

# REPENTANCE

## *What is the response to the gospel?*

All who believe the Bible are agreed that we must preach the *gospel* to sinners so that they might believe and become Christians. The gospel is centred in Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor.2:2). But how ought sinners to respond to this gospel in order to be saved?

1. Is it enough just to believe in Christ for the forgiveness of sins? Yes, if this faith is the true Biblical faith that repents of sin. No, if this faith is not joined to repentance. Simon professed faith and was baptized (Acts 8:13), yet he had never repented of his lust for power (so verses 18-24).
2. Is it enough that sinners just confess their sin in general as they believe in Christ? Their specific sins would be dealt with later as part of their growing in the Christian life. This is also wrong, because it is possible to say, "I am a sinner," and continue to live in specific sins.
3. It is the purpose of this paper to show that *true, saving repentance must include repentance from specific sins at conversion.*

## *An example from Rendille*

The Rendille people continue to be attached to their traditions. They believe in one God (Waq) to whom they pray daily. Because they are a pastoral people their religious ceremonies involve animals, milk, meat and blood. They pour milk on the ground, they smear blood on their houses, and they kill and even burn animals in order to thank God and seek his protection of themselves and their livestock. Anyone not taking part in such ceremonies will be cursed by the community. Their belief in God has similarities with the Old Testament religion: monotheism, an emphasis on prayer, dependence on God for daily needs, smearing of blood in a sort of 'Passover,' killing and eating of animals as a religious ritual, even burnt offering, and blowing of horns at new moon. Because of this similarity one Rendille told me that "All Rendille people are born Christians." In fact, they even have a prayer that Waq will send his son. When we preach to such Rendille people should we think they are genuinely seeking after God so that all they need to do is to believe that God has sent His Son in the person of Jesus? Are these religious traditions an evidence of their faith in God, or an evidence of their rebellion against God? In this paper we want to show from the Bible that if anyone continues to be committed to a life of following such religious traditions while claiming to be a Christian, then they do not have genuine saving faith.

## *Biblical teaching about Repentance*

(1) Repentance "is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ." Psalm 51 is a record of David's repentance. Note his guilty conscience (v.3), his open confession to God (v.4), no excuses made but admission of whatever punishment God would bring (v.4), his reliance on God's mercy alone (v.1), and his commitment to future godliness (vv.13-17).

(2) Repentance, as defined by the Bible, is *necessary* to salvation. Often repentance is referred to as the one necessary response to the gospel (Matt.11:20-24, Lk.3:3,8-14, 5:32, 13:1-5, Acts 2:38, 17:30, 2 Pet.3:9). Twice repentance and faith are required as the necessary responses to the gospel (Mk.1:15, Acts 20:21). We are going to consider exactly what is meant by this repentance, without which there is no forgiveness of sins.

(3) There are many examples of salvation in which there is repentance from specific sins. These are the sins which characterize a person, the things that their hearts trust in that may not even be sinful in themselves. Such things must be given up and turned away from, otherwise there can be no salvation.

- The rich young ruler (Lk.18:18-24). He wanted to know what to do to inherit eternal life. He was not told simply to believe on Christ because he was trusting in his riches. Rather Jesus told him to "sell all that you have." He treasured his riches even more than having eternal life. His riches (not sinful in themselves) were an idol which he had to turn away from in order to be saved.

- Zacchaeus (Lk.19:1-10). He was a tax collector who had defrauded many people. When he proclaimed “half of my goods I give to the poor,” Jesus responded that this was the evidence that salvation had come to him. He also repented of the idol of his heart at the time of his conversion.
- Levi or Matthew (Lk.5:27-32). Like Zacchaeus he was a tax collector. His call to be a disciple was a call to leave *everything* and follow Jesus. He could not carry on with his life and just add faith in Jesus. This is what it means to call “sinners to repentance.”
- The multitudes (Lk.3:8). They came to John the Baptist to be baptized with a baptism of repentance. John told them that if they were sincere there must be fruit showing true repentance. Note how he puts his finger on the specific sin that would characterize each group; for example, a tax collector taking more money than he ought.
- The woman of Samaria (Jn.4:16ff.). Jesus did not simply tell her to believe on Him. Why did he tell her to call her husband? This was her characteristic sin of immorality that she had to repent of if she was to be saved.
- The woman caught in adultery (Jn.8:3-11). Jesus did not condemn her for her sin, but He did command her not to commit adultery again.
- The Thessalonians (1 Thess.1:9). Before these Thessalonians became Christians they worshipped idols. When the gospel came to them through Paul’s preaching they “turned to God from idols.” It would obviously have been impossible to turn to God through faith in Christ and continue to cling to their idols. Sinners always trust in something – false religion, worldly possessions. Whatever that object of supreme trust is must be rejected in order to come to Christ. So the people of Athens were likewise told to repent of their idolatry (Acts 17:30)
- Jesus’ teaching about true discipleship. Jesus often warned those following Him that they must be true disciples. Generally there must be self-denial, or a losing of one’s life (Mk.8:34-37, Lk.9:57-58). Specifically to any tempted to put their own blood relatives first, as a sort of idol, Jesus clearly said they must be *hated*, together with their own life. Jesus must come first above everything else. Otherwise it is impossible to be His disciple (Lk.14:25-26).

CONCLUSION. Every person has a heart commitment to someone or something in which they put their trust. To become a Christian is to transfer that trust to trust in Jesus Christ, by first acknowledging the sin of trusting that other object. For example, a person who has believed a false religion that teaches salvation by good works, must reject as sinful that previous trust in good works, in order to believe on Christ. This was exactly the experience of Paul, as he records it in Philippians 3:4-9. He thought he could be acceptable to God through his Jewish religion, one that had truly been revealed by God in the Old Testament. But before he could know Christ by faith he first had to count as ‘rubbish’ all that he was and had done under that old religion.

#### ***Application to Rendille people***

Rendille people trust in their traditional religion. They use animals and their products and trust that these ceremonies will be a vehicle of thanksgiving that God will accept, and a means of bringing needed protection. Jesus Christ has nothing to do with this religion. If they really believed in the promise of the Son of God they would receive Him when they hear the gospel. But what is their response? “We have heard your message about Jesus and that He is the only way to God because He died as a sacrifice for sinners. But we will continue with our traditions that God gave to our forefathers and that they have handed down to us.” This is idolatry and rebellion against God that must be repented of if any Rendille is to be truly saved. It is not possible to continue with the traditional religion and believe in Christ at the same time. It is the one or the other. They are mutually exclusive. The message of repenting from trusting such practices as ‘sooriyo’ in order to trust in Christ, must not be watered down in order to get a response. As in the experience of all Christians, repentance will grow, but it must be there in seed form from the beginning. Such a repentance is a turning away from whatever was trusted in before conversion.