

FAITH AND REPENTANCE

William S. Plumer

FAITH

EVERYWHERE in the Scriptures great stress is laid on **FAITH**. In scores of passages, its absolute necessity is explicitly declared. With the Word of God, Christian experience well agrees. The young convert had neither hope nor joy till he believed. His faith being weak, he manifests great instability. But as it increases, he grows stronger until he is undaunted and cries, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). Old Christians speak much of faith and always love to have the truth concerning it clearly explained.

But what is the faith on which the Scriptures so much insist? This is a matter of chief importance. An error here will affect our whole religious life. Faith is either human or divine. In human faith we rely upon what men say. This we do by the constitution of our minds. Thus, children rest upon what their parents tell them. Human faith is properly confined to things on which God has not spoken. Its basis is human testimony. Divine faith rests on the testimony of God. It concerns things which are revealed from heaven...

The faith of God's people relates to things past, present, and to come. It believes that God made the world. There is the *past*. It believes that God is. There is the *present*. It believes that there will be a Day of Judgment. There is the *future*. Nor are these and other revealed truths believed by different kinds of faith, but all by one and the same faith. As with the same visual organ we look to the east, to the west, to the north, and to the south, at objects far from us or near to us, so

with the same eye of faith we look at things thousands of years past, or thousands of years to come, or things now existing in the unseen world. Of old for thousands of years, the pious believed in a Savior to come. In the days of His flesh, His disciples believed in a Savior then come. For nearly two thousand years, God's people have believed in a Savior that has come. In all these cases the faith was the same in principle and in its effects also.

The *Westminster Confession* says, "The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened. By this faith a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word for the authority of God himself speaking therein, and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace. This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed and weakened, but gets the victory; growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith." A little consideration of this account of faith will show how full, complete, and Scriptural it is.

The first thing asserted is that saving faith is not of earthly, but of heavenly origin; that it is not of man, but of God. Faith is the gift of God: "For unto you it is given in the

behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him” (Phi 1:29); “God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Rom 12:3). When “Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Mat 16:16, 17). This faith is particularly ascribed to the Holy Ghost as its Author. He produces it in the heart. So say the Scriptures: “The fruit of the Spirit is faith” (Gal 5:22); “To another is given faith by the same Spirit” (1Co 12:9); “We having the same Spirit of faith...also believe” (2Co 4:13). The reason why saving faith endures is because it is the incorruptible seed of God.

It is next said that in working this faith in us, God puts honor upon His Word as the ordinary instrument. With this also the Scriptures well agree: “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?...So then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:14, 17); “It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1Co 1:21). This is the foundation of all our encouragement in proclaiming the Gospel. That which is sown in the weakness of man is raised in the mighty energy of the Holy Ghost. No wonder that such happy results flow from proclaiming the Gospel whenever God’s Spirit attends it. It is thus the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. “God’s gracious biddings are effectual enablings.”

In like manner this faith is chiefly nourished by the ministry of the Word and other ordinances, and by prayer. “Lord, increase our faith” (Luk 17:5). The baptism of water is effectual when accompanied by the baptism of the Holy

Ghost. The breaking of bread and drinking of wine are means of nourishment to all those who drink spiritually of the Rock which follows them, even Christ, and who by faith eat the true bread which cometh down from heaven, even the Son of God. All the saints desire the sincere milk of the Word that they may grow thereby.

True faith respects all God's Word. It receives narratives, promises, threatenings, doctrines, precepts, warnings, encouragements, all as they were designed for its use. It obeys God's commands. They were given for that purpose. It is afraid of His threatenings. It trembles at His Word. It relies upon the promises, both as they respect this life and the next. It takes warning from many parts of Scripture. It rejoices in solid Scriptural encouragement. It relies upon God's Word as testimony that is infallible. Whatever God speaks, faith believes. It receives all He has said. The Word of God liveth and abideth for ever. So faith receives it as His Word and not as the word of man. His authority is perfect.

But saving faith has special reference to Christ. So the Scriptures often teach: "Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1Jo 5:5); "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1Jo 5:9-11); "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Act 16:31); "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life" (Joh 3:36); "He that believeth on him is not condemned" (Joh 3:18). In God's

Word, the great theme is Christ Jesus: “To him give all the prophets witness” (Act 10:43); “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev 19:10). If to deny the Father is fatal, so is it also to deny the Son. If to do despite to the Spirit of grace involves the loss of the soul, to reject Christ as the Savior makes destruction inevitable. But to receive Christ, to rest upon Him, to look to Him, to come to Him, to flee to Him for refuge, to take Him as our Sacrifice, as our Prophet, Priest, and King, and to do this heartily is the great office of saving faith.

This faith is not of equal strength in all believers, nor in the same believer at all times. We read of “him that is weak in faith,” of “little faith,” and of “great faith.” Faith grows by the divine blessing. The faith of some grows “exceedingly.” Every true disciple says, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mar 9:24). It finally gains every needful victory. In some cases it is matured into full assurance. This is all through Christ, Who begins, carries on, and perfects the work of faith in us by His Spirit and grace.

This whole view of faith is consistent with itself and with all the Scriptures. It explains many things which otherwise would seem to us enigmatical.

First, we see why faith always was and always will be necessary: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain” (Heb 11:4). This was the religion of those early times. “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luk 18:8). This will be the religion of the latest times. The reason why no man was ever able or shall ever be able to please God without faith, is, that unbelief at every step sets aside all that God has said and done for man’s salvation. He who would be saved in unbelief, would put per-

petual contempt on all the arrangements of heaven for the recovery of lost men.

We also see how reasonable it is that faith should be required of us: “Have faith in God” (Mar 11:22); “Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established” (2Ch 20:20); “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent” (Joh 6:29); “Be not faithless, but believing” (Joh 20:27). These are but specimens of the authoritative tones in which God speaks to us on this subject. He could not say less if He sought our good. To permit us to live in unbelief would be to license all sin.

We can also now understand why the minds of truly religious people are so ready to take up with God’s offers of grace and mercy. Believing all God says, they of course receive as true all that He has alleged concerning their fallen and depraved condition. In other words, they find out that they are sinners, lost, guilty, vile, and helpless. To such the Gospel is *always* good news. It is indeed life from the dead to a poor, convinced sinner to see the door of mercy wide open and Christ standing ready to receive all that come to Him...

And yet faith, even the simplest and strongest, is not irrational, nor foolish. No man acts so wisely as he who implicitly believes God. Abraham never showed that his faculties were so well regulated and orderly as when he went straight forward at God’s bidding to sacrifice Isaac. He asked no reasons, he stated no difficulties; he simply did as he had been commanded and staggered not through unbelief. The reason why faith is so wise is because it reposes confidence in God, Who cannot lie, cannot change, cannot fail, cannot be deceived, thwarted, or even perplexed; Who sees the end from the beginning, Who loves beyond all names of love known to mortals

or even to angels; a God and Savior Who never trampled on a broken heart, Who never despised the cry of the humble, Who never left the penitent to perish in their sins; and Who will infallibly bring to eternal glory all who take refuge in atoning blood...

The following is a good definition: “Justifying faith is a saving grace wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the Gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness therein held forth for the pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.”

Without further comparing formal definitions on this subject, it may be said that sound writers fully agree with the Scriptures in representing faith as a simple act of the mind, in which both the understanding and will are united; that the light of knowledge goes before it so far as to reveal the mind of God, and so it is not blind and credulous, but sober, watchful, and intelligent; and that it is the fruit of warm affections, and so is not cold, speculative, and without practical effect...

The effects of saving faith are many and of great value. Indeed they are so important, that without them salvation in any of its benefits is impossible.

1. True faith is the instrument of a sinner’s justification before God. So the Scriptures abundantly teach: “The just shall live by faith” (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38); “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; Jam 2:23); “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our

Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1); “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom 3:28). “For if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (Gal 2:21). Here is a grand result: sin is forgiven and the sinner is accepted simply by believing on Him Who is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believeth. This is indeed a mystery and an offence to many...

2. Adoption is also by faith: “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (Joh 1:12); “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26). What a wonderful effect is this: a child of the devil becomes a child of God, an heir of perdition is changed into an heir of glory, and all by reliance on the Word of God and by confidence in the Person and merits of Jesus Christ. No wonder believers have ever celebrated the wonders of faith.

3. Besides obtaining justification and adoption, we also by faith are made partakers of the Holy Spirit to all the ends of illumination, sanctification, and encouragement in the Lord. Christ says, “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive)” (Joh 7:38, 39). There is no success, progress, or comfort in religion, but through this blessed Spirit. To receive Him in His fullness of grace is to secure the earnest of all good things, the pledge of heaven itself. “Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Rom 8:9). But if a man have the Spirit of Christ, nothing can prove him a castaway, a reprobate, an enemy.

4. Saving faith is an infallible sign of regeneration. None ever thus believed but those who “were born, not of blood, nor

of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Joh 1:13). “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God” (1Jo 5:1). Genuine faith being ours, our regeneration is no longer doubtful...

5. The powerful effect of true faith in purifying the heart is among its transcendent blessings. This chiefly makes the difference between it and the faith of devils. It awakens intense hatred of sin, eager longings after holiness, blessed hopes of attaining complete conformity to God, and a purpose to do right, whatever may be the result. There is no effectual purifying of the heart but by faith—by faith laying hold of Christ, and obeying the truth. Hooker well says, “To make a wicked and sinful man most holy through his believing, is more than to create a world of nothing.”

REPENTANCE

REPENTANCE belongs exclusively to the religion of sinners. It has no place in the exercises of unfallen creatures. He who has never done a sinful act nor had a sinful nature needs neither forgiven. But sinners need all these blessings. To them they are indispensable. The wickedness of the human heart makes it necessary.

Under all dispensations, since our first parents were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God has insisted on repentance. Among the patriarchs, Job said, “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). Under the Law, David wrote the thirty-second and fifty-first psalms. John the Baptist cried, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mat 3:2). Christ’s account of Himself is that He “came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mar 2:17). Just before

His ascension, Christ commanded “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luk 24:47). And the Apostles taught the same doctrine “testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Act 20:21). ***So that any system of religion among men which should not include repentance, would upon its very face be false....***This doctrine will not be amiss while the world stands.

Though repentance is an obvious and oft-commanded duty, yet it cannot be truly and acceptably performed except by the grace of God. It is a gift from heaven. Paul directs Timothy in meekness to instruct those that oppose themselves: “If God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth” (2Ti 2:25). Christ is exalted a Prince and a Savior “to give repentance” (Act 5:31). So when the heathen were brought in, the church glorified God, saying, “Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Act 11:18). All this is according to the tenor of the Old Testament promises. There God says He will do this work for us and in us. Listen to His gracious words: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Eze 36:26, 27). So that true repentance is a special mercy from God. He gives it. It comes from none other. It is impossible for poor fallen nature so far to recover herself by her own strength as truly to repent. The heart is wedded to its own ways and justifies its own sinful courses with incurable obstinacy, until divine grace makes the change. No motives to

good are strong enough to overcome depravity in the natural heart of man. If ever we attain this grace, it must be through the great love of God to perishing men.

Yet repentance is most reasonable. No man acts wisely till he repents. When the prodigal came to himself, he went straightway to his father. It is so obviously proper that he who has done wrong should be heartily sorry for it and never do so any more, that some infidels have asserted that repentance was sufficiently taught by natural religion without the Bible. But this is a mistake. The true doctrine of repentance is understood nowhere but in Christian countries, and not even there by infidels. Besides, that which is required of us may be very reasonable, and yet be very repugnant to men's hearts. When called to duties which we are reluctant to perform, we are easily persuaded that they are unreasonably exacted of us. It is therefore always helpful to us to have a command of God binding our consciences in any case. It is truly benevolent in God to speak to us so authoritatively in this matter. God "now commandeth all men every where to repent" (Act 17:30). The ground of the command is that all men everywhere are sinners. Our blessed Savior was without sin, and of course He could not repent. With that solitary exception, since the Fall there has not been found any just person who needed no repentance. And none are more to be pitied than those poor deluded men who see in their hearts and lives nothing to repent of.

But what is *true repentance*? This is a question of the highest importance. It deserves our closest attention. The following is probably as good a definition as has yet been given. "Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace... [whereby] a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but

also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous Law of God, and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for and hates his sins as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.” That this definition is sound and Scriptural will appear more and more clearly the more thoroughly it is examined. True repentance is sorrow for sin, ending in reformation. Mere regret is not repentance, neither is mere outward reformation. It is not an imitation of virtue, it is virtue itself...

He, who truly repents, is chiefly sorry for his *sins*. He, whose repentance is spurious, is chiefly concerned for their *consequences*. The former chiefly regrets that he has *done* evil; the latter that he has *incurred* evil. One sorely laments that he deserves punishment; the other that he must suffer punishment. One approves of the Law which condemns him; the other thinks he is hardly treated, and that the Law is rigorous. To the sincere penitent, sin appears exceeding sinful; to him who sorrows after a worldly sort, sin, in some form, appears pleasant. He regrets that it is forbidden. One says it is an evil and bitter thing to sin against God, even if no punishment followed. The other sees little evil in transgression if there were no painful consequences sure to follow. If there were no hell, the one would still wish to be delivered from sin. If there were no retribution, the other would sin with increased greediness. The true penitent is chiefly averse to sin as it is an offence against God. This embraces all sins of every description. But it has often been observed that two classes of sins seem to rest with great weight on the conscience of those whose repentance is of a godly sort. These are *secret* sins and sins of *omission*. On

the other hand, in a spurious repentance, the mind is much inclined to dwell on *open* sins and on sins of *commission*. The true penitent knows the plague of an evil heart and a fruitless life. The spurious penitent is not much troubled about the real state of heart, but grieves that appearances are so much against him.

It is indeed true that oftentimes some one sin is very prominent in the thoughts of the genuine penitent. Peter wept bitterly for having denied his Lord. David says of the matter of Uriah, "My sin is ever before me" (Psa 51:3). On these words Luther says, "That is, my sin plagues me, gives me no rest, no peace; whether I eat or drink, sleep or wake, I am always in terror of God's wrath and judgment." And how often and penitently does Paul refer to the great sin of his life, the murder of the saints....But though one sin may be first or most deeply impressed on the mind, yet in true repentance the mind does not rest there. The Samaritan woman was first convicted of living with a man who was not her husband. But soon she says that Christ had told her all things that ever she did. On the day of Pentecost, Peter labored to convict his hearers of the guilt of Christ's death. He was successful to a great extent. The result was their repentance for all sin, and their conversion unto God. "He that repents of sin as sin, does implicitly repent of all sin." So soon and so clearly as he discovers the sinful nature of any thing, he abhors it. A wicked thought, no less than a vile word or evil deed is for a loathing to the true penitent. The promise runs, "They shall loathe themselves for the evils which they have committed in all their abominations." So that if there were no beings in the universe but God and the true penitent, he would have very much the same emotions of sorrow and humiliation that he has now. And if instead

of countless offences he was conscious of comparatively few, the nature of his mental exercises would be the same as now. It is therefore true that he, who ingenuously repents of sin, repents of all sin. To change one sin for another, even though it be less gross or more secret, is but disowning one enemy of God to form an alliance with another.

Nor is a true penitent afraid of humbling himself too much. He does not measure the degrees of his self-abasement before God. He would take the lowest place. He says, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee?" (Job 40:4). "O God, thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins are not hid from thee" (Psa 69:5). "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). "If thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Psa 130:3). "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions" (Psa 51:1). It is not of the nature of genuine lowliness of heart before God to be nice and careful not to get too prostrate in the dust. Its great fear is that it will after all be proud and self-sufficient.

True repentance has in it also much shame. This relates not only to open and disreputable crimes, but also to secret sins, to vain thoughts, and evil imaginations: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God" (Ezr 9:6); "Shew the [temple] to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities" (Eze 43:10). He who does not blush for his sins has never been truly ashamed of them, has never really and heartily forsaken them....Nor does this shame cease with the hope of pardon, but is rather thereby increased. So God says, "I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant. Then thou shalt remember thy ways, and be ashamed....And I will establish my covenant with thee; and

thou shalt know that I am the LORD: That thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord GOD” (Eze 16:60b, 61a, 62, 63). On this point, universal Christian experience fully accords with God’s Word. Paul never forgave himself for his cruel persecutions. Peter never ceased to be ashamed of his cowardly denial of his Lord. David never ceased to be ashamed of his base conduct.

A true penitent also reforms. A holy life is the invariable fruit of genuine repentance. “If I have done iniquity, I will do no more” (Job 34:32)....When Ephraim sincerely repented, he utterly renounced idolatry, saying, “What have I to do any more with idols?” (Hos 14:8). He does not really confess sin who does not forsake it. He who hates sin turns from it. It was not the habit of David’s life to commit murder and adultery, though he once did both; nor of Peter to deny his Lord, and curse and swear, though he was once guilty of both these. A true penitent is not willing to be always sinning and repenting. We often read of “fruits meet for repentance,” or “fruits worthy of repentance.” Paul, having said that “godly sorrow worketh repentance not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (2Co 7:10), gives a very lively account of the effects of true repentance: “For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!” (2Co 7:11).

Genuine repentance also draws its chief motives from the milder aspects of the divine character and the sweet influences of the cross. It is not the severity so much as the

mercy of God that melts the heart. “The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance” (Rom 2:4). It melts the heart when it sees God’s kindness and its own baseness. None but a soul not touched by the finger of God can agree to be bad because God is good, or consent to a career of folly because the Lord is merciful. Repentance unto life invariably looks not merely at the goodness of God in creation and providence, but has a special regard to the work of redemption: “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness” (Zec 12:10). This is specially stated to have been the ground of the repentance of the three thousand on the day of Pentecost. It is so still. Nothing breaks the heart like a sight of Christ crucified. This is obtained by faith only. There can be no evangelical repentance without saving faith. Indeed, “the true tears of repentance flow from the eye of faith.” To “repent and believe the gospel” are not separate, though they are distinct duties. He who sincerely does one never omits the other. He who lacks one of these graces never attains the other. So that true repentance is always also connected with love.

From *Vital Godliness: A Treatise on Experimental and Practical Piety*, reprinted by Sprinkle Publications.

William S. Plumer (1802-1880): American Presbyterian minister; author of numerous Christ-centered books; born in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, USA.