

# Taking Repentance Seriously



by J.I. Packer



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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by  
*J.I. Packer*

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## Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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Editor

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# Taking Repentance Seriously

*J.I.Packer*

As I sit down to write this little book, three declarations are jumping up and down in my mind.

The first is the title of a current book: *Repentance: the First Word of the Gospel*.

The second, dating from half a millennium ago, is the first of Luther's *95 Theses* (1517), which sparked the European Reformation: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he meant the whole life of a believer to be a practice of repentance."

The third is another book title, from the not-so-distant past: *The Church must First Repent*.

Between them, these three declarations express most of what I want to say now.

## **Repentance is Basic**

But how am I to say it? Where should I start? The problem is that teaching, talk and thought about repentance have virtually vanished, not just from our post-Christian secular world, but from the lives of churchpeople too. The words "repent" and "repentance," which we hear often enough in church services, carry no clear meaning to us; in fact, they signify something to which most of us are strangers. Rarely if ever do we hear sermons about repentance (check your own memory for that); rarely if ever do we talk to each other about repentance; like sex in the Victorian era and death in the twentieth century, it has become a Great Unmentionable. The nearest many of us get to it is the sour old proverb which, perhaps I may say, we half-know, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure," where "repent" means "wish we hadn't done it" (only a skewed fraction of the word's Christian meaning, by the way)—and beyond this our thinking about repentance does not go.

Which is an amazing thing, when we weigh the following facts:

## **(1) The call to repent was the beginning of the preaching of the biblical gospel**

John the Baptist's message from the start, we are told, was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 3:2). After John's imprisonment Jesus "began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (4:17). When Jesus sent the twelve on their first mission, they "proclaimed that people should repent" (Mk. 6:12). When on resurrection day evening Jesus appeared to the disciples, "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations'" (Lk. 24:45-47; not, note, forgiveness without repentance!). When on Pentecost morning Peter's Spirit-empowered sermon so stirred the crowd that they interrupted him, asking what they needed to do, his first word in reply was, "Repent" (Ac. 2:38). Paul described his extended ministry at Ephesus as one of "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (20:21; not, note, faith without repentance!); and he told King Agrippa that he had simply been proclaiming to one and all "that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance" (26:20). So in Athens, the intellectual capital of the ancient world, Paul had told the Areopagus, the top gathering of Athens' intellectual elite, that "God... now... commands all people everywhere to repent" (17:30). Repentance was thus primary in the preaching of John, of Jesus, of Peter and of Paul, and Peter's last words on paper include the description of Jesus as "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). The centrality of repentance in the gospel and purpose of Jesus Christ our Lord is a fact we must face.

## **(2) The call to repent was the beginning of the sixteenth-century Reformation**

Constantly and correctly we are told that the heart of Reformation theology, the theology that determined the shape of our *Book of Common Prayer Book*, was its reconceiving of faith. Hereby faith came to mean, not just believing the creed, but on that basis trusting oneself to God's promises of pardon and peace, through Jesus Christ the crucified and risen Lord, who died on the cross for our sins. This trust was an embrace of Christ himself, whereby as we clung to him he received us, so faith

became the mainspring of a new life of obedient discipleship. Without this trust, said the Reformers, there is no faith; credence without commitment does not constitute faith. In England, in the days of Henry VIII and Edward VI, this reformed theology was actually called the doctrine of faith rather than of justification, which is what it was called in Lutheran territory. Now my present point is that Reformation theology can just as validly be described as a reconceiving of repentance. Previously, repentance had been taken to mean confessing your sins to a priest with suitable sorrow, receiving absolution from him, and performing whatever “penance” (corrective discipline) he might impose. In Reformation thought, however, faith and repentance were brought together, back to back as it were, like the two sides of a single coin, and repentance became the comprehensive, habitual turning away from sin to serve Christ in righteousness which the gospel demands and faith energizes. Luther’s nugget assertion of this has already been quoted, and here is a statement made in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, chief architect of our *Book of Common Prayer*, that amplifies the same idea: “Repentance for sins according to the gospel (*Evangelice*) is a saving (*salutaris*, health-giving) grief about one’s sins because of their offence to God, with hope of obtaining pardon through Christ and a purpose of amending one’s life with Christ’s help” [my translation of Cranmer’s Latin in Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, pp. 237 f., note 100]. Without serious effort to change one’s ways, said the Reformers, repentance is not real; mere bewailing and confessing and breast-beating with remorse and regret still fall short of it. So the centrality of repentance in our Reformational understanding of Christianity is another fact we must face.

### **(3) The call to repent is the beginning of Anglican liturgical worship**

“Anglican liturgical worship” here is a phrase covering the many versions of Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* (first form 1549, second form 1552) and England’s classic 1662 revision of it. Canada’s *Book of Common Prayer*, published in 1962, is in fact 1662 with minor omissions, additions and adjustments. All Prayer Book services aim at two things together, the honour and glory of God and the sanctification of the worshippers, that is, their formation in a holy life on the basis of the forgiveness of their sins through faith in Christ and the embracing of repentance as their path of life for the future. Thus,

Morning and Evening Prayer, the daily Bible services, begin with a confession of sin that ends with the words:

Restore thou them that are *penitent* [i.e., repentant];  
According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ  
Jesu our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his  
sake, That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober  
life, To the glory of thy holy Name.

To this the absolution that follows responds by declaring that we ask God

to grant us true *repentance* and his Holy Spirit... that the rest  
of our life hereafter may be pure and holy; so that at the last we  
may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the two-part Holy Communion service, the Ante-Communion (to give it its old name) starts with prayer for the cleansing of our hearts “that we may perfectly love thee,” and for the law of God to be written on our hearts; and the Communion proper begins with an invitation to those “who do truly and earnestly *repent* you of your sins,” leading into a confession of sin that centres upon the following:

We do earnestly *repent*, And are heartily sorry for these our  
misdoings... Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we  
may ever hereafter Serve and please thee in newness of life, To  
the honour and glory of thy Name.

And the prayer of absolution that follows invokes God as “our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty *repentance* and true faith turn unto him...” Then in the Litany, the first part of Cranmer’s liturgy to be composed, we ask God to

give us true *repentance*; to forgive us all our sins, negligences  
and ignorances; and to endue us with the grace of thy Holy  
Spirit, to amend our lives according to thy holy Word.

Also, the *Book of Common Prayer* contains “A Penitential Service for Use on Ash Wednesday and at other times,” in which we pray that “we, truly *repenting* of our sins, may obtain of thee perfect pardon and release.” This indeed is something of a drumbeat emphasis throughout our authorized liturgy.

In the *Book of Alternative Services* the emphasis on repentance as basic to devotion is very much weakened, which is surely something

to regret, but it is there still, as the post-baptismal Reconciliation of a Penitent (pp. 166–72), and the eucharistic Penitential Order (pp. 216–17), to look no further, show us.

What emerges from what we have seen thus far, however, is that a generation of churchpeople like ourselves, who know so little about repenting, are spiritually superficial by historic Anglican standards and devotionally very much out of sorts. Prayer Book Christianity is Bible Christianity, and Bible Christianity is founded on repentance, just as it is built on faith, and we are today falling badly short. So we must think our way through this subject from square one. That means, we must start with God, the Holy Lord, from whom we learn the nature of sin.

### **The Human Condition**

The passages cited from the New Testament told us that repentance is *toward God*, and the *Book of Common Prayer* tells us that what we must repent of is the sins for which we seek forgiveness—our *misdoings*, that is, both by commission and by omission. The Bible's big story, which binds all its contents together—what nowadays is called its metanarrative—tells us to understand these misdoings in the following terms: God has made (formed) humans in his own image, meaning us to behave toward both him and each other in a way that reflects his own character of love and justice, truthfulness and trustworthiness, creativity and joy in work. But a corrupting force in our moral and spiritual system, with a corrupt demonic intelligence behind it, has unmade (deformed) us all, so that now we are alienated from God and have become a grotesque and, alas, vicious travesty of what we were meant to be. The Bible's name for the deforming force, both in itself and in its various modes of expression, is sin. Through Christ the Redeemer we can be remade—restored, that is, to God's fellowship here and now, and started on the road of being re-conformed to God's image by learning to live Christ-like lives. Repentance, in the broadest sense, signifies the change of mind, purpose, attitude and behaviour whereby we embrace God's agenda of mercy toward us and turn back from the old life of fighting God by playing God to live the new life of humbly and thankfully serving him. Repentance is thus a whole-person business in which a pattern of self-centred self-service is replaced by a God-centred habit of seeking others' welfare, and pride and wilfulness give way to prayer and worship.



But now, within this new frame of life, each act of repenting is specific. I discern in myself a particular fault, shortcoming, type of misbehaviour, bad habit or whatever. I ask forgiveness for it, through Christ's atonement, telling God that I am asking also for help to break the pattern: to be different henceforth and not lapse again, and meantime to see and do all I can do to make amends for the damage, both relational and material, that my past lapses actually did. This is the reality of repenting that we are concerned to explore, the repenting to which the Bible and the Prayer Book summon us in the name of the Lord Jesus himself.

To make the reality of repenting clearer, more must be said about sin. Be warned: some of what the next few paragraphs will affirm may sound to you shocking and incredible. That is because, as a result of sin's deceitfulness (more of that in a moment), we know so little about ourselves. In our therapeutically-oriented Western culture, where Christian perspectives are largely lost, we settle for comparing ourselves with each other, inevitably from the outside only and in merely behavioural terms; we think of ourselves as basically good and certainly better than some people we know, and we really have no idea how we appear to a holy God who searches hearts and knows us literally inside out. As scanners in hospitals put our physical insides on display for physicians to see, so the eyes of the Creator scan our hearts and show up the thoughts, motives, dreams, drives, cravings, fantasies, hates, hostilities and meannesses that actually make us tick, including those of which we are only half-aware and indeed those of which we are not aware at all till someone brings them to our notice. The first time I saw my physical heart on a screen, thumping away, as they scanned me, it was a jolt, and every time one gets a glimpse of one's personal heart (inner spirit) as God sees it, churning out perversities of all kinds, that will jolt one too. God's view of us is not complimentary, and our pride makes it difficult at first for us to accept what he tells us about ourselves. But if we are humble and honest we shall end up accepting it, for we shall find ourselves convinced that the cap fits, and God's diagnosis of us is true.

The wide range of words in Hebrew and Greek which our Bibles translate as "sin" express the ideas of failing either to hit a target or to reach a standard or to obey authority or to be clean in company. And the standard unreached, the target missed, the path abandoned, the law transgressed, the authority defied, and the purity violated, are God's. God's character and will are the true measure of sin.

The way of sin is to live, not for God, but for yourself; to love and serve and please yourself without regard for your Maker; to try to be independent of him, to hold him at arm's length, to keep the reins of your own life firmly in your own hands; yet at the same time to try to manipulate him as a means to your own ends, and to use him as a safety net when you are in trouble. Sin is truly the devil's image in us, for self-exalting, God-defying pride was his sin before ever it was ours (1 Tim. 3:6). Sin is deviation from the God who wants our fellowship and worship, and sin embraces self-absorption in place of God-centredness. Augustine spoke of *homo incurvatus in se*, the human person bent in upon his or her self. The historic name for our inborn antipathy to God and his law is *original sin* (*peccatum originale*, another phrase coined by Augustine); and the name, though not found in Scripture, is entirely appropriate, whether we take it as signifying that this disposition comes to us from the first human, or simply that it is in us from the moment of our origin, and that in any case all our acts of sin stem from it. The sinful condition of humankind, according to the Bible, is absolutely universal. "There is no one who does not sin" (1 Kgs. 8:46). "All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin... none is righteous... no one does good... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:9–12, 23). All human beings are guilty and unclean in God's sight.

This spirit of sin within us, which disrupts the relationship between us and our Creator, disrupts human society also. From self-aggrandizing non-love of God springs self-aggrandizing non-love of neighbour. Irreligion breeds inhumanity. Sin spreads, and society suffers. Think about Paul's three sad catalogues of characteristic forms that this disruption takes (Rom. 1:26–31; Gal. 5:19–21; and 2 Tim. 3:2–4), and also about Jesus' list of defiling things that come out of the human heart (Mk. 7:20–23). Every item in those lists can be matched in the Western world today.

To sum up: sin, as a label for our natural state before God, signifies rebellion, defilement, condemnation and slavery. *Rebellion* means that all of us resent, defy, evade, belittle, ignore and disobey God, one way or another, every day of our lives. *Defilement* means that all of us are unclean—dirty, to say it straight out—in God's sight; we are offensive and unacceptable to him, and unfit for his fellowship. *Condemnation* means that in the presence of God our judge we are all guilty rebels who can now only await the moment when God makes us feel his displeasure. *Slavery*—you could call it bondage, or addiction—means that we are all naturally under sin's power; we do not have it in us to love

God and our neighbour whole-heartedly and without qualification, the way we should. And only through a faith-and-repentance relationship with the Lord Jesus, a relationship that brings forgiveness and renews our hearts, can this slavery ever be ended.

Such, then, is the frame of insight into the human condition within which repentance, both personal and corporate, is to be understood. Repentance, we now see, will always be more than a moment of regret and remorse, plus a word of apology; it will always centre upon turning from and leaving behind what was wrong, and asking God in fullest sincerity to keep us from ever falling back into this wrongness again. The world of spiritual reality into which our thinking has led us, we now see, is the world of sin and grace: of the sin that will ruin us, keeping us from knowing the joy of God's love for ever unless Christ saves us, and of the grace that will rescue us from sin's guilt and power through Christ's death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit. I now cast anchor explicitly in this biblical world of sin and grace, towards which I have been navigating from the start; I give notice that I shall remain in it for the rest of this study.

### **Personal Repentance: the Habit and the Fight**

“Sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” The words of the proverb apply directly. Repentance is an action that must become a habit and a mark of character in each Christian's life, as we shall now see.

Neither the Bible nor the *Book of Common Prayer* gives us a formal definition of personal repentance. But here is a time-honoured one, taken from the Shorter Catechism of the mid-seventeenth-century Westminster Assembly, a body 90% of whose members were Anglican clergymen.

*Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.*

This definition pulls together all we have said so far. It applies to each repetition of repentance throughout the Christian's life, for every act of repenting is “unto life” in the sense that penitents know they must surrender their sins in order to be saved. And the statement provides a launch-pad for what has to be said now.

Repentance, like sin, begins as a desire of the heart. “*Hearty* [that

is, heartfelt] repentance and *true* faith” are called for, according to the *Book of Common Prayer*, when we turn in humility to God. The regenerate heart is a battlefield, where the Spirit-wrought desire to please God and the residual twisted desire to please oneself are constantly slugging it out. Sin within deceives us, desensitizing us about the evil of what we are doing till after we have done it. (See the pattern in the story of the Fall, Gen. 3, and note Rom. 7:11; Heb. 3:13.) Paul speaks of the need to renounce “deceitful desires” (Eph. 4:22). Sin will paralyze thought, so mesmerizing us by the dazzling prospects it offers that reason and conscience cannot get a word in edgeways. (Later we shall say, “I didn’t *think*—I acted in a moment of *thoughtlessness*”—and how right we shall be.) Sins of exploiting people, manipulating systems, ducking responsibilities, withholding goodwill and working out resentments to gain revenge, regularly reflect a mind switched off, a state of affairs to which alcohol, drugs and exhaustion can contribute alarmingly.

Habitual yielding to sin’s alluring blandishments will blind and harden us. (For this biblical picture, see again Heb. 3:13, with Eph. 4:18–19; 1 Tim. 4:2.) This is the process whereby one’s conscience ceases to function with regard to particular things one is up to, or the attitudes of pride, godlessness, lovelessness, brutality, hatred, contempt, dishonesty, untruthfulness or whatever that one is indulging. The habit of going against conscience soon kills conscience, so that spiritual blindness and hardening become ever deeper realities in one’s life.

Countermeasures must take the form of thought, prayer, meditating on the Scriptures, keeping close and becoming transparent to fellow-believers, and making a point of repenting, formally, frankly and fully, in an explicit transaction with God, the moment one realizes that one has in any way gone wrong. Hereby one sets up defences against sin’s further attacks, as the battle goes on.

The habit of regular self-examination—that is, of periodically opening oneself to God so as to learn from him through the Bible what one’s track record looks like to his all-seeing eyes—will help to keep us realistic at this point. The psalmist’s prayer—“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Ps. 139:23–24)—is a model for us all. Sin is multiform and chameleon-like in the way it presents itself as good, but disordered and, to use the church’s old word, inordinate desire is always at its root, and

a clear-headed taxonomy of desires will be helpful whenever we give ourselves this periodic once-over. Thus, desire for sex, for food and drink, and for ease and comfort, are sample desires of the body that can lead us astray. Desire for profit, for possessions and wealth, for mastery and control in some specific area, for reputation and respect, and for the power of the top position, whether as leader or as the critic who undermines and cuts down the leader, are sample desires of the mind that trip us up. Each of us will need to compile our own list of what our own self-knowledge, such as it is, tells us to watch out for in the way of personal weaknesses. By thus making self-examination a habit, and reinstating it as one of the disciplines of the Christian life, we are likely to do better in our inner war with sin than we shall if we fail to do this. So here is wisdom for our pilgrimage.

I turn now to the implications for our corporate life of the things I have been saying.

### **The State of the Church**

The first question here must be, on what part of the worldwide church of Christ are we to focus our attention? The church on earth at this time is a very large and varied body, with a number of cultural and convictional differences built into its makeup. Speaking roughly, of its over two billion members a billion and a quarter are Roman Catholics, a quarter of a billion are Eastern Orthodox, and half a billion are Protestants of one sort or another, mostly conservative evangelicals with more or less of a Pentecostal style. Something like a sixth of them are Anglicans. In what we may call the Old West—Britain, Canada, USA, Australasia, South Africa—where English is the common language and cultural links are strongest, approximately half of those who call themselves Anglicans do not regularly attend church, appearing only for special occasions; thus, about four million Old Westerners join in public worship on an average Sunday, as compared with some forty million worshipping in younger Anglican churches in Africa, Asia and South America. Until recently the Old West gave theological, pastoral and devotional leadership to the Anglican Communion as a whole, though this is changing. The present essay comes from, focuses on, and is addressed to, the Anglican Church of Canada, a body less than two-thirds of a million strong and only one-quarter the size of The Episcopal Church, its counterpart in the USA. It is a province of the Anglican Communion in its own right, and is

noticeably distinct in spirit, style and sociological contour from its bigger brother south of the border, just as indeed Canada itself is. The ACC will be the specific centre of attention in all that follows.

A century ago, the ACC was more like the then Church of England, intellectually, pastorally, and institutionally, than is the case today. On its two wings, as in England, were Evangelicals (low church) and Anglo-Catholics (high church), each viewing the other as its polar opposite, spiritually stunted through the limitations of its theology, and each thinking of itself as having a better right to lead the Church than any other group. Evangelicals criticized Anglo-Catholics for not understanding personal conversion and life in the Holy Spirit's power, and Anglo-Catholics criticized Evangelicals for not understanding the church, the sacraments and the true disciplines of devotion. Both had their theological colleges, societies, and what may fairly be called power bases. Each was precise in formulating its own account of the redemption and regeneration, through the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord, of human creatures ruined by sin, and each was confident of the accuracy and adequacy of its own biblical interpretation and theological heritage. Then in the centre, forming the majority at both membership and leadership level, were the "broad" churchmen, loyal to the Anglican tradition and institution but seeing both parties on the wings as narrow, rigid extremists (as, no doubt, some of them were), and laying more emphasis on the church's social tasks, and less on the individual's communion with Christ, than either of the other groups did.

Two generations ago, so it seems, serious attempts began to be made to mute both wings and extend the solidarity of the centre, in the belief that this was what the ACC needed. The result was that, with little debate happening to keep minds sharp, Anglican Christianity became fuzzy at the edges. Specifically, it became unsure about biblical authority in light of biblical criticism; imprecise regarding the doctrines of the creeds; loose regarding the life of faith in Christ and the discipline of personal repentance; and neglectful of Anglicanism's earlier educational priority of clergy teaching and layfolk learning aspects of Christian truth throughout their life. Living in the shadow of both stiffly authoritarian Roman Catholicism and the robust liberalism of the United Church, the ACC became increasingly genial, friendly and relaxed in style, but increasingly less attentive to catechetical instruction, evange-

listic outreach, spiritual formation, and serious theology. After half a century of this, a great deal of lost ground now needs to be made up.

During this past half-century, Canada has ceased to identify itself as a Christian country, calling itself multicultural and multireligious instead, and national life has drifted far from its Christian moorings. Both Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics have recovered some strength and now see each other as brothers and allies, as their partnership in the Essentials movement (to look no further) shows. Meantime, a virulent version of liberal theology has emerged, reducing the historical facts of faith to symbols signifying personal religious intuitions, embracing cultural driftings as new revelations of God's mind and will, and seeking on this basis to create a theosophical theology that assimilates all religions to each other. The inevitable clash between the conservationist and revisionist agendas came about on gay sexual ethics: whether the church should approve and bless same-sex partnerships, even viewing them as marriages, in line with Canadian public law, or not. Over this issue, and the conception of the gospel that goes with each view, the entire Anglican Communion, along with the ACC itself, is now split, and as the Archbishop of Canterbury acknowledges, it will have to be reshaped. Truly we live, as the Chinese euphemism puts it, in interesting times.

### **Corporate Repentance: the Vision**

The books of the prophets constitute about a quarter of the Old Testament and a fifth of the Bible as a whole. In most printings, while the Epistles fill about 100 pages and the Gospels 120, the fifteen prophetic books, spanning four centuries and ranging from Isaiah's 66-chapter colossus to tiny one-chapter Obadiah, occupy some 250. This amount of space itself tells us that these books are important. When we read them, we find that the prophets are much more moralists than futurologists, and what they speak constantly about is corporate repentance, made necessary by communal sin. God's recurring message to Israel through them, in consolidated form, boils down to this:

*I am your covenant God.* I have chosen you, redeemed you from slavery, given you this land, and promised you protection and prosperity in it. Never forget my mercy in this.

*I require you to keep my law always, for I am your holy Lord and Judge.* ["Holy" in the Bible is an umbrella word signifying all that makes God awesome and sometimes fearsome to us, notably his

boundless power, absolute purity, and impeccable justice. Human holiness is faithful law-keeping in a frame of fellowship with God.]

*I have discerned in you disbelief of my words and disobedience to them, and I promise you disaster as my punitive, purging judgment for that; after which I guarantee to restore a repentant remnant under a ruler who will prove himself to be David redivivus. If you hope for a share in the good things to come, return to me now!* [“Turn” and “return” are the Old Testament words that express the meaning of “repent” in the New Testament.]

Chapters 1–3 of the New Testament book called Revelation echo all this in a Christian context. Here, our Lord Jesus Christ, the church’s glorified Head, sends through John business letters to seven Asia Minor congregations. The letters assess their achievements, note their failings, and tell five of them to repent of particular shortcomings or be pulverized in judgment; after which, all are encouraged by a promise of eternal bliss with the Lord himself for all who “conquer”—that is, who say a firm “no” to sin and error, who uphold gospel truth as Christ and his apostles gave it and who practise faithful obedience to it, despite all persuasions and pressures to do something else instead.

Again and again, as we read the Bible, we have to ask ourselves: “If that is what our unchanging God said to those people/that person then, what should we conclude that he has to say to us now?” Let us put this question to Revelation 1–3; where does it take us? In the present state of the ACC, it seems an inescapable inference that our Lord’s call to all of us at this moment, loud and clear, is, “Repent!” In light of what we have surveyed in these pages, we can flesh that out a little. It is as if our Lord should say to our Anglican Church, which is of course his church really, and to all of us who are part of it:

“Return to me, who am the same yesterday, today and for ever. From the gospels and from letters like Colossians and Ephesians, and Hebrews, renew your vision of who and what I am, and from your starting-point in Revelation 1–3 renew your sense of, and your sensitivity to, the things I have to tell you. You seem to be out of range of my voice; come closer, listen harder, and get back under my supremacy and authority. Learn from me the destructive force of all the proud foolishness that has seeped into the church. Follow me as I lead you away from it.

“Return to *truth*, that is to my teaching and the Bible’s teaching. Here is truth for everyone, truth through which reality is found and I myself become known. The idea that there is no universal truth, but that when it comes to life-strategies it is everyone for themselves intellectually, is a



postmodern fantasy, flattering perhaps but totally confusing and totally wrong. The key truths of the gospel, that I was man in Palestine and was crucified to save sinners, have always given offence and always will, but these are the life truths of fact that everyone needs to know. So begin your repenting with your mind; practise intellectual repentance, for uncritically accepting fashionable intellectual folly; confess the mental mistakes that you picked up from the pagan world around you and forsake them, and follow me into renewed faithfulness to the true truth of God.

“Finally, return to *holiness*. Holiness means consecration, seeking always to do right and avoid sinning. So steel yourself against slothfulness, carelessness, apathy, drifting, half-heartedness, double-mindedness, and spineless conformity to the world. Turn your back on the world’s slack standards—all forms, for instance, of irresponsible sexual self-indulgence and promiscuity. With that, turn your eyes away from all forms of pornography and secret sexual stimulation, which are the stepping-stones into that indulgence. And turn your heart away from all forms of dishonesty and evading proper responsibility in all personal relationships and all business transactions, and from all forms of behaviour that cheapen life itself. Say good-bye to your complacency about your present condition. Humbly practise self-examination, with willingness to have the Spirit through the Word and Christians in the fellowship show you where you are off track and falling short. Learn from my example to love sinners by trying to wean them away from their sinning, which I hate, and which you must learn to hate too. Watch me in action in the gospels and seek always to advance in knowing, loving, adoring and imitating me, so as to please my Father in all that you do. Let go of distractions that clutter your life; pass up petty things, and think and pray big, even though circumstances may compel you to act small. Express your unity with all believing people, and do all the good you can to all those around you. Be zealous to extend my kingdom, serving the saints, practising Samaritanship with strangers, and labouring to spread the gospel everywhere. Stay put with me in my risen life, share your daily tasks with me, look to me for help at each step, and I will walk with you all the way. Follow me, then, with a well-schooled conscience that you keep clean, and more and more of the power and peace that I give will be shown forth in you.”

So now, are we going to take repentance seriously? What might we expect for ourselves and for the ACC if we do, and what if we don’t? Over to you.

# Questions For Study and Discussion

- 1 What is your definition of repentance?
- 2 How do you understand the holiness of God?
- 3 Do you think the stress on repentance in Prayer Book worship is excessive?
- 4 Was G.K.Chesterton right when he affirmed that original sin is the one Christian doctrine that can be proved and established anywhere by simple, direct inspection?
- 5 What problems might be raised concerning the biblical view of sin? How would you deal with them?
- 6 If we believe that the Anglican Church of Canada needs to repent, what can we do about it?

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