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Repentance Also Means Rethinking

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Repentance Also Means Rethinking

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Although Latter-day Saints have a knowledge of the process of repentance, they lack a complete understanding of how the scriptures use the term repentance: repentance consists not only of remorse, confession, restitution, and forgiveness, but a literal changing of one's entire perspective on life, so that eventually a Latter-day Saint may "repent of having to repent." In a world where temporal, statistical, commercial, political, and pseudoscientific experiences have taken the place of our God-given eternal, moral, and revelatory rights, it is is easy for any of us to be led astray—if we are not prepared. And I submit that repentance is the most important survival tool the Lord has placed at our disposal. "Say nothing but repentance unto this generation; keep my commandments and assist to bring forth my work, according to my commandments" (D&C 6:9). God's first rule is that all men must repent. All men. Repentance is not only for those who have committed sin—it is for everyone, so that they may come to know the mind of God and his eternal perspective. This process also replaces the natural man with the new man in Christ.

Wanting to find true repentance so that I could really feel that I was forgiven of my sins led me to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and to the waters of

This was given as a Sperry Symposium lecture on 26 January 1985.

baptism twenty years ago. I came from a church whose major theological tenets were faith alone, grace alone, and scriptures alone. As a student of the ministry I don't remember learning anything about repentance except for a brief paragraph in my theology textbook by Alan Richardson, which read, "Repentance is thus a 'sine qua non' of the Christian life, not only in its beginning but at every stage; it involves a constant awareness of the fact that all our faith and all our virtue are God's gift and not our achievement."¹ Most of this quote is mere theological opinion or the commandments of men which ignore free agency and man's potential, relegating us to a life of simple subservience to God. However, in exploring the "rethinking" aspect of repentance, I would like to emphasize two phrases of Richardson's: "constant awareness" and "at every stage."

During the first twenty-four years of my life, repentance was not a remorse for sin followed by proper confession and restitution. It was merely a recognition of original sin and of Martin Luther's principle of *pecca fortiter*—"sin boldly that grace may more fully abound!" Who in his right mind would be too concerned about his sins if he felt that the greater the sin the more Christ's atonement would settle the deficit of purity? We were so thoroughly taught of our sinful nature that we were encouraged not to dwell on it, but simply to ask forgiveness from the Lord and confess our sins with the rest of the congregation on communion Sunday once monthly. But I felt no peace. I wanted to be cleansed thoroughly from my sin but didn't know where to turn. Accordingly, like Enos and Joseph Smith, I began praying more from the heart instead of from a prayerbook—with greater sincerity and a desire to find some answers. The Lord taught me patience first, however, rescuing me only just before I was going to pack my bags and leave for San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury to live the "good life" of sex, drugs, and ultimate freedom that 1968

clamored for. That Friday, the thirteenth of December, showed me that the God whom I thought had forsaken me was really alive and supporting me. My spiritual and emotional frustrations from visiting a different church or two every Sunday trying to find the truth were finally allayed, for the missionaries taught me three things which I had never really learned before: the value of a testimony, the importance of living by the Spirit, and the true nature of repentance.

The Old Testament on Repentance

No theologian, minister, or fellow ministerial student first taught me a glimpse of true repentance: just a prophet of the Lord, Elijah. This happened in a very vicarious manner, through the music of Felix Mendelssohn's great oratorio "Elijah." While in my freshman and sophomore years at St. John's College in Winfield, Kansas, the choirs in this school joined with the choirs at the Methodist college in town, Southwestern College, to sing this soul-searching piece of music. I was intrigued by Elijah's life and the power of God which he had access to. But I was also lifted up by his humility before the Lord and his human frailty, which approached that of Jonah. Consider what he was able to accomplish with the power of the Lord: healing the widow's son, withholding rain from the people of Israel, and finally subduing and slaying the priests of Baal. But when Jezebel and Ahab went after him, Elijah felt like all he had done was in vain and wanted the Lord to remove him from that wicked world: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4). Here he was implying to the Lord that what had happened to this point had been Elijah's doing — that the conversion of Israel was entirely up to him, and that he was not succeeding. But the Lord strengthened Elijah even more, so that later in the oratorio, before he is translated by means of a chariot of fire, he hints of the repentance that had

taken place in his life: "I go on my way in the strength of the Lord." In the words of Paul: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13). Elijah had not sinned by being immoral or any such thing. His thinking was merely wrong. He then experienced the change of perspective to the mind of God that all of us need—the kind that guides all of our actions through the help of the gift of the Holy Ghost. We find throughout the Old Testament that it was not only Elijah who needed a boost in self-confidence: Moses, Jeremiah, and Enoch are also good examples of prophets who needed to have their minds and hearts infused with a portion of the mind of God.

Two words are used for repentance in the Old Testament. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*² states that the Hebrew word *niham* is used thirty-five times. It is usually used to signify a contemplated change in God's dealings with men for good or ill according to his just judgment. ("It repenteth me that I have made them," Genesis 6:7; 1 Samuel 15:11, 35; Jonah 3:9-10). Only in five places does *niham* refer to human repentance or relenting. *Teshuvah* is the other word referring to repentance: a true turning toward God. It also means "recover," "refresh," "restore," "convert," "return," "reverse," or "turn again." It indicates a return to God and the right path (cf. Hosea 14:2; 2 Kings 17:13; Jeremiah 13:14; and Joel 2:12-13). The Rabbis have a saying for *teshuvah*: "Great is 'teshuvah,' for it brings healing to the world. Great is 'teshuvah,' for it reaches to the throne of God. Great is 'teshuvah,' it brings redemption near. Great is 'teshuvah,' for it lengthens a man's life."³ This rabbinic saying probably has its roots in Deuteronomy 30:9-10, which gives us the essence of the doctrine of repentance in the Old Testament: "And the Lord thy God will make thee plenteous in every work of thine hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy land, for good: for the Lord will again rejoice

over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers: If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul." This seems to indicate that God is unfailingly responsive to repentance, thereby indicating the depth of it; for as we become ever closer to the mind of God we not only automatically bless ourselves but are blessed by God who responds to our "change of mind." Otherwise, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8-9). How can we know the ways of the Lord unless we do those things that help us to that end? David the Psalmist also recognizes that repentance is a change of thinking: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10-11). Two final examples from the Old Testament: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverb 4:23), and "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverb 23:7).

The New Testament on Repentance

The most common Greek words used in the New Testament for "repentance" are *metanoeo* (the verb), *metanoia* (the noun), and *metamelomai* (the present participle). These Greek words usually mean not merely feeling sorry, or changing one's mind, but a complete alteration of the basic motivation and direction of one's life. This explains why John the Baptist demanded baptism as an expression of this repentance, not just for obvious "sinners," but for the "righteous" Jews as well. *Metanoia* was often used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *niham*. So defined, repentance might seem purely intellectual, but this is not the case, for writers of the Bible seemed to be aware of the unity of human personality. To change one's mind was to change one's attitude, and thus to change the actions and

even the whole way of life.⁴ *Metanoeo* occurs thirty-four times and is mostly used in a favorable sense to include faith. *Metanoia* is used twenty-three times in the sense of the whole process of change. It can mean an inward change of mind, affections, and convictions as well as a commitment rooted in the fear of God and sorrow for offenses committed against him. When accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ, this repentance results in an outward turning from sin to God and his service in all of life. It is a gift from God, and the repentant person never regrets having repented.⁵ The Roman Catholic Douai version of the Bible interprets *metanoia* as penance, the performance of ecclesiastically prescribed acts to make satisfaction for postbaptismal sin. According to *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, this use of the word has no place in New Testament Christianity.⁶ *Metamelomai* is used very seldom and means "regretting" or "having remorse."

If the use of repentance is both God's gift and man's responsibility, then the call for repentance on the part of man "is a call for him to return to his creaturely and covenant dependence on God." It should be clear to all of us that it is God's way that is important, not ours. Paul said it best in Romans 8:6: "Set your minds on things which are above, where God and Christ dwell, for to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life eternal." God encouraged the Saints, after they had forgotten or erased undesirable thoughts and attitudes and things which were behind, to plant good thoughts in their place, as in Philippians 3:13-14 (or Article of Faith 13): "But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ." Paul must have experienced repentance in a big way, for prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus he was sure that he was doing the will of the Lord. However, after the Lord had set him straight, he

began to change his mind—and heart—about a lot of things, becoming himself renewed in the spirit of his mind, as he later exhorted the Saints in Ephesians 4:17-24. Or as in Romans 12:2: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” The exhortation of Jesus Christ to “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48) could only be preceded by a change of mind and understanding opened to the things of the Spirit. Otherwise perfection would be impossible both in this world and the next. As it is, “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

As I read some of these passages of scripture before my own conversion, I had to ask myself a few questions: Is it true that all things are new for me, too? Do I feel renewed in the mind and spirit? If not, is it perhaps because I feel repentance is only for committed sin, not an act which is calculated to bring me ever closer to the Father? Hence, my own change from human thinking to divine understanding was truly a necessary consequence in “putting on the new man.” The act of repentance had always been for me a mere remorse for sin and often a half-hearted promise “never to do it again,” even though I suspected that the next chance I got I would sin again—such was the force of “negative” theology in my life. It is important to consider, then, that true conversion is incomplete unless it is preceded not only by a remorse for former sins and future rejection of them, but a total transformation of one’s entire thought process—one implying an erasure of thoughts and images foreign to the pure gospel revealed to us by the Holy Ghost.

The Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants on Repentance

The Book of Mormon tells us three very important things about repentance: (1) All people must repent, (2) there must be enough time for all people to repent, and (3) faith must be present in the process. One verse covers the first two well: “And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, that they might repent while in the flesh . . . for . . . all men must repent” (2 Nephi 2:21), and another covers the third: “And behold, ye do know of yourselves, for ye have witnessed it, that as many of them as are brought to the knowledge of the truth, and to know of the wicked and abominable traditions of their fathers, and are led to believe the holy scriptures, yea, the prophecies of the holy prophets, which are written, which leadeth them to faith on the Lord, and unto repentance, which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them” (Helaman 15:7).

Understanding the meanings of repentance as used in the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants is more difficult than in the Bible simply because the English language is not as precise as Hebrew or Greek. We must understand the meanings of these by context, inspiration, and revelation—and only secondarily by language.⁸ Mosiah 27:26 elucidates this further: “And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God.” If Alma the Younger’s teaching is to square with Pauline doctrine in the New Testament, then we must assume that the rethinking type of repentance is also necessary to reach this new state. Finally, there is an excellent example in the Book of Mormon about this change of mind in action after true repentance. When the brother of Jared presented the problem of light in the vessels in which he and his company were to cross the ocean, the Lord did not answer the problem, but threw

the question back at him: "What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?" (Ether 2:23). The brother of Jared was prepared to answer because he had studied it out in his mind already. If the Lord were to tell us what to do all the time, we would not grow; we would not learn to think as he does (D&C 9:7-8).

Following my conversion, I found that my renewed mind and understanding now freed me from the bondage of not only wrong thinking but wrong actions which had proceeded from human thinking. In my freedom I also discovered that I could now act according to the Spirit instead of being acted upon by the natural desires of the flesh.

The Doctrine and Covenants points out some additional teachings about repentance. Sections 137 and 138 are two very important sections which are too often ignored by Latter-day Saints. To me, however, these are two of the most important passages of scripture, both because they can lead to true repentance by helping us to understand better some of the more ineffable facts about our eternal existence and because they answer the challenge of the Lord: "Let the solemnities of eternity rest upon your minds" (D&C 43:34). Joseph Smith has further added this well-known admonition, "The things of God are of deep import, and time and experience and careful, ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity. Thou must commune with God."⁹

Those two revelations, added in 1976 to the Doctrine and Covenants, both talk about death and the life hereafter. Perhaps they are important to me because, like many people throughout the world (Latter-day Saint or not), I had a life-after-death experience in 1963 while trying to recover from a critical automobile accident. The experience

was like that of Joseph Smith's learning more by looking into the heavens than by reading many books, but the experience has had advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand a small portion of my faith has been replaced by absolute knowledge of life after death. On the other hand, such a glimpse into the eternities results in an extra measure of discernment which gives me a sorrowful impatience concerning the world. (It's like looking into the hearts and minds of anyone you meet, and although it can be very useful in helping teach a wayward student here at Brigham Young University, it can be frustrating to be out in the world where sin and ignorance of spiritual matters are the measure of the children of man.) Moreover, this type of experience gave me an immediate megadose of repentance, or rethinking—what to many people is a figment of foolish imagination rather than a serious matter of eternal consequences. (A friend once remarked to me that with such knowledge I could almost start my own church. Surprised at his comment, I answered that I would not do such a thing *because* of the experience I had had. That very conversation gives us a further hint into how people behave differently in various stages of repentance.)

Several passages of scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants give us further practical information about repentance as well, and I believe they reveal as much about rethinking as they do about remorse, confession, and restitution. One sobering thought is that "surely every man must repent or suffer, for I, God, am endless" (D&C 19:4). However, the Lord graciously gives us our free agency, for the farther along we are in our repentance, the less we have to suffer. In some cases this is simply a change of our attitude, for our sufferings will work to our eternal betterment if we allow them to be growth experiences. Even so, the more our mind thinks like God's, the less we will suffer. Furthermore, the Lord tells us that our "sorrow shall be great" unless we "speedily repent, yea very speed-

ily” (D&C 136:35). That reminds us how much more God knows about each of us and the direction in which we are headed. Do not just “do it,” he is saying, “do it *now*.” “And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth” (D&C 18:13). And what godly parent would not want his children to have the mind and wisdom and knowledge of life he or she has had?

Teachings from General Authorities on Repentance

Spencer W. Kimball is one of the Church’s leading experts on the teachings of repentance, especially the practical applications of it. Particularly well-known are his five steps for repentance: (1) sorrow for sin, (2) abandonment of sin, (3) confession of sin, (4) restitution for sin, and (5) doing the will of the Father.¹⁰ Rather than spend a lot of time summarizing his own teachings on repentance, I am going to list them briefly so that you will be able to see how they support repentance as rethinking.

1. Repentance must be as universal as sin.¹¹

2. The delay in repentance encourages the continuation of sin.¹²

3. If we are humble and desirous of living the gospel, we will come to think of repentance as applying to everything we do in life, whether it be spiritual or temporal in nature. Repentance is for every soul who has not yet reached perfection.¹³

4. Conscience is a celestial spark which God has put into all people for the purpose of saving their souls. It awakens the soul to consciousness of sin, spurs a person to make up his mind to adjust, to convict himself of the transgression without soft-pedaling or minimizing the error, to be willing to face facts, meet the issue, and pay necessary penalties – and until the person is in this frame of mind [!] he has not begun to repent.¹⁴

5. Repentance is timeless. The evidence of repentance

is transformation. We certainly must keep our values straight and our evaluations intact.¹⁵

6. 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.¹⁶

7. In abandoning sin one cannot merely wish for better conditions. He must make them. He needs to come to hate the spotted garments and loathe the sin. He must be certain not only that he has abandoned the sin but that he has changed the situations surrounding the sin. He should avoid the places and conditions and circumstances where the sin occurred, for these could most readily breed it again. He must abandon the people with whom the sin was committed. He may not hate the persons involved, but he must avoid them and everything associated with the sin. He must dispose of all letters, trinkets, and things which will remind him of the "old days" and "old times." He must forget addresses, telephone numbers, people, places, and situations from the sinful past, and build a new life. He must eliminate anything which would stir the old memories.¹⁷

The last passage would seem to indicate practical acts which would enable not only the sinner but the would-be Saint to acquire a godly perspective which enables one to see the eternal plan more clearly. Moreover, all of the passages seem to support one important result of repentance: the ability to forgive all people.

Church leaders who are contemporary with President Kimball can lend further insight to our study. David O. McKay once said that to repent is "to change one's mind [and one's heart] in regard to past or intended actions or conduct on account of regret or dissatisfaction."¹⁸ By now, however, we can see that it is infinitely better and easier

to repent *before* reaching the point of regret or dissatisfaction. In fact, Bruce R. McConkie elucidates this further: "Repentance is easy or difficult of attainment by various people depending upon their own attitude and conduct, and upon the seriousness of the sins they have committed."¹⁹

Nor can we leave out Church leaders who preceded our own day. According to the Prophet Joseph Smith, "It is the will of God that man should repent and serve Him in health, and in the strength and power of his mind, in order to secure his blessing, and not wait until he is called to die."²⁰

Repentance is a thing that cannot be trifled with every day. Daily transgression and daily repentance is not that which is pleasing in the sight of God.²¹ (The Prophet is probably speaking of penance here.)

Repent! Repent! Obey the Gospel. Turn to God.²²

Parley P. Pratt, "Cultivate the mind, renew the spirit, invigorate the body, cheer the heart, ennoble the soul of man."²³ All of these things make up true repentance. Brigham Young, "Train your minds."²⁴ What a simple definition for repentance! And finally, President Young's reverse definition of repentance, "Sin consists in doing wrong when we know and can do better."²⁵

Hugh Nibley on Repentance

If Spencer W. Kimball is the Church's most prolific official spokesman on the meaning of repentance, Hugh Nibley is certainly the most prolific apologist and scholar on repentance. Unfortunately, not enough members of the Church take him seriously when he talks about doctrinal subjects. As I have studied his writings during the past few years, I found that most of his recent addresses have more or less been cries of repentance, or as he calls it, "the eschatological viewpoint." That viewpoint is best exemplified by his parable in the November 1955 issue of the

Improvement Era.²⁶ It is much too long to share here, but since it is one of his most inspiring writings, I would highly recommend it to you for thorough study. Briefly, it tells of a successful businessman who has been told by his doctor that because he suffers from a serious disease, he has but a short time to live. Facing imminent death, the priorities in his life change considerably, so that his perspective has become “eschatological,” or having to do with the last things and last days. His colleagues believe he has gone crazy, because the things of the world no longer mean that much to him anymore – it’s the intangible, everlasting things about life that now attract our businessman. But lo and behold, he finds out a few days later with a second series of tests that he may yet live for many years. With this new piece of news you would think that this good man would go back to his old habits, but no, he retains his “eschatological” or “repentant” viewpoint, continuing in this positive and eternal mode for the rest of his long life. And that, Nibley insists, is the true eschatological attitude which all Latter-day Saints would do well to emulate: act as if you knew you were to die in the very near future.

Elsewhere, in an article entitled “The Historicity of the Bible,” Brother Nibley defines this viewpoint:

The eschatological viewpoint is that which sees and judges everything in terms of a great eternal plan. Whether we like it or not, we belong to the eternities: we cannot escape the universe. All our thoughts and deeds must be viewed against an infinite background and against no other. *Eschatos* means ultimate and refers to that which lies beyond all local and limited goals and interests. Limited objectives are very well in their way, but only as contributing to something eternal. Extreme as this doctrine may seem, the only alternative, as the philosophers of old repeatedly observed, is a trip to nowhere, a few seconds of pleasure in an hour of pain, and after that only “the depth of emptiness.”²⁷

When asked what do we think about in this life, Nibley responded, "That very question."

How so, I wondered? I looked in my Nibley subject index under repentance to find out what else he had written, and found the following juicy tidbits:

1. "Sin is waste. It is doing one thing when you should be doing other and better things for which you have the capacity. Hence, there are no innocent idle thoughts. That is why even the righteous must repent, constantly and progressively, since all fall short of their capacity and calling."²⁸

2. "The fatal symptom of our day is not that men do wrong – they always have – and commit crimes, and even recognize their wrongdoing as foolish and unfortunate, but that they have *no intention of repenting*, while God has told us that the first rule that he has given the human race is that all men everywhere must repent."²⁹

3. "The gospel of repentance is a constant reminder that the most righteous are still being tested and may yet fall, and that the most wicked are not yet beyond redemption and may still be saved. And that is what God wants: 'Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?' There are poles for all to see, but in this life no one has reached and few have ever approached either pole, and no one has any idea at what point between his neighbors stand. Only God knows that."³⁰

4. "Does not one person need repentance more than another? . . . You can always find somebody who is worse than you are to make you feel virtuous. It's a cheap shot: those awful terrorists, perverts, communists – they are the ones who need to repent! Yes, indeed they do, and for them repentance will be a full-time job, exactly as it is for all the rest of us."³¹

5. "You are either repenting or not repenting and that is, according to the scriptures, the whole difference between being righteous or being wicked."³²

Famous Protestant theologians like Malcolm Muggeridge have also spoken out in ways similar to Hugh Nibley, but William Temple comes the closest: "The world, as we live in it, is like a shop window into which some mischievous person has got overnight, and shifted all the price-labels so that the cheap things have the high price-labels on them, and the really precious things are priced low. We let ourselves be taken in. Repentance means getting those price-labels back in the right place."³³

Further Religious Notions of Repentance

Notwithstanding Judaism is considered a non-Christian religion, it is interesting to note that Mormonism comes closer to Judaism than either Protestantism or Catholicism in the understanding of some theological subjects. Repentance is one of them. In fact, it is regarded so fundamental by Judaism that it is enumerated in the Talmud as one of the seven things created by God before he created the world.³⁴ According to rabbinic teachings, man was created with an evil inclination (tendency to sin) to which repentance is the antidote—as long as it means a sincere changing of ways and returning to God.³⁵ To the Jew, repentance means "to think differently after; to change one's mind, opinion, moral thought, reflection, apprehensions, character, conduct; the tendency of personal life as a whole."³⁶

Rabbi Joseph Dov Baer Halevi Soloveitchik is an orthodox rabbi who studied the typology of man and of human society. His teachings on repentance are probably the most prolific of any religious writer I have run across. He felt that there were four main types of men: repentant, halakhic (dutiful or obedient), religious, and rational.³⁷ To the Rav, "repentance implies that there are powers in man which allow him to leap from that sense of sin, which profoundly oppresses him and casts him far away, to a

different feeling of *hazarty le-fanekha* (I am again in Your presence).”³⁸

Repentance means nothing other than (1) retrospective contemplation of the past and the distinction between the living and the dead in it; and (2) the vision of the future and its utilization according to the free determination of man. Man’s very existence is contingent upon these two realms of activity: (1) in the memory of those situations and experiences undergone by man in the past and which, in many senses, have not died or been erased, but rather continue to exist in the inner recesses of his heart, and (2) in his expectations of the future, in his plans and hopes for the morrow, and for the day following. In these two realms man responds to the question, “Who am I?” Memory and expectation come together and focus on the character of man and give significance to the whole of his life, above and beyond the flow of meaningless time, whose flux is devoid of significance and purpose.³⁹

The Rav defined “repentant man” as follows:

1. He expresses his humanity as a creature created in the divine image.

2. He possesses independent creative powers coupled with a compulsion to draw near to the Creator. This creative power enables him to forgo uprooting the past. Rather, it enables him to take up the past and exalt it, and to shape it so that it can be molded with the future to create the present, himself.

3. He has four characteristic traits: profundity of suffering, a depth of experience, the ability to make decisions in the light of free choice, and the capacity to create.⁴⁰ Finally, “repentance not only cleanses the sinner of the filth of iniquity, but it contains a kind of fresh act of covenant-making between the individual and the Almighty. . . . Repentance is not merely the purification of the personality, but a special sanctification of the individ-

ual, making him ready once more to conclude a covenant."⁴¹

Another Jew represents our own day—Dave Brubeck, an American composer not only of jazz music but of the powerful oratorio “The Light in the Wilderness.” I had the opportunity to sing this work as part of the Indianapolis Symphony Choir in 1969— with Dave Brubeck at the piano. During the dress rehearsal, Mr. Brubeck gave each of us performers a mimeographed sheet which included some of his feelings concerning the writing of his music and the two men he described in the wilderness: John the Baptist and Jesus. His comments were the germ for my consideration of repentance as rethinking, coming as it did while I was being taught by the missionaries:

When it was clear to Jesus who he was and what he must do, he emerged from the desert wilderness with the passionate cry to RETHINK! . . . RETHINKING precedes effective learning and obedience and sacrifice. . . . Jesus in the wilderness is only touched upon by the synoptic gospels. Whatever went on in his mind during his solitary fast, it must have been a soul searching beyond our imagination; and yet he must have asked basically the same question we all ask— Who am I?⁴²

Other non-Christian religions also have a contribution to make to our understanding of the principles of repentance, but only very briefly. In the Qur’an, Sura 47:24, the question is asked: “What, do they not meditate in the Qur’an? Or is it that there are locks upon their hearts?” Is that an unrepentant attitude? In Arabic *metanoia* is usually rendered by *tawba*, which means “repentance,” especially in the sense of turning away from the world and a change in perspective and values.⁴³ According to Sri Ramakrishna, the Bengali Hindu teacher, “A man cannot see God unless he gives his whole mind to Him.”⁴⁴ Hujwiri, a Sufi anthropologist of Afghanistan (ca. 1070), allows that there are two types of repentance: of fear and of shame. The former

is caused by the revelation of God's majesty, while the repentance of shame is caused by a vision of God's beauty.⁴⁵ And of course the best kind of repentance is that which comes not from fear or shame but because of faith, testimony, and a desire to be obedient to the commandments of God.

Secular Notions: Literature, Music, Art, Philosophy, and Psychology

While growing up, some of the earliest influences we have upon our minds and our style of thinking come from the books that are read to us by our teachers and parents, and later from the reading we do ourselves. As a librarian, I am quite aware of how much reading affects behavior. Those who would assert, for instance, that pornographic literature does not affect the reader's behavior are at the same time negating the influence, positive or negative, of *any* kind of reading material. Speaking for myself, at least, I was so sure that the books I had read before my conversion had been instrumental in my conversion that I compiled an annotated bibliography of those preconversion books, and I came up with some startling conclusions. (You may wonder how I could remember all of the things I read. Easy. One of the most important things I have done in my life is to keep a journal since I was a sophomore in high school. The books are listed there, and I still own most of them.) The most important conclusion was that reading material had as much effect upon my later conversion as any other factor. As I reread portions of those books, I was able to find key passages which I had underlined earlier, and most of these had to do with eternal matters—with the deepest sources of knowledge in my soul, those feelings and thoughts which Plato said we learned in a premortal life. As one passage after another superimposed itself on previous passages, I found myself wondering where I could find the distillation of all these

things I was not yet experiencing in my life but which I knew were true. (I did not yet know anything about a “testimony.”) This process of rethinking, of taking certain parts of my learning and replacing them with things which were “true,” is another phase of repentance – renewing and purifying the mind.

You might think at this point, that the types of literature I am talking about are the theological and doctrinal books which I was required to read for my preministerial classes. And you would be partly right. But I hasten to add that just as much came from reading fiction: Charles Dickens, especially *A Christmas Carol*; for in that perennial favorite of mine the three spirits of Christmas give Scrooge a gift that most people cannot enjoy – some help in rethinking his entire life. Repentance? Conversion? You could call it either one, but the fact is Scrooge had to do some rethinking first. Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoevski, Shakespeare, and Dante inadvertently, or perhaps on purpose, follow the advice of Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Man”: “Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; the proper study of mankind is man.” But of course the truth is that since God was also once a man, we are not incorrect in studying his life either. And that’s why we *ponder* the scriptures. How could I not be affected by Lew Wallace’s sentiment that repentance must be more than mere remorse of sins: it comprehends a change of nature befitting the heavens.⁴⁶ Or that “sin is . . . a turning of our gaze in the wrong direction?”⁴⁷

Many of us have teenagers, and I think right away you can understand why I would correlate rethinking with music. I do not at this time want to pass judgment on any kind of music, for there is bad classical music, good rock music, lousy jazz, and beautiful country and western. The key for me in judging good music of any genre is what it does to me. Does it merely excite physically? Or does it also affect me spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually?

I have found out that my personal "Top Forty" consists of music which affects all four simultaneously, like Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5, Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," or John Denver's "Sweet Surrender." While working on this paper I had my radio tuned to KBYU-FM listening to Richard Strauss's "Death and Transfiguration." I had to pause from this paper during parts of it, and especially at the end, because this piece of music, like many of my favorites, was as much a look into the eternities for me as it was for the composer. Thus, music cannot only redirect our thinking towards the goal of the Rav's "Repentant Man" but can also constantly remind us of the good, the true, and the beautiful. For me, music is therapeutic on the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental level. It is one of the ways toward man's highest goals: inner freedom, purity, perfection.

Art, on the other hand, is a bit more difficult to consider. Like music, one of art's highest purposes is to help us see more clearly: ourselves, society, the common things around us, and the uncommon things we should be enjoying but are not. While teaching the epistles of Paul one semester, I required projects of everyone in the class which reflected either their majors or interests. An art major painted an excellent portrayal of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, showing me for the first time that truly spiritual experiences can differ from one individual to the next. The painter showed that one of Paul's companions was frightened by the light, another of the voice, and a third was looking around with a puzzled look on his face, wondering what all the fuss was about. Truly good art, like good music, is never on trial: we are, and usually we do not fully understand either until we immerse ourselves in them. For example, I never really understood art through an appreciation class as I did when I took a drawing class. Only then did I begin to understand the creative mind of the artist and the work and sensitivity involved. It's not

at all surprising to me, moreover, that most artists and composers have nothing but disdain for the trivia of the world. They are looking to the stars while many of us grovel in the dust. Oh, for the praise of David: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Psalm 19:1). The very truest music and art is of God: the art of nature and the music of the spheres.

A standard joke in academia as well as in society in general is that philosophy never helped improve society: it's just there so that eggheads can have something to think about. I disagree. Many philosophers think only on important, eternal matters and can help us change our outlook, viewpoint, and perspective – if we take to heart what they are writing. They can give us deeper insight into life and a change of attitude leading to an entirely new life – beyond consensual reality to a new state of consciousness about all life. As your view of the world changes, so your source of motivation changes. In your mind your frame of reference has changed, and your reasons to act have changed. They can effect a complete change of mind consequent upon the apprehension of the true moral nature of things, providing an excellent service. For if one wants to revolutionize the thinking of the world without destroying it, how does one begin? With a reorientation of the fundamental thinking patterns of men into a spiritual, eternal frame of mind. In other words, knowing who we really are and what we are here for. Most of the world lacks this knowledge. Other popular "philosophers" are prescribing their own brands of repentance or rethinking. Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point*, John Naisbitt's *Megatrends*, and Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* are examples of this new thinking about society. Other grass-roots philosophers such as Dick Gregory identify more with the poorer classes of people, as well as with his fellow Black race, but ends up with a message strikingly similar to our Latter-day Saint "law of the harvest": "Now I realize that

you just go on planting the seeds, and be honest and ethical and regardless of what anybody thinks, there's gonna be harvest time. . . . Once you get clear spiritually, it's gonna clear up everything you're gonna do. . . . Your reasoning gets better. And then a lot of old petty things that you normally get hung up with, you don't. That's the first step. The second step is flushing out the mind."⁴⁸

Psychologists and brain scientists have been working for years in two different areas of what we would call rethinking. The first had to do with why the brain retains some messages and learning and disregards others. Here at Brigham Young University in the seventies I did some research with the Youth-Talk Foundation: The International Institute of Self-Image Research. "Riq-ology," the brainchild of the late Ralph Nance (with help from Maxwell Maltz and his "Psychocybernetics"), sought to help grade school children to rethink by eliminating self-defeating self-talk, hang-ups, and mental blocks. Its theories were used successfully with hundreds of local students to help them to unthink, rethink, and reprogram negative "tapes" in the brain so that life would be more fulfilling and positive for them. According to Bernell L. Christensen, who also worked with the institute, the conscious and subconscious mind has to deal with the whole gamut and spectrum of human error, be it moral sin or social impudence. These all have to be dealt with in the mental processes. Mistaken thoughts can include physical clumsiness; mental preoccupation; pleasure at the expense of others; prejudice to the personality or cultural background of others; indiscretions of speech and social actions; attention-getting traits, jokes and sneers for social attention and approval at the expense of the feelings of others; failure to develop little but significant habits of health; and malicious acts of revenge and hatred. Movies, filmstrips, plays, handbooks, and songs were generated from these studies, and some of the finest researchers on campus were involved with it.

Unfortunately, the program lost impetus when Ralph died from injuries suffered in an automobile accident. Nevertheless, his basic theories are correct: We can change all negative and downgrading thoughts which we have “programmed” into our brain and substitute them with more positive and uplifting ones. It is surprising to me how many Latter-day Saints have self-images which are far beneath the wholesome image we should have of ourselves as literal children of our Father in Heaven. Repentance is therefore a necessity for anyone with a low self-image, for the highest human and divine potential cannot be attained without a healthy self-image. It involves asking ourselves what we think of ourselves and then asking what the Lord thinks of us.

The second area of psychological research is that of brain research—specifically with that involving left- and right-brain styles of thinking. I am now entering deep water, and although Joseph Smith said he was wont to swim in deep water, I am not. I may have read everything that has come out on the research in these theories, but that does not make me as qualified as a trained psychologist in the area. Therefore, let me only briefly outline my theories.

Dr. Roger Sperry, a neurosurgeon, was given the 1981 Nobel Prize for his proof of the split-brain theory. His research shows that problem-solving and decision-making skills, as well as our physical, emotional, and mental abilities, and even our personalities, are strongly influenced by which side of the brain we happen to be using. Further studies in a number of books show that people range anywhere from extreme left-brained to extreme right-brained preferences and anywhere in between, including the ideal “balanced” or “orchestrated.” This brain research has yielded vast storehouses of insights and understanding which have so far aided interpersonal communication, improvements in educational testing and teaching methods,

and enhanced self-knowledge. Unfortunately, religion has so far been untouched, except for a rare article here and there. This has occurred probably because such insights may have the tendency to devolve into more religious intolerance, narrow dogmas, and strict authoritarian notions as to which preferences may be true for a given faith system.

What does all of this have to do with rethinking? Balance. Consider for a minute the predilections of the two hemispheres. A left-hemisphere-dominant person thinks in a sequential or linear manner. He loves to deal with parts (specialization), numbers, and words. He is very rational and logical. He who is on the "right" thinks in images, patterns, and wholes, preferring to look at the creative and artistic "Big Picture" of life. An orchestrated person lives freely in both spheres, and that is where the rethinking part of repentance comes in.

I was raised in a church which preferred rational theology over revelation, prophecy, and visions, which belong on the right. My initial testimony at conversion was one of reason: The Latter-day Saint Church makes sense. But my reasonable testimony did not keep me from tearing up my baptismal certificate six months later and nearly apostatizing. It was wise home teachers who knew what kind of testimony I needed yet, and that was a spiritual one based on knowing that Joseph Smith experienced what he said he experienced and that the Book of Mormon was truly the word of God. What aided me in rethinking along those lines? Prayer and fasting—exactly what my home teachers prescribed. Apostate Christianity evolved through rational expediency—Aristotelian philosophy and pagan traditions—while the Latter-day Saint Church was founded on prayer, revelation, and visions. Today the Church is run rationally but would mean nothing without the continuing guidance the Lord gives us through a prophet. Having come from the outside, it is no surprise

to me that Christians have a difficult time accepting some of our teachings – they were raised on reasonable theology, not the mind and will of the Lord through revelation.

Why do fundamentalist Christian groups tend to lean to the right?

Would it be correct to say that while Lehi was right-brained dominant, Nephi was balanced and Laman was left dominant, not understanding of spiritual things because they were not reasonable?

Would Jesus Christ, Paul, and Joseph Smith be considered “balanced?”

How do these theories enlighten us on the preference of the ancient Jews to seek for a sign while the Greeks considered early Christianity “foolishness?”

How does this research explain the differences between Eastern and Western philosophies?

Is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a balanced faith system which relies on intuition/inspiration and logic/reason?

How does this research help to explain the secularism and humanism so rampant in all religions?

You may be surprised to know that there are tests you can take to discover where your dominance lies, that there are exercises in books which help you to think more on one side or the other, and which if tailored to the Latter-day Saints could indeed help the left-brained Saint better attain a testimony of right-brained spiritual matters. The possibilities are endless and may release a new age of thinking about thinking: about ourselves, about our Heavenly Father, about the nonmember family we are about to teach, and about our loved ones all around. My colleague and friend Curtis Wright would call this a “restructuring of the Thinkatorium.” It can also show how the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual experiences of our lives will predispose us to certain attitudes and perspectives. This may, for instance, explain why a balanced team effort

of Dan (left) and Ron (right) Lafferty would go off the deep end.

Roadblocks and Freeways to Repentance

Little discussion is needed here. Lists of roadblocks and freeways should suffice, for they will sound very familiar to you. Repentance, the rethinking kind, is blocked by many things, but here are the most serious:

1. Excuses.
2. Rationalizations.
3. Justifications (repentance, on the other hand, should never lead to self-justification).
4. Defense mechanisms.
5. Lack of humility.
6. Procrastination.
7. Incorrect doctrines.
 - a. Cheap grace (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).
 - b. Ecclesiocentrism instead of Christocentrism.
 - c. Outward appearances meaning more than the soul. (Some of my fellow theology students were more concerned about bishop's rings, colorful stoles, and clean altar vestments than about saving souls.)
 - d. Ambivalence or wanting the best of both worlds at the same time. (In Umberto Eco's excellent novel, *The Name of the Rose*, the narrator insists that there is a midpoint between good and evil, at which place a man could go in either direction. The difference between penitence and repentance is that in the first, man is content to stay in the midpoint, having constantly to decide which way to go. The repentant man, however, makes the decision to stay in the good and is overcome by temptation only rarely or never at all.)
8. The complexity of life (simplicity definitely helps us to keep our perspective better).

9. Centering our lives around “having,” “knowing,” and “doing” – rather than “being” and “becoming” – who we really are.

Unfortunately, the entire process of repentance can be simulated and phony. Only the Lord and I, the repenter, know the difference, for even though repentance should change the relationship I have with myself, others, and my Father in Heaven, it is still conceivable that I could deceive myself. I have found from experience that without an inward and prayerful change of attitude there really was no conquest over the flesh, and thus no true conversion of internal life, let alone perfection.

What helps us in rethinking?

1. Fasting, which includes not only the physical self, but the emotional, mental, and spiritual self as well.
2. Prayer and meditation.
3. Learning by study and also by faith, especially the scriptures. (Drink deeply, do not simply absorb it.)
4. Forgiveness and patience at all times. (Learn to turn to each person as the most sacred person on earth.)
5. Love and understanding.
6. Humility and teachableness.
7. Crying repentance, but overlooking the sins of others while concentrating on yourself.
8. Reading good books, listening to good music, enjoying nature.
9. Keeping a journal, for by so doing, you keep track of your spiritual progress.
10. Genealogy and temple work (there is much that could be said on how these help rethinking, and I will leave that to your imagination).
11. Asking what Christ would do?
12. Living as if to expect his coming at any moment.

Conclusion

I once asked my Gospel Principles and Practices students on the final exam what one principle of the gospel

they found the most difficult to live. Most felt that because of the call of the world repentance was that principle, echoing the good rabbi's earlier comment. I submit, however, that it is not only the tempting call of the world that makes repentance difficult, it is that we do not fully know ourselves. I would challenge us to two things: First, we should not disparage ourselves or underestimate our capabilities. We are much greater than we know. Oh, how different from the way I was raised: that man is totally depraved, not merely corruptible, and that I was therefore a "worm" who could do no good. It's no wonder I've had to work on my own self-image ever since I joined the Church. Secondly, we need to learn what God thinks of us – through meditation, revelation, the scriptures, patriarchal blessings – and how we touch others around us.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to quote the best little dialogue on repentance I have yet seen. It is packed with meaning and insight, and I share it with the hope that it will set something in motion within you like it did within me. It happens to be part of Hugh Nibley's "Intellectual Autobiography," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*:

We: Dear Father, whenever the end is scheduled to be, can't you give us an extension of time?

He: Willingly. But tell me first, what will you do with it?

We: Well . . . ah . . . we will go on doing pretty much what we have been doing; after all, isn't that why we are asking for an extension?

He: And isn't that exactly why I want to end it soon – because you show no inclination to change? Why should I reverse the order of nature so that you can go on doing the very things I want to put an end to?

We: But is what we are doing so terribly wrong? The economy seems sound enough. Why shouldn't we go on doing the things which have made this country great?

He: Haven't I made it clear enough to you what kind of greatness I expect of my offspring? Forget the statistics; you are capable of better things – your stirring commercials do not impress me in the least.

We: But why should we repent when all we are doing is what each considers to be for the best good of himself and the nation?

He: Because it is not you but I who decide what that shall be, and I have told you a hundred times what is best for you individually and collectively – and that is repentance, no matter who you are.

We: We find your inference objectionable, Sir – quite objectionable.

He: I know.⁴⁹

In conclusion, I know what it is like to wonder where I came from, what I was doing here, and where I was going. I know what it is like to have been taught the truth of the atonement of Jesus Christ without having a true conception of his Father. I now know the difference between avoiding hell and working for heaven, with the help of the Lord. But most of all, I now know that I am here to learn all I can from the Lord and from his servants, the prophets, who communicate with him through the wonderful gift of revelation. And this is what makes this Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the most effective instrument on the face of the earth for teaching our Father's children the truths of heaven and earth. It is my prayer for all of us that we may spend our days in renewing our knowledge of the eternities and of our familial friendship with Heavenly Father and his son Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. Alan Richardson, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 33.
2. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 936.

3. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 330.

4. J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 837.

5. *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1980), 3:1327-28.

6. Douglas, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 837.

7. *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3:1327-28.

8. An example of this necessity is found in Alma 26:21-22: "And now behold, my brethren, what natural man is there that knoweth these things? I say unto you, there is none that knoweth these things, save it be the penitent. Yea, he that repenteth and exerciseth faith, and bringeth forth good works, and prayeth continually without ceasing – unto such it is given to know the mysteries of God [Ammon certainly was not intimating that normal repentance after a serious transgression will lead someone to the mysteries! On the contrary, only he who has begun to think like God will come to know the mysteries of God]; yea, unto such it shall be given to reveal things which never have been revealed; yea, and it shall be given unto such to bring thousands of souls to repentance, even as it has been given unto us to bring these our brethren to repentance."

9. *TPJS*, 137.

10. Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 85-86.

11. *Ibid.*, 81.

12. *Ibid.*, 83.

13. *Ibid.*, 81.

14. *Ibid.*, 86.

15. *Ibid.*, 97.

16. *Ibid.*, 105.

17. *Ibid.*, 90.

18. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1953), 14.

19. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 631.

20. *TPJS*, 197.

21. *Ibid.*, 148.

22. *Ibid.*, 361.

23. Letter of Parley P. Pratt to his brother, August 3, 1848, Brigham Young History, MS, Office of the Church Historian, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, 57.

24. *JD* 10:177.
25. John A. Widtsoe, ed., *The Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 156.
26. See Hugh Nibley, "The Apocalyptic Background, I: The Eschatological Dilemma," 58 (November 1955): 829-31.
27. Hugh Nibley, "Historicity of the Bible," in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, vol. 1, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1986), 1-2.
28. Hugh Nibley, "Zeal without Knowledge," in Truman G. Madsen, ed., *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 264; in *CWHN* 9:66-67.
29. Hugh Nibley, "Beyond Politics," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, 22.
30. Hugh Nibley, "The Prophetic Book of Mormon," in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 462.
31. Hugh Nibley, "Great Are the Words of Isaiah," in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 217.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Tony Castle, ed., *The New Book of Christian Quotations* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 205.
34. Werblowsky, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, 330.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Pinchas Hacoheh Peli, "Repentant Man—A High Level in Rabbi Soloveitchik's Typology of Man," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 18 (Summer 1980): 135.
38. *Ibid.*, 145.
39. *Ibid.*, 149-50.
40. *Ibid.*, 150.
41. *Ibid.*, 156.
42. David Brubeck, mimeographed sheet in possession of the author, March 1969.
43. Whitall N. Perry, ed., *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 479.
44. *Ibid.*, 491.
45. *Ibid.*, 492.
46. Castle, *The New Book of Christian Quotations*, 205.
47. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, tr. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 124.
48. Dick Gregory, "Up from Soul Food," *East-West Journal* (July 1981): 35.
49. Hugh Nibley, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, 279-80.