The Prophet Joseph Smith specified as the first principles and ordinances of the gospel, “first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Fourth Article of Faith).

These four principles and ordinances form the arch to the entrance of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Compliance with them is the process by which one receives that rebirth of the water and of the Spirit without which, as Jesus taught Nicodemus, a man can neither see nor enter into the kingdom of God. In one sense, repentance is the keystone in that arch. Unless followed by repentance, professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is impotent; unless preceded by repentance, baptism is a futile mockery, effecting no remission of sins; and without repenting, no one actually receives the companionship of the Holy Spirit of God, notwithstanding the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.

In this attempt to discover and define the place of repentance in the plan of redemption, I have been confirmed in my persuasion that it is most difficult to separate the principles of the gospel from each other and treat them one at a time. However, an attempt to do so, as our late beloved and able Elder Albert E. Bowen has so eloquently said,

is proper enough as a device for facilitating examination and analysis-making it easier to talk about. It is a common resort of the human mind which cannot always compass the whole until it has become familiar with the parts and these gradually have shaped themselves into relation with each other and are seen to fit into one pattern. Truth, presumably, is one whole, but the human mind does not grasp the entirety. We break it up into segments and nibble at them in apparent isolation from each other. Finally, with greater familiarity we begin to see relationships and begin putting the segments together. But we never really understand the separate fragments until we begin to see them as parts of the whole (Albert E. Bowen, The Church Welfare Plan, p. 41).

With this statement in mind, you will understand why, as we proceed in our consideration of the place of repentance in the plan of redemption, we shall frequently have under consideration other principles of the gospel, particularly the atonement, with which repentance is inextricably involved.

Repentance has to do with releasing men from spiritual death. It has nothing to do with the universal resurrection spoken of by Paul when he said, “Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:21, 22; see also Romans 5:18).

Spiritual death means banishment from God. It was the first death which passed upon Adam. It will be the last death to pass upon the still unrepentant at the days of final judgment. It is infinitely more far-reaching and terrible than physical death.

Perhaps it will assist us to understand spiritual death if we keep in mind that God is perfect; that he and all who associate with him are spotless; that no unclean thing can dwell in his presence. Jesus said, “No unclean thing can enter into his kingdom” (3 Nephi 27:19).

This earth is a battleground where two mighty contending forces struggle for the souls of men. All mortals who come to accountability, as they react to the play of these forces upon them, yield in some measure to the temptations of evil. Thereby they become stained with sin. Thus stained, they are unclean and therefore banished from his presence. Such is the penalty imposed upon them by the law of justice.

Herein (that is, in the banishment of men from the presence of God) lies the necessity for the plan of redemption. For without some means being provided for payment of the penalty which the law of justice imposes upon men for transgressing the law of righteousness (that is, some means other than banishment from the presence of God) men would remain spiritually dead forever. Awful would be their situation.

Jacob says that without the plan of redemption “the first judgment which came upon man must needs have remained to an endless duration...our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God, and became the devil to
rise no more" (2 Nephi 9 :7, 8).

You see, the devil is spiritually dead for all time. So far as repentance is concerned, he has reached the point of no return.

Without the plan of redemption, of which repentance is a vital part, as we shall hereafter see, “our spirits,” Jacob continues, “must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself” (2 Nephi 9:9).

Then contemplating the escape provided for us in the plan of redemption, Jacob continues, "0 how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Nephi 9:10).

As already intimated, the purpose of the plan of redemption was to provide a means to meet the demands of justice in some way other than by leaving men forever banished from the presence of God. Now the demands which justice made for releasing men from spiritual death were heavy, but they could not be robbed. They had to be met.

One of those demands was that men’s sins be atoned for. Man, being within the grasp of the demands of justice, could not make the required atonement. So far as he was concerned, he was forever bound. By the exercise of his own will, he had incurred the penalty of the broken law, and he could not, by himself alone, remove the penalty. He had to be rescued by someone other than himself or remain forever spiritually dead.

The required atonement had to be made by someone upon whom spiritual death had not passed, someone over whom the demands of justice had no claim. Such a one could be none other than a god—a god who, endowed with free agency, would in mortality submit himself to the temptations of Satan without once yielding thereto in any particular.

Because man had fallen, said Jacob, “they were cut off from the presence of the Lord. Wherefore, it must needs be an infinite atonement—save it should be an infinite atonement. . . the first judgment which came upon man must needs have remained to an endless duration” (2 Nephi 9:6, 7).

On the same point, Alma explains that as

the fall had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death as well as a temporal, that is, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord, it was expedient that mankind should be reclaimed from this spiritual death. . . .

And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them forever to be cut off from his presence.

And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also (Alma 42 :9, 14, 15).

In the spirit world, when this matter of an atonement was under consideration, Jesus volunteered to make it. . . .Pursuant to his divine appointment, received in that great council, Jesus in due time came to earth as the literal Son of Elohim and the virgin Mary. He endured the temptations of Satan but he never once yielded to them. “He suffered temptations but gave no heed unto them” (D&C 20:22; see also Mosiah 15:5). He endured the indignities and cruelty of men. The pain he endured in Gethsemane and on the cross was sufficient to pay the penalty imposed by the demands of justice, sufficient to atone for all the sins of all men who ever had lived or ever would live in mortality upon the earth.

The intensity of his suffering was beyond the ken of men. No mortal has ever understood it; none ever will, for it is beyond human comprehension. We do know, however, that it was of terrible intensity, for of Gethsemane Luke wrote:

He kneeled down, and prayed,
Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.

And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.
And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling) down to the ground (Luke 22:41-44).

Speaking of that same suffering eighteen hundred years later, Jesus said to the Prophet Joseph Smith:

Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit-- and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink--

Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men (D&C 19 :18, 19).
This was the awful price demanded by the justice of God and paid by Jesus to put into effect the plan of mercy—that is, the gospel plan of redemption through which men may escape from spiritual death. In this manner Jesus literally bought us with his blood. Paul twice says, “Ye are bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23), and Peter charges “false teachers” with “denying the Lord that bought them” (2 Peter 2:1). His blood was drawn from him in blood sweat, the most torturous manner in which it could be spilt. From every beneficiary of the plan of redemption, Jesus merits everlasting praise, honor, and gratitude.

By his atonement, Jesus accomplished two things: (1) he overcame mortal death, and (2) he put into effect the plan of redemption from spiritual death. By atoning for the fall of Adam, he overcame death and brought about the resurrection. As has already been pointed out, the benefits of this aspect of his atonement are extended to every creature to whom death came as a result of Adam’s fall. The Lord indicates the scope of its application in the following quotation from the 29th section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

> And the end shall come, and the heaven and the earth shall be consumed and pass away, and there shall be a new heaven and a new earth.

> For all old things shall pass away, and all things shall become new, even the heaven and the earth, and all the fulness thereof, both men and beasts, the fowls of the air, and the fishes of the sea;

> And not one hair, neither mote, shall be lost, for it is the workmanship of mine hand (D&C 29:23-25).

The working out of that part of the atonement which brought about the resurrection was a great act of mercy by the Redeemer. It is matched only by the second aspect of his atonement. However, so far as the beneficiaries of universal resurrection are concerned, the bringing of it about was for them an act of justice, not of mercy only. This is so because mortal death came to them not as a penalty for their own sins, but as a consequence of the fall of Adam. Therefore, it was but justice to them that their bodies should be raised from the grave.

Since by the fall of Adam came death (that is, mortal death—death of the body), so by the atonement of Christ comes the resurrection. One is as wide in its scope as the other. The resurrection is universal and unconditional as a matter of justice to the beneficiaries thereof.

As has already been said, the second aspect of Christ’s atonement was the putting into effect of the law of mercy, the plan of redemption whereby men may be cleansed from the stain of their own sins and thereby freed from spiritual death. With respect to this aspect of the atonement, the circumstances differ from those attending the first. The difference arises in the origin of spiritual death.

As we have seen, spiritual death is the penalty for men’s own sins and not for the transgression of Adam, as was the case in temporal death. Men, in the exercise of their own free agency; voluntarily break the laws of righteousness, the penalty for which is spiritual death. They therefore have no such claim upon justice for relief from spiritual death as they have for relief from temporal death. So far as men are concerned, Christ’s atonement for their individual sins was entirely beyond the scope of justice—it was an act of pure mercy. It seems to me that, if possible (particularly since it was an act beyond the power of men to do for themselves), we owe our Redeemer an even deeper debt of gratitude for this aspect of his atonement than we do for bringing about the resurrection.

Because men’s transgressions are voluntary acts of their own, Jesus did not, by his atonement, remove the stain thereof unconditionally. He merely did for men with respect to the remission of their sins, what the themselves could not do, that which they were powerless to do. Specifically, he put into effect the plan of redemption whereby they may secure forgiveness upon the condition that they will do what they can do to bring themselves within reach of that plan. He left with them the responsibility to meet this condition.

This requirement is in full harmony with the laws of justice, for in addition to the atonement which Christ made for the sins of men, justice itself requires, as part of the price for their release from spiritual death, that men do what they can do for themselves. This they must do before they can profit from the atonement which Christ has conditionally made for them. For, as Nephi put it, we are saved by the grace of Christ only after we have done “all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

This, then, brings us to repentance. For it is repentance which both mercy and justice require of men as a condition for their participation in the plan of redemption. The very intent of Christ’s sacrifice, according to Amulek, was “to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance” (Alma 34:15).

From this and companion scriptures, it is clear that our ability to repent, as well as the efficacy of our repentance, comes as a gift from the Redeemer. It is one of the fruits of his atonement. This gift men reject at
their peril. Unless they exercise it, they remain spiritually dead, just as dead as if there had been no redemption made. For it takes repentance to bring one within reach of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ and thereby secure to himself the full benefits of the plan of redemption. In this manner, and only in this manner, does “mercy... satisfy the demands of justice, and encircle them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption” (Alma 34:16).

So testifies Amulek, while Abinadi (Mosiah 16:15), Amulek (Alma 11:41), Alma (Alma 12:18), Samuel the Lamanite (Helaman 14:18), and Mormon (Moroni 7:38) all testify that the unrepentant “remain as though there had been no redemption made, except it be the loosing of the bands of death” (Alma 11:41).

Jesus taught this principle at the time he told of his suffering, as above quoted.

I command you to repent [he said to Martin Harris through the Prophet Joseph], lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not. . . yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I God, have suffered these things for all that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I” (D&C 19:15-17).

On a later occasion he said, “Behold, ‘my blood shall not cleanse them if they hear me not’” (D&C, 29:17). This statement he made following a warning to the wicked who he said would not repent. Later on in the same revelation he said that those who would not believe would be raised in immortality unto “eternal damnation; for they cannot be redeemed from their spiritual fall, because they repent not” (D&C 29:43, 44).

These quotations call to mind the great summary of his gospel which Jesus gave to the Nephites as he drew near to the close of his ministry among them:

Behold [said he], I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me.

And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works whether they be good or whether they be evil.

And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works.

And it shall come to pass, that who so repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled; and if he endureth to the end, behold, him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that day when I shall stand to judge the world.

And he that endureth not unto the end, the same is he that is also hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence they can no more return, because of the justice of the Father.

And this is the word which he hath given unto the children of men. And for this cause he fulfillleth the words which he hath given, and he lieth not but fulfillleth all his words.

And no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest it be those who have washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end.

Now this is the commandment: Repent, all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me and be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel (3 Nephi 27:13-21).

From the foregoing and many other scriptures, it is clear that repentance is the process by which every person must himself put into operation the plan of mercy on his own behalf if he would be redeemed from spiritual death. In other words, repentance consummates for an individual, with respect to his own sins, what the atonement of Jesus Christ did conditionally for the sins of all. Such is the place of repentance in the plan of redemption.