

“BEAR FRUIT WORTHY OF REPENTANCE”:
THE BIBLICAL ROOTS OF PENANCE

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Since the Reformation, Protestant writers have frequently disparaged the Catholic practice of penance, though actuated by a godly sorrow for sin. Adventist literature is no less aggressive on this front, claiming that the union of penitential acts to prayer “prevents us from making Christ our entire dependence” and “is abomination in the sight of God.”¹ Unfortunately, these views fail to assimilate the biblical roots of such practices.

Biblical Precedent

When biblical figures sought the forgiveness of God, they expressed their contrition tangibly, intensifying the effect of their prayers by uniting them to works of self-denial. Commonly, they humiliated themselves by wearing sackcloth (2 Kings 19:1-3//Is 37:1-2; 1 Chr 21:16; Neh 9:1; Jon 3:5,8; Bar 4:20; Ps 69:9,11) or casting ashes upon themselves (Job 42:6; Dan 9:3; Jon 3:6; Jud 4:11,15; Mt 11:21//Lk 10:13). More drastically, they made recourse to forms of corporal mortification (i.e., self-inflicted physical discomfort), such as fasting (Dan 9:3; Jon 3:5; Ps 69:9-10) and the wearing of sackcloth upon bare flesh (1 Kings 21:27).

Now, none of the above situations strictly demanded a tangible work of any sort (as perhaps would be the case if the sin demanded a restitution: e.g., returning a stolen item). Rather, these were voluntary actions, which the sinners in each case amended to their heartfelt prayers to intensify their effect. In many cases, they received a remission, or reduction, of their due punishment in light of their acts of penance, as in the case of Ahab:

When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ‘Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not

1. White, Ellen G., “Christ Our Hope,” *Signs of the Times*, 24 August 1891, par. 9.

bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster on his house.' (1 Kings 21:27-29)

When God mentions Ahab's self-humiliation to Elijah (v. 28-29), He undoubtedly refers to the actions listed in the previous verse (v. 27). God honored these concrete, positive expressions of the king's repentance, and graciously responded to his entreaties for mercy.

Accordingly, faith is not inimical to works of self-denial in the pursuit of God's forgiveness. Rather, the biblical pattern encourages penitential actions (actuated by a contrite spirit) when one approaches God in repentance. So far, then, from being unscriptural, the Catholic practice of participating in penitential acts when seeking God's forgiveness is rooted in the biblical tradition. Indeed, one cannot construe this practice as an implicit denial of God's willingness to freely forgive, since He Himself sometimes enjoined penitential acts upon those whom He hoped to forgive. For example, God often commanded his people to mortify themselves by fasting in sorrow for the sins they have committed (Joel 2:12,15).² The Day of Atonement itself, which day principally embodied the expiation of sins, was divinely instituted as a day of prayer and self-mortification (Lev 16:29-31). These penitential works did not undermine the liberality of God's mercy; rather, they plead the same.

Note, however, that since God mandated these works of penance, they were not always "voluntarily" conceived. Additionally, one cannot claim that God offered His forgiveness on the basis of the completion of these works,³ though it appears He did not offer the same apart from the completion of the mandated works (Lev 23:29). This subtle interplay between prayer and penitential acts is significant when understanding the Catholic sacrament.

Catholic Practice

Among Catholics, penitential acts are either enjoined (in the sacrament of Reconciliation) or voluntarily undertaken. However, Catholics receive the forgiveness of their sins in view of their contrition and confession, and not, strictly speaking, the completion of penitential works:

2. The same passage instructs the people to "rend your hearts and not your clothing" (2:13). One cannot interpret this verse as a reproof of penitential works, however, since 2:12 urges penitential fasting. Rather, the text indicates God's displeasure with empty gestures with no basis in an interior change of heart.

3. As the New Testament repeatedly states, the sins of all men are remitted through the work of Christ alone (Acts 4:12).

Satisfaction is not, like contrition and confession, an essential part of the sacrament [of Reconciliation], because the primary effect, i.e., remission of guilt and eternal punishment—is obtained without satisfaction; but it is an integral part . . .⁴

Penitential works are integral to the forgiveness of sins in view of the following factors, enumerated by the Council of Trent:

And it beseems the divine clemency, that sins be not in such wise pardoned us without any satisfaction . . . For, doubtless, these satisfactory punishments greatly recall from sin, and check as it were with a bridle, and make penitents more cautious and watchful for the future; they are also remedies for the remains of sin, and, by acts of the opposite virtues, they remove the habits acquired by evil living. Neither indeed was there ever in the Church of God any way accounted surer to turn aside the impending chastisement of the Lord, than that men should, with true sorrow of mind, practise these works of penitence. Add to these things, that, whilst we thus, by making satisfaction, suffer for our sins, we are made conformable to Jesus Christ. . . .⁵

Thus, although penance is not essential for the forgiveness of sins, it is integral to the process of spiritual healing. God does not offer His forgiveness on the basis of these works, but neither does He offer the same apart from these works. Here again we encounter the same subtle juxtaposition found in scripture.

Perhaps a deeper appreciation of these facts would correct such mistaken Adventist views as this:

Doing penance is confounded by [Catholics] with Christian repentance. Instead of teaching the people to look to Christ alone for pardon through faith in his merits, the priests professedly grant it to them through penitential works. Fasting and mortification of the flesh is enjoined, while the inward work, the regeneration of the heart, which constitutes true conversion, is deemed unnecessary.⁶

How radically different is this caricature of from the actual teaching of the Catholic Church:

4. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “The Sacrament of Penance,” Accessed Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11618c.htm> (28 June 2007).

5. Session 14, *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, Ed. and trans. J. Waterworth, London: Dolman, 1848, 102-3.

6. White, Ellen, G. *Review and Herald*, 1 June 1886, par. 11.

Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.⁷

Again, from the pen of John Paul II;

What is the meaning of this satisfaction that one makes or the penance that one performs? Certainly it is not a price that one pays for the sin absolved and for the forgiveness obtained: No human price can match what is obtained, which is the fruit of Christ's precious blood. Acts of satisfaction . . . are the sign of the personal commitment that the Christian has made to God in the sacrament to begin a new life⁸

Conclusion

As this survey demonstrates, the practice of penance flows from, and balances many elements of, the biblical tradition. Hopefully, an appreciation for the modes of repentance described in scripture will contextualize the Catholic penitential instincts so easily misunderstood by other Christians. Instead of issuing false accusations, we might then be free to cooperatively "bear fruit worthy of repentance" (Mt 3:8), including prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These do more to glorify Christ than their lack, or worse, their disparagement.

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⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1430.

⁸ John Paul II, "Reconciliation and Penance," Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 2 Dec 1984, 31, III.