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Penitence [Dictionary Entry]

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Penitence

The word *penitence* (from Lat. *paenitentia*, “regret”) refers to remorse for wrongdoing or sin, and commitment to change one’s actions or life, via objective, disciplinary practices.

Penitence is thickly intertwined with Christianity. The call to repentance is a major theme in the Christian Scriptures. Yet, the shape of penitence throughout most of Christian history differs significantly from the scriptural witness. To relate penitence and Christian ethics today requires looking anew at penitence in Scripture.

In Scripture

Two terms convey repentance in the OT: *nāḥam* and *šûb*. The word *nāḥam*, whose root means “to breathe strongly,” translates as “pity, compassion, grief, regret, comfort”; *šûb* means “to turn, return, be restored.” Thus, in the OT repentance refers to fully embodied, affective acts of the whole person, a sense captured in the penitential psalms (Pss. 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143). Here, repentance is bodily, evoking illness and mourning. Beyond remorse, penitence connotes voluntary concrete actions that enact bodily punishment and publicly signal the authenticity of repentance. Both individuals and groups “proclaim a fast” (e.g., 2 Chr. 20:3) and “repent in sackcloth and ashes” (e.g., Job 42:6; Jon. 3:5). The endpoint is a return to the Lord (Deut. 30:2).

Although Genesis is rife with sin, conflict, and intrigue, actual remorse or penitence enters the story only with the Mosaic covenant and the complex practice of sin offering (Exod. 29:14–46; see also Leviticus; Deuteronomy). The first sin for which atonement must be made is Israel’s sin against the Lord at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exod. 32). The nature of this first repented sin is key: idolatry. Personal, individual sin certainly is present in the OT, but most calls for repentance concern Israel’s turning toward other gods. Most acts of penitence follow a call to the people of Israel to “re-turn,” as a people, to(ward) God, and to turn toward a different way of life, living as members of the people of God (Lev. 5:5; 1 Kgs. 8:47–48; 2 Chr. 6:37–38; Ezek. 14:6; Jeremiah; Hosea).

Idolatry, although committed by individuals (e.g., Solomon in 1 Kgs. 11), is understood

primarily as a sin of the people of Israel as a whole and penitence a corporate act (Ezek. 18:30). The sin offering in the Levitical code is largely a corporate penitential practice, conducted by the priest for individuals' sins but also for the general sinfulness of the priest and the people (the Ninevites extend penitence even to the animals [Jon. 3:8]).

The NT continues these themes, with some shifts. The Greek verb *metanoēō* derives from the roots *meta* ("with, after, behind") and *noeo* ("to perceive with the mind, understand") and suggests a sense of changing one's mind, captured in Paul's phrase about having "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). The Greek verb *epistrephō* connotes particularly a return to the worship of God or conversion. From the beginning of the Gospels, the hearers of the prophetic proclamation are urged, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15). The audience—the people of Israel—is called to return to God; later, the gentiles are called to become part of that people in the church. This call to repentance reverberates throughout the NT. Penitential acts, however, are scarce (except perhaps the woman who anoints Jesus with oil [Luke 7:36–50]), for the ultimate penitential act, the sin offering, has been made in Christ. The task of the Christian and the *ekklēsia* is less to engage in penitence than to live as (a member of) Christ's body. The Christian and the church are called to turn their minds—that is, their whole self, their life together—toward the one true God by living as God's people.

Tradition and History

Yet, turning one's whole mind, self, and life toward God proved as difficult for the early church, and throughout the rest of the Christian tradition, as it did for Israel. At particular issue was apostasy under persecution (a form of idolatry): can one who has publicly renounced faith in Christ return to God's people? Some said no (the Donatists), while others said only after rigorous penance (Augustine), and then only once (Tertullian). Thus, in the second century penitential practices emerged (also for murder and adultery) designed to test and reshape the sinner's allegiances; they were imposed by church authorities and could extend over a period of years. To sin was to worship falsely; penitence required public demonstration of repentance and willingness to live as a Christian in order to be admitted again to true worship—that is, participation in the sacrament of Communion.

With Constantine, the identity of the church as a distinct people of God becomes ambiguous and the function of penitential practices shifts.

Christianity and penitence become almost coextensive. Penitence loses its corporate character and its link to idolatry, focusing on individual penitence for individual sins. First within monastic communities, then through the practice of auricular confession beginning in the fifth century, penitence becomes the primary mode of Christian practice for laity. Formative, punitive, and expiatory penitential practices remain extensive in rigor and time, resulting in infrequent reception of the Eucharist by the laity. The relationship between penitence and money contributes to the Reformation and Protestant rejection of penance as a sacrament (though certainly not a rejection of penitence itself). The Catholic Counter-Reformation reemphasizes the connection between penitence, the Eucharist, and the Christian moral life in creating the discipline of moral theology (Mahoney).

Penitence and Christian Ethics

Beyond Lenten observance, penitence today is largely suspect as repressive, body-denying, or an expression of works-righteousness. Yet Scripture's constant call to turn away from false gods remains relevant, and the tradition's connection between penitential practices and renewed living suggests that penitence is important for Christian ethics both intellectually and practically.

1. Primary questions of Christian ethics are these: Which artifacts of culture (democracy, money, medicine) have become false gods? Which specters (terrorism, death) are worshiped, even if that worship is manifested as fear?
2. Christian ethics becomes a form of grieving for the sin of idolatry and corollary sins (violence, injustice, etc.) committed in service of false gods. It names the sins, laments, and prophetically calls Christians and the church to repent.
3. Following Scripture, Christian ethics maintains that right worship is the point of the Christian life, and that right living, wisdom, and right discernment are of a piece with right worship with being a member of God's people.
4. Following the Christian tradition, Christian ethics highlights how centuries-old practices of penitence form critical skills: confession is training in truthfulness, naming false gods is training in seeing a situation in new ways, doing penance (e.g., fasting) trains bodies to detach from participation in practices that serve false gods that are clamoring for our attention.

Perfection

See also Confession; Idolatry; Liturgy and Ethics; Penance; Practices; Repentance; Sin

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