

Confession ≠ Repentance

“Why You Need to Know the Difference”

True Confession

It is a beautiful experience when maturing Christians humbly confess their sin to one another and cling to the gospel again (James 4:7–10).

Maybe we were repulsed by our sin after a gospel-centered sermon, a Christ-anchored Bible study, or an intense time of prayer. Perhaps we’ve been confronted with our iniquity after a friend’s confrontational rebuke (Proverbs. 27:5), a spouse’s edifying correction (Ephesians 4:15, 25), or a time of self-examination during the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28). The Holy Spirit has given a heart-wrenching conviction of sin that’s either newly uncovered or old and rusty. Emotional brokenness and convincing contrition quickly follows, and we’re suddenly in glorious agreement with God about our sin. All of this is known as **confession** (1 John 1:9–10).

But how many times have you seen this happen without genuine and lasting change? Why does genuine transformation still evade us?

What are we missing with only confessing?

I think it might be the case that we don’t understand that confession and **repentance** aren’t the same things. In our desperation to be done with the shame and the shackles of our sin, we confess. But then, sometimes, we foolishly exhale and believe our work is done. Not wanting to talk about or be bothered by our sin again, we fail to realize that confession is just the beginning. This failure is why many people experience false transformation.

We shirk **repentance** by merely agreeing with the truth of our sin (confession) *without* choosing the gospel-immersed response. To be sure, **repentance** is jump-started by confessing our sin to one another (1 John 1:9-10), but it must extend to making no further provisions for the flesh, a vicious renouncing of temptation (Matthew 5:24-27), and eagerly walking the tangible road of Godly grief (2 Corinthians 7:10-11). **Repentance** is no foot-dragging, blame-shifting, excuse-ridden compliance to what we errantly see as someone’s forced demands on us. Instead, **repentance** is earnestly expressed in fellowship within our local church as a genuine surrender to biblical truth inserted into my life often by those who love God and care about me. When we are repentant we see that it is good to be concerned with rebuilding trust with others, even if it takes excessively longer than planned. We embrace the avoidance of further consequences of living an ungodly life as we seek to live our lives in Christ. Repentance is not only choosing to avoid sin but must also include thoroughly putting on Christ (Romans 13:14).

Repentance not only demands that we turn away or put to death debauchery; it also requires turning *toward* God by overtly putting on Christ (Colossians 3:1–17). Putting on Christ involves an increasing service to the Lord, others, and study of God’s word. Repentantly putting on Christ invites increasing fellowship, singing, praying, and setting our mind on the things above in the fellowship of the local church. When God brings someone to repentance, the fruit (Luke 6:43–45) of that repentance is increasingly evident well beyond the first moment of confession and even amidst the imperfect moments thereafter.

4 Distractions to Repentance

You may recognize these “buzz-words” that are common in Christian circles. They have the impression of being helpful, but they can actually derail or interfere with genuine repentance and transformation:

1. “Accountability”

It is common to hear that any Christian needing to change should have an “accountability partner.” These partners sometimes offer a less-than-biblical approach that focus on “talking around” sin, on a heavy reliance of man-centered help (a.k.a. unspecified expectations for checking in, texting, software reports) or self-help moralism, and may shift the focus away from the gospel. The bible doesn’t necessarily give us an explanation of the word “accountability”, so it is difficult to use this idea consistently.

2. “Legalism”

This word is regularly used as an excuse to avoid serious disciplined attempts to fight temptation and put away sin but instead allow us more room to indulge and dance with our sinful idols. Fear of “legalism” sometimes comes from unintended ignorance, apathy, laziness, fake confessions, or false repentance. In Christ, you are called to vigorously avoid temptation and sin, not to flirt with it (Matthew 5:24–27; 2 Kings 23 the king broke, buried, and burned the sources of idol worship). As long as efforts to repent are not used to earn the free grace-given relationship we have with God through Christ, there’s relatively little reason that we should say, “I don’t want to be legalistic” when talking about our fight against sin as a growing Christian.

3. “Heart Issue”

While finding clarity about the “why” of a sin is important (1 Thess. 5:14), not knowing the true “heart issue” yet is no reason to avoid confession. Furthermore, it’s no defense for delaying the pursuit of biblical repentance, especially while your sin is destroying relationships.

4. “Interpretation”

Sometimes we hold on to sin and the consequences of sin as we demand that what other Godly mature Christians are telling us is just not true, right, or biblical. We suggest that their interpretation of truth is different than our own and we live on in our sin until the consequences become too great (Proverbs 18:1, James 3:13-18, Matthew 18:, Proverbs 14:12, 2 Timothy 2:14, Matthew 18:15-20).

“CPR” Confession, Prayer, and Repentance

Confession, Prayer, and Repentance (CPR) are three ways we can biblically define our pursuit of growth in Christ.

1. Confession

We must seek to identify our sins biblically while moving toward a concise agreement with God about them (1 John 1:8–10). Confession means to agree with God about our sin in community with others through the local church; it means we agree with His response to those sins, according to the Scriptures.

2. Prayer

Take time to pray to God with others through your local church body for God’s strength to change your desires and to express thanksgiving for his immensely undeserved grace and mercy in Christ. Pray to the Lord to take away temptation and evil—both from within your heart and from outside influences. Thank God that he is worthy of praise, even in the midst of our wreckage (Phil. 4:8). Thank him for the hope of the gospel as our reason for repentance.

3. Repentance

Finally, we must patiently and passionately choose repentance, which must include an obvious surrender to God by putting sinful ways and temptations to death specifically (a.k.a. what we don’t do) as we necessarily put on Christ’s ways in our lives tangibly (a.k.a. what we now do). No, we will not be perfect, but Christians should regularly be pursuing Christ-likeness in specific tangible ways through relationships in the local church.

We’ll repeat this as needed—over and over and over again. This is called Christianity. “CPR” is NOT an equation or a marketing ploy, but a biblical idea. Sometimes you may start out repenting, then confess, and pray. You may begin by praying, then repenting, then confessing. Just remember, God has already changed us in many ways (Eph. 2:1–3), and he’s not finished with us yet.

Let’s not allow our limited desire or favorite methodology of being transformed obscure the hard, joyful, and life-long biblical pursuit of surrendering to God for the lasting fruit of the Spirit. For every believer, Christ-likeness will come through prayerfully depending on God in true confession and repentance.

