between God and sinful humanity. Few even know that the Great Commission includes a command to preach repentance: “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). They do not share the divine excitement over repentant sinners either. If they did, they would want to enter into it. They themselves would repent, and then they would go and plead with sinners to receive the same joy. Once tasted, repentance would speak to them of communion with Christ and of self-forgetting fruitfulness and of Kingdom power (Mark 1:15).

This is the age of the Spirit, and the age of the Spirit is an epoch of repentance. This new day was introduced by the preaching of repentance by John the Baptist and Jesus (Mark 1:4, 14–15). The apostolic message to the unconverted was a testimony of “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). In Athens the sophisticated Greeks were told that it was a very special time in which they were living. By raising Jesus from the dead, God had served notice to all people everywhere to repent, because He had fixed a day for judging the world by this same Man (Acts 17:30–31). The Spirit had the same message for the churches of Asia Minor. “Be zealous and repent,” said Christ and the Spirit (Rev. 3:19).

But most importantly, it is at Pentecost that the power of the new age descended. Here we discover that the new order did not begin with an invitation to seek the Spirit first of all. Rather, people were commanded to repent for what they had done with Jesus. Then they were assured that they too would be filled with the Spirit of promise. Peter said, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38, see also 3:19–20).

We have sinned by failing to teach and practice this commandment of the King. We have become small people, the least in the Kingdom (Matt. 5:19). Satan has deceived us. By our self-trust and self-dependence, the Spirit has been so quenched that many, many churches, pastors, Christian workers and laypeople think that things are just fine, when in fact we have been visited with the dryness of death (Jer. 17:5–6, 13).

In our pride we would never think of ourselves in connection with Ananias and Sapphira. But our sin bears a very close resemblance to theirs. They wanted to pretend to be near God when they were not. In doing this they lied to the Holy Spirit by publicly claiming to have given *all* the proceeds from the sale of their property to the Lord (Acts 5:1–2). How close we are today to the inner spirit of this terrible deed! We bring a *part* of ourselves to the Lord—and not always the best part—and then we want people to think that we are near God. This is to substitute the role of a Christian for the reality. True, we can effect a certain awe in our prayers as we tell the Lord that “we are not worthy of the least of all Thy mercies.” Yet such praying does not get the fountain clean at its deepest source. It says very little about particular

sins which we commit daily and the root-sins of pride, unbelief and lust which clog up our lives.

The sad truth is that we are like the Pharisees who loved the *reputation* for knowing God more than they loved God. They were expert Bible students who searched the Scriptures with the conviction that they taught the way to eternal life (John 5:39). Despite the intensity of zeal which made their religion seem so authentic, Jesus said that it was all pretense. For in their hearts they were blinded because they sought glory from one another and not from God (John 5:44).

So in their pride they were not near God. Instead, they were under Satan's influence. Full of themselves and their own thoughts, they did not really seek to be taught of God (Isa. 29:11–14). Hence, they were blinded in a very deep way. They were those who saw everything so clearly without really seeing anything at all (John 9:40–41).

We are terribly foolish if we think that contemporary men and women do not see that many are putting on a false show.

The world of humanity in our generation has been dominated by lies, broken promises, shattered illusions and just general sham. People are sick and tired of role-players and plastic goods, slickly turned out and calculated to deceive. Therefore, if we wish to be effective, we must see that our own pharisaic pretense will eventually be discovered by the people we meet and rebuked by our own consciences.

But even more important, the Holy Spirit Himself is deeply grieved, weeps holy tears over our religious fakery and instructs us in a better way—by the path of renewal through sincere repentance. He says:

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. (James 4:6–10)

Thus, you do not need to continue as one of those whom T. S. Eliot has called the “hollow men.” Ask the Holy Spirit to make you willing to be searched by God (Ps. 139:23–24). Do not expect the process of searching to be always painless and pleasant. No, hardly. But you will begin to have the joy of a clear conscience and a deepening fellowship with Christ. As you learn to thirst after Christ and drink of Him, you will find the living waters of the Holy Spirit flowing through you (John 7:37–39). No longer will you be merely existing, you will be living—and from you waters will overflow into other lives.