

The Christian Life

by John Christian Wenger

The sermon emphasizes the importance of repentance and faith in the Christian life, and the need for continuous spiritual growth and transformation.

Scripture: Isaiah 2:4, Matthew 4:17, Luke 9:23, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 2:8, Hebrews 11:6

Topics: "Repentance", "Salvation By Faith"

Description

John Christian Wenger preaches on the Anabaptists' emphasis on repentance, faith, and continuous spiritual renewal as essential for building Christ's Kingdom. He highlights the contrast between personal conversion to Christ and the territorial church system prevalent in the 16th century, emphasizing the need for true repentance and discipleship. The Anabaptists strongly believed in salvation by faith alone, rejecting legalism and emphasizing the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation. Their doctrine of repentance focused on ongoing penitence and contrition, leading to a transformed life in Christ.

Transcript

Repentance Is First

Man's great need is for repentance and faith so that Christ may transform him into his own image and use him in the building of his spiritual Kingdom. This was the conviction of the Anabaptists. This hope of seeing men spiritually renewed drove them all over Europe in an effort to spread the gospel. Indeed, a conference of leaders was held at Augsburg in Swabia on August 20, 1527, and missionaries were sent out two by two to many areas of German-speaking Europe. So many of these evangelists were captured and martyred that the conference got the significant name, the Martyrs' Synod. Remarkable conversions nevertheless occurred. One curious explanation of the rapid spread of Anabaptism in the early years of the movement was that the missionaries carried little flasks with them, and whoever drank from their flasks was bewitched and charmed into uniting with the church of the "hedgpreachers"! The concept of the necessity of a personal conversion to Christ stood in sharp contrast with the territorial church system which prevailed in those days, and even greater was the contrast with all sacramentarian theories. For the Anabaptists only one road led to Christ and heaven: that was the path of suffering discipleship which began with penitence and contrition.

"My dearly beloved reader," wrote Menno in his book, *The New Birth*, about 1537,

take heed to the Word of the Lord and learn to know the true God. I warn you faithfully. . . He will not save you nor forgive your sins nor show you his mercy and grace except according to His Word; namely, if you repent and if you believe, if you are born of Him, if you do what He has commanded and walk as He walks. For if He could save an unrighteous carnal man without regeneration, faith, and repentance, then He did not teach us the truth. . . . Therefore, I tell you again that you cannot be reconciled by means of all the masses, matins, vespers, ceremonies, sacraments, councils, statutes, and commandments under the whole heavens, which the popes and their colleges have made from the beginning. For they are abominations and not reconciliations . . . But if you wish to be saved, by all means and first of all your earthly, carnal, ungodly life must be reformed. For it is naught but true repentance that the Scriptures teach and enjoin upon us with admonitions, threatenings, reprovings, miracles, examples, ceremonies, and sacraments. If you do not repent there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can help you, for without true repentance we are comforted in vain.[1]

And yet it is also true that repentance is the response of a sinner to the gracious prompting of God in his soul. It is nothing which the sinner can initiate himself. He will not of himself turn to Christ. In discussing the conversion of the malefactor on the cross (The True Christian Faith, c. 1541) Menno writes:

And so . . . take heed. This poor penitent sinner will rise up against those who have comforted themselves with him in their sins, and accuse and condemn them before the face of His Majesty. For they have so often heard the sweet sound of the harp and the new song (that is, the divine Word), and have never with joyful gratitude rejoiced in it, nor ever learned or believed it with open and renewed hearts. But this man heard it but once and immediately believed.

Ah, dear children, beware, and seek Christ while He may still be found. And call on Him while He is still near, lest His anger go forth and the fire of His fierce wrath consume you. Do you think . . . , that you can receive faith, repentance, sorrow for sin, and the grace of God whenever it suits you? Oh, no! . . .[2]

But the most important facet of the Anabaptist doctrine of repentance was its continuous nature. This continuing spiritual hunger and penitence they called in German, *Bussfertigkeit*, a rather difficult term to translate with one word. It signified a spirit of penitence and contrition. The attitude designated by it stands in contrast with a self-satisfied spirit, with being content with one's spiritual condition-if not possessed even of spiritual pride! The term *Bussfertigkeit* runs strongly through the Anabaptist literature. In the great Disputation held at Bern in 1538, a spokesman for the Swiss Brethren gave this testimony:

[While yet in the state church] We obtained much instruction from the writings of Luther, Zwingli, and others concerning the mass and other papal ceremonies, that they are vain. Yet I realized a great lack, for we were not led into a Christian life, repentance and true Christianity, upon which my mind was bent. I waited and hoped a year or two, since the minister had much to say of amendment of life, giving to the poor, loving one another, and abstaining from evil. But I could not close my eyes to the fact that the doctrine which was preached and which was based on God's word was not carried out. No beginning was made toward true Christian living, for there was no unison in the teaching concerning these things. And although the mass and the images were finally abolished, there was no true repentance, no evidence of Christian love. . . . There was only a superficial change. This gave me occasion to inquire further into these things. Then God sent His messengers, Conrad Grebel and others, with whom I conferred about the fundamental teachings of the Apostles and the Christian life. I found them men who had surrendered themselves by *Bussfertigkeit* to the doctrine of Christ, and with their assistance we founded and established a congregation in which repentance and newness of life in Christ were in evidence.[3]

[Back to Contents](#)

Justified by Faith

The Anabaptists have often been accused of legalism, of being weak on the doctrine of justification by faith, of having a low view of grace. The fact is that they asserted the New Testament doctrine of salvation by faith alone in the very strongest terms. Ponder this gem from Menno's Confession of the Distressed Christians, 1552:

Think not, beloved reader, that we boast of being perfect and without sins. Not at all. As for me I confess that often my prayer is mixed with sin and my righteousness with unrighteousness; for by the grace of God I feel (if I but observe the anointing which is in me) when I compare my weak nature to Christ and His commandment, what kind of flesh I have inherited from Adam. If God should judge us according to our deserts and not according to His great goodness and mercy, then I confess with the holy David that no man could stand before His judgment. . . . Therefore it should be far from us that we should comfort ourselves with anything but the grace of God through Christ Jesus. For He it is and He alone and none other who has perfectly fulfilled the righteousness required by God. . . . For Christ's sake we are in grace; for His sake we are heard; and for His sake our faults and failings which are committed against our will are remitted. For it is He who stands between His Father and His imperfect children with His perfect righteousness, and with His innocent blood and death, and intercedes for all those who believe on Him. . .

Notice, my dear reader, that we do not believe nor teach that we are to be saved by our merits and works. . . .[4]

That which appropriates these unmerited blessings from Christ is faith. And faith is no mere opinion of the mind, divorced from character and life. On the contrary, faith is that by which a man lives. What he believes he lives. The Anabaptists had an existential kind of Christianity much like that of the great reformer of the eighteenth century, John Wesley, or like the strangely modern Dane, Søren Kierkegaard (died 1855). In *The True Christian Faith*, Menno explained:

All the truly regenerated and spiritually minded conform in all things to the Word and ordinances of the Lord. Not because they think to merit the atonement of their sins and eternal life. By no means. In this matter they depend upon nothing except the true promise of the merciful Father, given in grace to all believers through the blood and merits of Christ . . . a truly believing Christian is thus minded that he will not do otherwise than that which the Word of the Lord teaches and enjoins. . . .5

I have read recently that they write that there is but one good work which saves us, namely faith; and but one sin that will damn us, namely unbelief. I will let this pass with out finding fault, for where there is a genuine, true faith there also are all manner of genuine, good fruits. On the other hand, where there is unbelief there also are all manner of evil fruits. Therefore salvation is properly ascribed to faith, and damnation to unbelief.[6]

The true evangelical faith which makes the heart upright and pious before God moves, changes, urges, and constrains a man so that he will always hate the evil and gladly do the things which are right and good. . . . It is unnecessary to admonish or warn those who sincerely believe that the wages of sin is death, that drunkards, liars, fornicators, adulterers, the avaricious, idolators, those who despise God, hate, shed blood, swear falsely, steal, etc., shall not inherit the kingdom of Christ. . . . For their faith which is

sealed unto them by the Spirit through the Word teaches them that the end thereof is death.[7]

Menno placed on the title page of each of his books, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

[Back to Contents](#)

Anabaptist Emphases

In 1572 Jan Wouters van Kuijck was living in Dordrecht in Holland, moving about frequently so as not to be apprehended by the authorities. Somehow the bailiff learned where he was residing and came with his beadles to capture Jan. He met them at the door and when they asked, "Does Jan van Kuijck live here?", he replied in a loud voice that he was the man. (He spoke loudly to warn his wife to flee, which she promptly did successfully.) He was tortured and scourged in the prison and finally burned at the stake on March 28, 1572. He wrote a dozen letters which have been preserved. To his only daughter he wrote a description of those of true faith which is an excellent summary of the emphases of the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century on the necessity of each believer taking up his cross:

[When you come to years of understanding] Diligently search . . . the holy Scriptures and you will find that we must follow Christ Jesus and obey Him unto the end; and you will also truly find the little flock who follow Christ. And this is the sign: they lead a penitent life; they avoid that which is evil, and delight in doing what is good; they hunger and thirst after righteousness; they are not conformed to the world; they crucify their sinful flesh more and more every day, to die unto sin which wars in their members; they strive and seek after that which is honest and of good report; they do evil to no one; they pray for their enemies; they do not resist their enemies; their words are yea that is yea, and nay that is nay; their word is their seal; they are sorry that they do not constantly live more holily, for which reason they often sigh and weep. Let not this however be the only sign by which you may know who follows Christ; but [they are] also these, namely who bear the cross of Christ, for He says: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."[8]

Jan also submitted a letter to the authorities, the bailiff, the burgomasters, the aldermen, and the council of the city of Dordrecht. The following brief extracts illustrate the thinking of a typical Anabaptist:

I, Jan Wouters, your prisoner, not for any crime but for the sake of my faith, which is nevertheless right before my God, wish you, you ministers of God, that He would grant you all a prosperous, peaceful, healthy, long life; and understanding [of how] rightly to use your office in punishing the evil [that is, evildoers] and protecting the good. . . .

I confess that I was a zealous papist in my youth, which I heartily regret . . . Afterwards God opened my blind eyes . . . And He revealed to and gave me, poor sinful man, the faith of the truth by which we are saved. . . . This faith and the inward baptism constrained me to the obedience of His Word to fulfill His righteousness. Hence I confess that I was baptized upon my faith . . . according to the command of Christ, renouncing the devil, the world, the pope, and his adherents.

I confess Christ Jesus alone as the way, the truth, and the life. And there is none other name given to men whereby we can be saved, except through Christ alone. I further confess that it is certain that the customs of the priests and of all the "shaved" are the broad way to damnation. . . .

I also confess that I have attended the assembly of the believers so often that I cannot count it. . . . I confess that I am a sinful man and need every day to confess my sins before my God and daily to die unto sin more and more . . .

I also confess that I did not marry my wife secretly that no one should see it, but before the church of God; for marriage is honorable . . . O my God, count it not sin to him who took me away, for it is a bitter cup to me to part from wife and child because we love one another so much. . . .

Finally, deal mercifully with me, innocent one, and think that I too am a man, for hereafter he "shall have judgment without mercy that hath shewed no mercy." . . . I confess one Lord, one faith, one God, one Father of all, who is above all, and in all believers. I believe only what the holy Scriptures say, and not what men say. Farewell. Written in my bonds.[9]

Before Jan was taken to the place of execution, his mouth was gagged so that he could not speak to the people who would assemble for his burning. Somehow he managed to get rid of the gag. A fellow believer pressed close to him on the way to the stake and said, "Strive valiantly, dear Brother, you will suffer no more hereafter." Jan pulled open his shirt and showed him his body bloody from the scourging as he replied, "I already bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."

Just before the fire was kindled he looked over the crowd and cried, "Adieu and farewell, my dear brethren and sisters, I will herewith commend you to the Lord, to the Lord who shed His blood for us." Then as the fire was about to initiate his slow death he prayed, "O God, who art my strength, I commend my spirit into Thy hands." Thus perished another of several thousand free-church martyrs.

[Back to Contents](#)

Faithful Discipleship to the Prince of Peace

The Brethren thought of the essence of the Christian life as discipleship to Christ. This meant walking as he walked, not in human strength but by the power of the Holy Spirit. Although human weakness and infirmity stay with every believer, no matter how mature in faith and experience, yet the Brethren believed that Christ's redemption actually did break the power of sin in the believer. Temptations to hatred, lust, avarice, vengeance, and the like still come to Christians, but in Christ they are able to come off victorious.

The most striking Anabaptist deviation from the traditional Christian ethic was the espousal of the doctrine of absolute love and nonresistance. This was no philosophical pacifism, but it was an effort to walk in love as Christ walked. The Anabaptists sought such an infilling of divine love that they could love even their persecutors. Many martyrs gave evidence of just such love as they forgave their tormentors, the judges who sentenced them, and the executioners who destroyed them. They were willing to die for Jesus, they were prepared to suffer in any way God permitted, but they did not feel free to hate or harm anyone. It was this doctrine of nonresistance which they based squarely on the explicit teaching of Christ and his Apostles which made them refuse both the magistracy and the military. They were ready to die but not to kill.

In his Brief and Clear Confession, 1544, Menno wrote:

Behold, beloved friends and brethren, by these and other Scriptures we are taught and warned not to take up the literal sword nor ever to give our consent thereto (except the ordinary sword of the magistrate when it must be used) but to take up the two-edged, powerful, sharp sword of the Spirit which goes forth from

the mouth of God, namely the Word of God.[10]

And in his Reply to False Accusations of 1552 Menno added:

All Christians are commanded to love their enemies, to do good unto those who abuse and persecute them, to give the mantle when the cloak is taken, the other cheek when one is struck. . . .

O beloved reader, our weapons are not swords and spears, but patience, silence, and hope, and the Word of God. . . .

True Christians do not know vengeance, no matter how they are mistreated. . . . They do not cry, Vengeance, vengeance, as does the world; but with Christ they supplicate and pray, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." [11]

In the year 1569, a pious brother named Dirk Willems of Asperen in Holland learned that officers were about to arrest him in his home. He fled out the back door with the officers in pursuit. Coming to a frozen dyke he ventured to flee across on the ice, which he managed to do. But the officer who attempted to follow him broke through and was about to perish in the icy water. Thereupon Dirk, in true compassion, turned back and assisted the officer to safety. Dirk's only reward was to be burned at the stake as an Anabaptist heretic. The Catholic judges passed sentence on him May 16, 1569. On the day of his burning at the stake such a strong wind blew that he suffered a very slow death. He was heard to cry out over seventy times, "O my Lord; O my God." Finally, the bailiff, who was on horseback, wheeled his horse around and shouted, "Dispatch the man with a quick death." The account does not report in what manner his misery was terminated.

A century and a half ago there lived in Philadelphia a prominent leader in Colonial America named Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745-1813). He was a physician, a member of the Continental Congress, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He seems to have given some thought to the matter of war and bloodshed. He ventured this optimistic comment on such groups as the Mennonites and the German Baptists (now known as the Church of the Brethren): "Perhaps those German sects of Christians who refuse to bear arms for the shedding of human blood may be preserved by divine Providence as the center of a circle which shall gradually embrace all nations of the earth in a perpetual treaty of friendship and peace." His prophecy certainly shows little sign of ever being fulfilled. And yet should not this hope be the prayer of all Christendom? Ought not men learn to dwell together in peace and harmony, with young people free to establish Christian homes, and with the whole church unhindered in its great commission to make disciples of all the nations? Ought we not all cry to the Father that through Jesus Christ the day might soon come when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares . . . neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4).

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-christian-wenger/the-christian-life/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net