

The Grace of Repentance by Sinclair Ferguson, Crossway Publishers, Wheaton, IL: 2010. (28 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Repentance Central to the Gospel.

In today's church we are as likely to be told not only that we can become Christians without such repentance, but can even remain Christians without it, being *carnal* to the end of our days. By contrast, our forefathers were convinced that repentance is so central to the Gospel that without it there can be no salvation. They believed this because it is the Bible's teaching. [page 14]

2. Scriptures Speak of Repentance Extensively.

Since repentance is such an important concept for understanding the true biblical Gospel, it is not surprising to discover that the Scriptures have an extensive and lively vocabulary to describe it. [page 15]

3. Repentance -- Change a Course of Action.

Two Old Testament metaphors express the rigor, thoroughness, and even pain that can be involved in repentance: circumcising one's heart (Jer. 4:4) and breaking up the fallow ground with a plow (Hosea 10:12). *Shub*, the Hebrew word that dominates the language of repentance, is one of the most frequently used verbs in the Old Testament. It is used over 100 times in the book of Jeremiah alone. It means to change a course of action, to turn away, or to turn back. This turning can refer to apostasy, a turning away from God (Numbers 14:43, Joshua 22:16, 18, 23, 29; 1 Samuel 15:11; 1 Kings 9:6), but predominately it denotes man's turning away from rebellion against God, and turning *to* God. It means a complete about-turn. [page 15-16]

4. Turning Away From and Turning To

Turning away from sin and turning back to God belong together. [page 17]

5. A Complete Change under the Holy Spirit's Influence.

Ulrich Becker summarizes the New Testament teaching [of repentance] in these words:

Repentance, penitence, and conversion are closely linked. Whenever someone gives his thought and life a new direction, it always involves a judgment on his previous views and behavior. This is expressed in the NT by three word-groups which deal with its various aspects: *epistrepho*, *metamelomai*, and *metanoeo*. The first and third both mean turn round, turn oneself round and refer to man's conversion. This presupposes and includes a complete change under the influence of the Holy Spirit. *Metamelomai* expresses rather the feeling of repentance for error, debt, failure and sin, and so it looks back. Hence it does not necessarily cause a man to turn to God. *Epistrepho* is probably the widest concept, because it always includes faith. (New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975-78], vol.1, pp 353-354)

6. Repent and Believe in the Person of Christ.

At first sight it might seem as if New Testament repentance no longer carries the covenantal overtones of the Old. But the reverse is the case. In the New Testament the covenant reaches its fulfillment in the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the last days. The covenant promise is no longer foremost because it has been fulfilled. In a sense the covenant *is* Christ. The focus of attention is now no longer on a promise but on a person.

Hence, the message of the New Testament is not, "This is God's covenant; therefore repent." Instead it is, "The Kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus; repent and believe in him." Kingdom-oriented and Christ-centered language now predominates, not because this has always been the focus of the covenant. The King has come. Therefore, to speak of his Kingdom and the necessity of repentance is to speak in the language of God's covenant grace! [page 19]

7. A Radical Reversal to a Completely Different Mindset.

Biblical repentance, then, is not merely a sense of regret that leaves us where it found us. It is a radical reversal that takes us back along the road of our sinful wanderings, creating in us a completely different mind-set. We come to our senses spiritually (Luke 15:17). Thus the prodigal son's life was

no longer characterized by the demand “give me” (v.12) but now by the request “make me ...” (v.19).

This lies on the surface of the New Testament’s teaching. Regret there will be, but the heart of repentance is the lifelong moral and spiritual turnaround of our lives as we submit to the Lord. [page 20]

8. Repentance Is Essential for Salvation.

Repentance is essential for salvation. Twice in the same context Jesus underscores this: “Unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:3,5). God commands all men every where to repent, because he has fixed the day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by Christ (Acts 17:30-31). Repentance “is of such necessity to all sinners that none may expect pardon without it” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* XV, 3). [page 21]

9. Salvation Is a Transformed Life.

Salvation is salvation from sin. That means more than forgiveness; it includes sanctification, a transformed life. It involves those who are saved in a turning away from sin. That turning away is repentance. There can be no salvation if we continue in sin (Romans 6:1-4; 1 John 3:9).

Does this mean that we are forgiven on the basis of our repentance? Not at all! Repentance and faith are both necessary for salvation, but they are related to justification in different ways. Faith alone is the instrument by which Christ is received and rested on as Savior. Justification is by faith, not by repentance. But faith (and therefore justification) cannot exist where there is no repentance. Repentance is as necessary to salvation by faith as the ankle is to walking. The one does not act apart from the other. I cannot come to Christ in faith without turning from sin in repentance. [page 21]

10. Faith and Repentance Both Needed.

Faith is trusting in Christ; repentance is turning from sin. They are two sides of the same coin of belonging to Jesus. [page 22]

11. Repentance Is What God Says It Is.

The true repentance does not consist of what men make of it, but of what God says of it. In the diversity of providences and experiences it consists and must consist of the dying of the old and rising new man. [page 23]

12. Repentance Is God-centered.

David's repentance, which was also marked by remorse and regret, was evangelical because it was God-centered, not self-centered. David recognized and responded to the fact that he had acted wickedly and committed sin *against God*. His repentance included the hope of forgiveness and new life (Ps 51). [page 24]

13. Repentance Comes from Walking in the Spirit.

Paul describes the repentance that issues from the regenerate heart as the righteous requirements of the Law being met in those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4). [page 24]

14. One Agrees with God's Judgment of One's Sinful Life.

Repentance is *radical*. It involves agreeing with God's judgment on my sinful life, justifying God in his righteousness and condemning myself in my sinfulness. It is taking up the cross, denying myself, putting off the old man (Ephesians 4:22, Colossians 3:9), and crucifying the flesh with its lusts (Galatians 5:24).

15. An Ongoing Battle for Holiness.

The Christian is a new person in Christ, but he is imperfectly renewed. He has died to sin and has been raised to new life. But this mortification and vivification continue through-out the whole course of his life on earth. We are no longer what we were, but we are not yet what God calls us to become; and as long as that is the case we are called to an ongoing battle for holiness. [page 25]

16. Christ's Kindness.

The kindness of Christ led Peter to repentance (Romans 2:4). [page 26]

17. No Excuses for Present Sin.

Having served well in the past as a faithful warrior and servant like David is no excuse for present sin. [page 29]

18. Revelation of an Evil Heart.

Evil deeds are the fruit of an evil heart. They are not an aberration from our true self but a revelation of it. [page 30]

19. Being Inescapably Sinful.

Sin is woven into the very core of my being. I am congenitally, inescapably sinful. This is what I really am.

Only when I have seen this and cried out like that do I see my need for grace. And only those who have tasted the depths of their need can taste the sweetness of God's forgiveness. Only that self-discovery leads us to experience the cleansing pain of the live coal from the altar of God (Isaiah 6:6-7). It burns and is painful, but it brings forgiveness. [page 31]

20. Self-cleansing Does Not Work in God's Sight.

"Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is before Me," declares the Lord God" (Jeremiah 2:22). [page 32]

21. Don't Be Deceived by Temptation.

James's words, written much later, almost seem to be a commentary on David's experience: "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire [David, not God or Bathsheba, was responsible for his sin], he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin [spiritual adultery in David's case was also physical adultery]; and sin, when it is full-grown [lust led to adultery, adultery led to murder], gives birth to death [Bathsheba gave birth, and the baby died]" (1:14-15). The next verse needs to be engraved upon our hearts: "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers" (v.16). [page 33]

22. Repentance Is Life-long.

Repentance does not merely begin the Christian life. According to Scripture, the Christian life is repentance from beginning to end! So long as the

believer is *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time righteous and yet a sinner), it can be no other way. [page 37]

23. Today Repentance Is Separated from Genuine Regeneration.

Seeing repentance as an isolated, completed act at the beginning of the Christian life is a principle underlying much of modern evangelicalism. We look back upon a single act, abstracted from its consequences, as determinative of salvation. For us, as for the medieval church, repentance has been divorced from genuine regeneration, and sanctification has been severed from justification. [page 41]

24. Christians *Have Already* Crucified Their Sinful Nature.

The idea that it is possible to receive justification without sanctification, to trust in a Savior who does not actually or presently save, to receive a new birth that does not actually give new life, or to have a faith that is not radically repentant despite uniting us to a crucified and risen Christ simply did not find a place in Reformation theology.

Paul spelled this out with perfect clarity, writing that “those who belong to Christ Jesus *have* [that is, have already] crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24). To fail to live thus, as Calvin vividly pointed out, to “rend [Christ] asunder by ... mutilated faith” (*The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1960], p.167). [page 42]

25. Worship Has Become a Visual Spectacle.

Worship is increasingly becoming a spectator event of visual and sensory power, rather than a verbal event in which we engage in a deep soul dialogue with the Triune God.

Contemporary evangelicalism tends to focus on what “happens” in a spectacle rather than on what is heard in worship. Aesthetics, be they artistic or musical, are given priority over bowing underneath the authority of what God says. More and more is seen; less and less is *heard*. There is a sensory feast but a hearing famine. This is purely medieval, not evangelical. [page 45]

26. Christ Himself Is the True Sanctuary.

There was a time when four simple words were enough to bring out goose bumps on the neck of our ancestors: “Let us worship God.” Not so for the twentieth- and twenty-first century evangelicals. Now there must be color, movement, and audiovisual effects. God cannot be known, loved, praised, and trust for His own sake.

We have lost sight of great things—the fact that Christ Himself is the true sanctuary of the new-covenant people, that true beauty is holiness, that when the Lord is in His temple all are transfixed with a heart of silence before Him. These are glories of worship. [page 46]

27. Christ Alone Is the God-ordained Worship Leader.

We must offer our very best to God in corporate worship. But we do that only when we realize that true worship is not a spectator event, where we luxuriate in what others do. It is a *congregational* event, in which Christ mediates our prayers, conducts and leads our praise, and preaches His word to us. He alone is the God-ordained worship leader, the true minister in the sanctuary (Hebrews 8:2). We dare not obscure this Christ-centered and congregational character, nor make worship dependent on anything other than approaching God in the Spirit through Christ with clean hands and a pure heart. The Father seeks such to worship Him! [page 47]

28. Unfortunately Producing a Generation of Spiritually Infant Christians.

The tragedy here is that in our worship we are in danger of producing a generation of professing Christians who remain spiritual infants, feeding them emotionally with what produces satisfaction for a brief moment but never truly builds them up in Christ.

I once heard Dr. James Montgomery Boice express this principle as he introduced congregational prayer for Sunday School teachers at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He noted that from the beginning the children are taught small portions of Scripture on which they build until, for example, they are eventually able to recite such chapters of the Bible as

Romans 8. Hymns (yes, hymns!) are sung and learned because of their power to teach doctrine (yes, doctrine!).

Why this stark contrast with, if not in opposition to, the trends of the time? Here, as I recall, is what Dr. Boice gave as the rationale: “We are living in a time when adults, including Christians, want to behave like children. Here, in our Sunday School, we are training our children to grow up to be Christian adults.” [page 49]