What Is True Repentance?

Sometimes it is easier to define what something is by telling what it is not.

Repentance is not repetition of sin. It is not laughing at sin. It is not justification for sin. Repentance is not the hardening of the spiritual arteries. It is not the minimizing of the seriousness of the error. Repentance is not retirement from activity. It is not the closeting of sin to corrode and overburden the sinner.

Alma is eloquent:

“... Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds.

“If he has desired to do evil, and has not repented in his days, behold, evil shall be done unto him, according to the restoration of God.” (Alma 42:27–28.)

True repentance is composed of many elements, each one related to the others.

President Joseph F. Smith covered the matter well:

“True repentance is not only sorrow for sins and humble penitence and contrition before God, but it involves the necessity of turning away from them, a discontinuance of all evil practices and deeds, a thorough reformation of life, a vital change from evil to good, from vice to virtue, from darkness to light. Not only so, but to make restitution so far as is possible for all the wrongs that we have done, to pay our debts and restore to God and man their rights, that which is due them from us. This is true repentance and the exercise of the will and all the powers of body and mind is demanded to complete this glorious work of repentance.”

True repentance must come to each individual. It cannot be accomplished by proxy. One can neither buy nor borrow nor traffic in it: There is no royal road to repentance: whether he be a president’s son or a king’s daughter, an emperor’s prince or a lowly peasant, he must himself repent and his repentance must be personal and individual and humble.

Whether he be lean or fat, handsome or ugly, tall or short, intellectual or less trained, he must change his own life in a real and humble repentance.

There must be a consciousness of guilt. It cannot be brushed aside. It must be acknowledged and not rationalized away. It must be given its full importance. If [page 5] it is 10,000 talents, it must not be rated at 100 pence; if it is a mile long, it must not be rated a rod or a yard; if it is a ton transgression, it must not be rated a pound.

Alma expresses to Corianton an important element in repentance when he says:

“... I desire that ye should let these things trouble you no more, and only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance.” (Alma 42:29. Italics added.)

Consciousness of guilt should bring one to his knees in humbleness with “a broken heart and a contrite spirit” and in “sack cloth and ashes.”

There must be a pricking of conscience, perhaps sleepless hours, eyes that are wet, for Alma says:

“... none but the truly penitent are saved.” (Alma 42:24.)

Remorse and deep sorrow then are preliminary to repentance.

There must not be rationalization to cover and hide. Alma, the great authority on this subject, we quote again:

“... Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sins, by denying the justice of God; but do let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility.” (Alma 42:30. Italics added.)

This is important: do let yourself be troubled; let the tears flow; let your heart be chastened. Do not endeavor to excuse yourself in the least point because of your sin. Let the justice of God have full sway in your heart so that it will bring you to the dust in humility.

There should be the element of shame. Jeremiah says:

“Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall. ...” (Jer. 6:15.)

Rationalizing is the enemy to repentance. Someone has said, “Rationalizing is the bringing of ideals down to the level of one’s conduct while repentance is the bringing of one’s conduct up to the level of his ideals.”

The searing of one’s conscience is certainly inimical to repentance, and to justify and rationalize is not the highway to repentance.

Sin has size and dimensions. There are greater and lesser ones. Someone has said, “Conscience is a celestial spark that God has put into every man for the purpose of
saving his soul.” It awakens the soul to consciousness of sin; it stimulates him to want to do better, to make adjustments, and to accept the sin in its full weight and size, to be willing to face facts and meet issues and pay penalties.

True repentance is to forgive all others. One cannot be forgiven so long as he holds grudges against others. He must be “merciful unto [his] brethren; deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually.” (Alma 41:14.)

There must be an abandonment of the transgression. It must be genuine and consistent and continuing. The Lord said in 1832: “… go your ways and sin no more; but unto that soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God.” (D&C 82:7.)

And a temporary, momentary change of life is not sufficient.

Another element of repentance is indicated in Alma 41:9:

“And now behold, my son, do not risk one more offense against your God … which ye have hitherto risked to commit sin.” (Italics added.)

Alma says further:

“Do not suppose, because it has been spoken concerning restoration, that ye shall be restored from sin to happiness. Behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness.” (Alma 41:10. Italics added.)

We are impressed again with the paragraph of Alma 42:16, 18:

“Now, repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be. …

“Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man.” (Italics added.)

If there is no pain and suffering for the errors, then there can be no repentance.

The road to forgiveness is through repentance, and the road to repentance is through suffering, and that road must be kept open. Otherwise, the transgressions will invade and finally absorb again.

There is an area in Yucatan so fertile and weather-favored that the jungle grows rapidly. Needy peasants make a clearing and plant a crop, but constantly the shrubbery and forest creep in, and unless the owner is diligent and persistent to keep down the undergrowth, it will soon take over his little farm and turn it into jungle again.

 Likewise, repentance must be consistent and continuous. To repent of a sin and then to tamper with it again or permit it to invade, even slightly, is to lose the repentance and its beneficent effects, and “the former sins return, saith the Lord God.” (D&C 82:7.)

Unfortunately, many people not understanding repentance think that when they have told the bishop and have ceased the error that they have repented and are worthy of forgiveness, but there are other important elements.

True repentance comes before one is apprehended or imprisoned. He is very sorry, even if his transgression is never known. He pays not only penalties he is forced to pay, but penalties that are voluntary, without pressure.

To lie about serious sins is to add fuel to the fire and heat to its flames.

Very frequently people think they have repented and are worthy of forgiveness when all they have done is to express sorrow or regret at the unfortunate happening, but their repentance is barely started. Until they have begun to make changes in their lives, transformation in their habits, and to add new thoughts to their minds, to be sorry is only a bare beginning.

Much has been written in scripture of that part of true repentance that is confession. It is wholly proper for the transgressor to go to the bishop or stake or mission president and to confess voluntarily the transgressions he has committed. He should be frank and offer the information and answer honestly all the questions propounded to him by that authority. This brings humility and takes courage: The Church’s authority will in confidence hear his story and suggest recovery plans and impose the penalties.

In transgressions of lesser magnitude he may place the person on probation or in the more serious ones he may disfellowship or excommunicate. If he feels that the transgression is minimal and deserves forgiveness, he may grant a waiver of penalties that we sometimes call forgiveness and permit that person to continue his activity in the Church, and he will likely say to that person, “Because the sin was minimal and your repentance seems to be sincere, I feel the Lord would have me forgive you for the Church.” But one should remember that that forgiveness is conditional, and if repeated, the original sins return.

Many people in their confession give only a skeleton picture and often rationalize and minimize the sins that have been done and often blame the transgression upon others when indeed the individual was largely guilty himself. One must remember, as stated in Doctrine and Covenants 1:38:

“What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my
servants, it is the same.” [D&C 1:38]

And so it is important that the one who is confessing should realize that the servant of the Lord to whom he makes bare his record represents the Lord. The Lord said again: “For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me, and he that receiveth me, receiveth my Father.”

And so a lie to an official of the Church who has a right to delve into our lives is tantamount to a lie to the Lord, and a half-truth to his officials is like a half-truth to the Lord, and rebellion against his leaders is comparable to rebellion against the Lord.

The true confession is not only a matter of making known certain developments but it is a matter of getting peace, which seemingly can come in no other way.

Frequently people talk about time: How long before they can be forgiven? How soon may they go to the temple?

Repentance is timeless. The evidence of repentance is transformation. We certainly must keep our values straight and our evaluations intact.

Certainly we must realize that penalties for sin are not a sadistic desire on the part of the Lord, and that is why when people get deep in immorality or other comparable sins, there must be action by courts with proper jurisdiction. Many people cannot repent until they have suffered much. They cannot direct their thoughts into new clean channels. They cannot control their acts. They cannot plan their future properly until they have lost values that they did not seem to fully appreciate. Therefore, the Lord has prescribed excommunication, disfellowship, or probation, and this is in line with Alma’s statement that there could be no repentance without suffering, and many people cannot suffer, having not come to a realization of their sin and a consciousness of their guilt.

One form of punishment is deprivation, and so if one is not permitted to partake of the sacrament or to use his priesthood or to go to the temple or to preach or pray in any of the meetings, it constitutes a degree of embarrassment and deprivation and punishment. In fact, the principal punishment that the Church can deal is deprivation from privileges.

Certainly the transgressor must know that even a good hot bath, shampooing of the hair, and a laundry-cleaned suit do not cleanse from sin.

I am certain that the wife of Potiphar who tried to tempt Joseph from his purity must have been clean physically; she must have been free wholly from distasteful body odors; she must have had limitless cosmetics. Her clothes must have been scrupulously clean, her fingernails, her hair, her teeth, her body—but her real contamination, which is totally inexcusable, was pollution of the soul.

If no penalties are assessed, if no punishment is required, if no deprivation is expected, then what would induce the average transgressor to change his ways?

True repentance incorporates within it a washing, a purging, a changing of attitudes, a reappraising, a strengthening toward self-mastery. It is not a simple matter for one to transform his life overnight, nor to change attitudes in a moment, nor to rid himself in a hurry of unworthy companions.

True repentance must include restitution. There are sins for which restitution can be made, such as a theft, but then there are other sins that cannot yield to restitution, such as murder or adultery or incest. One of the requisites for repentance is the living of the commandments of the Lord. Perhaps few people realize that as an important element; though one may have abandoned a particular sin and even confessed it to his bishop, yet he is not repentant if he has not developed a life of action and service and righteousness, which the Lord has indicated to be very necessary: “… He that repents and does the commandments of the Lord shall be forgiven.”