

Repentance — Public or Private

Question: Does repentance have to be public? Must it be done in front of the congregation or can it be private? When is public confession of sin appropriate and when is it necessary? Should a Christian who commits a sin in private and asks the Lord in private to forgive that sin confess it publicly? What about a member who is unfaithful in attendance and comes back and is faithful but does not come forward?

Answer: Repentance takes place inside a person. It is by definition a change of mind or heart. Its reality may be indicated by action. John the baptist demanded, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8), and those fruits, of course, included changes in conduct. If change of conduct does not occur, it can be fairly inferred that the professed repentance may not have been genuine. It certainly was not lasting.

Confession of sin is one of the fruits of repentance. True repentance means one does not hide past sins, but acknowledges them as well as turns from them.

Note, however, that the change of conduct is not the repentance. It is the fruit of repentance; it follows repentance.

So repentance is not "done in front of the congregation." Repentance is an internal matter.

This is not belaboring an unnecessary point. When repentance and our custom of coming forward in an assembly to confess sins are thought of as being the same thing, a man-made law is created. Repentance is required in scripture. If coming forward in a service is what repentance is, then coming forward in a service is required by Scripture. But that is not the case.

Confession of sins is also required by Scripture. "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

To how many people must confession of sin be made? How public must confession of sins be? The answers to these questions are left to our judgment.

Certainly we are not required to confess the secret sins of our heart to everyone every day.

It is generally accepted that confession of sin should be as public as the knowledge of the sin already is. That makes good sense. One purpose of confession is to help ensure that everyone who knows of a sin knows also of the repentance.

Though reasonable, however, that is a human rule. It is not spelled out that way in Scripture. We have no right to impose it as law.

If a Christian has sinned against another individual, confessing that sin to the church, especially in the absence of the offended one, is not as biblical as going to the offended one, confessing to him or her, and asking pardon personally.

The Bible knows nothing of our practice of coming down the aisle of a church building during an invitation song. (For that matter, it knows nothing of our church buildings.) There is nothing wrong with the practice; it is a good way (note, *a* good way) to make confession; but it is nowhere required by God.

If people are lax in attendance at services and then begin to attend regularly, their renewed attendance is evidence of their repentance.

Have they confessed? Probably. If you think not and have genuine concern for them, ask them. But walking down the aisle is not the only way to confess sins, and there is no biblical prescription that mandates to whom or to how many confession is to be made.

We should not think that "repenting" means walking down the aisle or that "confessing" requires responding to an invitation song. There are other ways to accomplish both. (Firm Foundation, June 2006) (Cecil May Jr.) G & P Ministries, ohatcheechurch.org

