

Begin a New Life

Four Universal Steps of Life Change and Spiritual Transformation

A Sermon by the Rev. Mark D. Pendleton

Repent, and turn away from your idols and from all of your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin; and dwell in the land that the Lord has given to you forever and ever.¹

...From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."²

Then Jesus said to them that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem.³

Actual repentance is examining oneself, recognizing and acknowledging one's sins, praying to the Lord, and beginning a new life.⁴

This is the way, and the only way, from hell to heaven.⁵

Imagine that today is January 3rd of *next* year. You've just enjoyed the start of a new year; and if you're like many people in the United States, or in our world today, you'll have begun the year with a new sense of resolve to do or "be" something different.

Some people like making New Year's resolutions; others don't care for it so much. If you're a person who *likes* making them, and today actually *was* January 3rd of next year, what resolution would you have made for yourself for the coming year, and how would you expect it to go? If you're *not* the kind of person who makes New Year's resolutions, can you think back to the last time that you decided to make a shift, or a change, or a new

¹ Ezekial 18:30, 14:6, and Jeremiah 25:5, combined, emphasis added

² Matthew 4:17

³ Mark 6:7,12-13; Luke 24:46-47

⁴ *True Christianity* 528

⁵ *True Christianity* 567:6

beginning in your life? What was the change that you were determined to make at that time, and how has it gone so far?

You see, whether or not you like making New Year's resolutions isn't a very important issue. After all, what is a New Year's resolution other than a simple desire to make a new beginning, and a determined effort to do so? And most, if not all of us are interested in making new beginnings. The ability and willingness to make new beginnings *is* an important issue in every human life.

How do we know that making new beginnings is an important issue for everyone? Well, it's partly based in experience. But more to the point, it's because the Lord has said so in His Word:

- Making new beginnings was the main message of Jehovah through the prophets to the people of Israel, prior to the Lord's coming on earth.
- It was the main message that John the Baptist preached before Jesus manifested Himself to the public.
- It was one of the main messages that the Lord Himself preached while He was alive on earth.
- It was the main message that the Lord told His disciples, *and* the seventy who He sent forth, to preach.
- And in the New Church, the willingness to make new beginnings is said to be the first and foremost element in the establishment of the Lord's kingdom within a human being.

That's how important making new beginnings is.

The word that was used many years ago to refer to life-change or new beginnings was the word "repent," which simply means to "turn" or to "change." In a more defined sense, the word "repent" refers to a holistic change in behavior, thought, intention and will. The prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah wrote,

*Repent, and turn away from your idols and from all of your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin; and dwell in the land that the Lord has given to you forever and ever.*⁶

⁶ Ezekial. 18:30, 14:6, and Jeremiah 25:5, combined, emphasis added

In the New Testament it says,

John came baptizing in the wilderness of Judea and preaching a baptism of *repentance* for the remission of sins, saying, "*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"⁷

Later it says that at a certain point in Jesus' own life, He--

began to preach and to say [the same words:] "*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."⁸

Still later it says that the Lord--

called the twelve [disciples] to Himself and began to send them out two by two and gave them power over unclean spirits. So they went out and preached that people should *repent*. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them. [Then Jesus] said to them...that *repentance* and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.⁹

"And still further, the Lord commanded...the seventy whom He sent forth, to preach *repentance*."¹⁰

And finally, in the doctrine of our church it is written,

[*Repentance* is "the first" element of the church within a person].¹¹

So, if repentance or making new beginnings is so important to human life, how does a person get started on making a new beginning; and what are the steps that a person can take to make a change for the better and then stick with his or her resolve?

⁷ Mark 1:4 and Matthew 3:1-2 combined, emphasis added

⁸ Matthew. 4:17, emphasis added

⁹ Mark 6:7,12-13; Luke 24:46-47, emphasis added

¹⁰ *True Christianity* 510, emphasis added

¹¹ *True Christianity* 510 Lit., "...The first...of the church is repentance," emphasis added

A new beginning is often prompted when we notice some sort of pain or discomfort happening in our lives, and we don't want to feel that pain any more; or when our conscience signals to us and begins to steer us in a new direction; or when we read or hear something from the Lord's Word--something which gives us pause, and which suggests a new course of action for our lives.

For example, a person who has made a habit of putting some kind of substance into his body begins to experience the symptoms of a disease process, and he decides to make a change. Or, a person who communicates with others in a socially unacceptable way feels strain and discomfort in relationships, and she decides to do things differently. Or, a person who is passively aggressive against people who defy him feels a pang of conscience for what is happening. He's aware perhaps, not only of his actions, but also of some of the thoughts and intentions of his heart. And so he charts a new course for the better. Or, a married woman learns something from the Word about married love--something which she didn't know before--and she realizes that it could help her in her relationship with her husband. So she starts to incorporate what she has learned into her marriage.

And what are the steps of human change? The Lord has not left us comfortless on that question. He has answered clearly and simply. In the entire universe there are just four steps that are necessary for making, sustaining, and *being* sustained in any change or any new beginning that we desire to make. In the New Church we're taught that actual change involves the following four steps:¹²

- Examining yourself
- Recognizing and acknowledging your sins
- Praying to the Lord
- Beginning a new life

In other words:

- Take a look at yourself.
- See and acknowledge that you have a problem.

¹² *True Christianity* 528

- Ask the Lord for strength to overcome that problem (and He gives it to you).
- Then overcome it, and do better.

...And if the problem comes back...start over again.

It's just that simple. And one of the striking beauties of this approach is that it squares so well with common sense, with human experience, with reason, and with the truth of faith. In order for *any human being* to make a change in her life for the better, she *must* be willing to take a look at herself to see that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. In order to make a change, he *must* be willing to see that problem for what it is, and acknowledge, to himself and to the Lord, that he *has* that problem. And since the Lord is the only source of help and power for true and lasting change, she must be willing to talk with the Lord and implore Him for His help and power to resist any form of evil or sin that may lie at the heart of her problem. And finally, in order for change to actually occur, he must overcome his problem and do something different and better.

If you remove any one of these steps from the process, change can't happen. And if you add anything to them, what you're doing is simply expanding on what is stated or implied in one or more of the essential steps that the Lord has given us. Even the doctrine of the New Church expands on these four basic steps, in order to refine and clarify them, and to show how they can be most effectively applied to life.¹³

This summary of the four essential ingredients to human change arises out of the Scriptures. For example:

Related to step no. 1 (examining yourself) Jeremiah writes,

I listened and heard, but they do not speak aright. No one repented of his wickedness saying, "What have I done?"¹⁴

And in the time of ancient Israel there was a law which said that--

¹³ *True Christianity* 509-570, especially 567:5

¹⁴ Jeremiah 8:6

if there is found among you,..a man or woman who has been wicked in the sight of the Lord your God, in transgressing His covenant, who has gone and served other gods and worshiped them,..which I have not commanded, and it is told you, and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently [to see] if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination has been committed in Israel.....¹⁵

(This law was in place to govern the Israelites nation as a whole, but in a spiritual sense it's also a law for individual self examination.)

Related to step nos. 2 and 3 (recognizing and acknowledging our sins, and praying to the Lord) the Scriptures speak of the children of Israel--

repenting and [making] supplication to [the Lord], saying, "We have sinned and done wrong, we have committed wickedness."¹⁶

And related to step no. 4 (beginning a new life) the Lord commanded in Matthew,

Therefore bear *fruits* worthy of repentance.¹⁷

And in the book of Revelation it is written,

Remember therefore, from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works....¹⁸

Four positive steps to human change. Four stepping-stones to any new and lasting beginning, openly taught and clearly summarized in the Lord's own words. It's just that simple.

One of the interesting things that's said of this kind of repentance in the doctrine of the New Church is that "this is the way, and the only way, from hell to heaven."¹⁹

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 17:2-4

¹⁶ 1 Kings 8:47

¹⁷ Matthew. 3:8, emphasis added

¹⁸ Revelation 2:5

¹⁹ *True Christianity* 567:6

That's a fairly striking and bold assertion to make. Think about it: we live in an age and worldwide climate in which a wide array of pathways for spiritual growth and regeneration have been developed by people in the east and west, many of which have proven helpful and effective in people's lives. And then along comes an 18th century theologian, Emanuel Swedenborg, making a claim that the four steps of change given in the doctrine for the New Church (including their several qualifiers²⁰) are "the way, and the only way, from [the experience of hell in our lives to an experience of heaven]." "How arrogant of him!" we might think, "*and* of the New Church!"

And yet, in making the claim that he made, Swedenborg was not putting down or invalidating anyone else's personal approach to the Lord. Instead, what he was doing was to *universalize* the steps of human change that are recorded in Scriptures, and to order them in the most efficient and effective sequence possible. What he seems to have been saying, in essence, was, "Here are the four essential ingredients, some or all of which are (or will be) common to *all* successful pathways of spiritual growth and change." What he was doing, rather than *invalidating* all other approaches to spiritual transformation, was to *universally validate* them. He was establishing a gold standard by which every living, personal approach to the Lord could be measured for success--now and forever. We might dare say that based on what Swedenborg wrote, any pathway of spiritual growth that *has* ever or *will* ever be developed, will be successful for human beings depending on the degree and extent to which they partake of these four steps of change, in their order, that are recorded in the work which Swedenborg

²⁰ True Christianity 567:5-6 The four basic steps of change, along with several important qualifiers, are summarized in the following passage (note: it is here that we find the assertion, "this is the way, and the only way, from hell to heaven):

Actual repentance is to examine oneself, to recognize and acknowledge one's sins, to **hold oneself guilty**, to **confess sins before the Lord**, to pray **for help and power to resist them**, and thus **refrain from them and begin a new life**; and all this you must do **as if of yourselves**. Do so **once or twice a year, when you come to the holy communion**; and afterward, **whenever the sins of which you have found yourselves guilty recur, say to yourselves, "We will not do this because it is a sin against God."** This is actual repentance. With anyone who actually repents [the case is this:] his evils, such as he has recognized and acknowledged, he calls sins, and therefore begins to shun them and turn away from them; and finally to feel their delight to be undelightful. And so far as this is done he sees and loves good, and at length feels the delight of good, which is the delight of the angels of heaven. In a word, so far as anyone puts the devil behind him, he is accepted by the Lord, and is taught, led, withheld from evil, and kept in good by Him; and **this is the way, and the only way, from hell to heaven** (emphasis added).

titled, *True Christianity, Containing the **Universal** Theology of...the New Church.*²¹

It is my intention, therefore, to offer a series of sermons in the coming year titled, *Begin a New Life: Four Universal Steps of Life Change and Spiritual Transformation*; and as an introduction to that series I would leave you with the following (interrelated) questions:

As a church, do you think that we have fully realized the sheer power and effectiveness that this approach to life-change holds out to those who are interested in it, and who wish to engage in it?

Do you think that we appreciate the depth of peace and contentment that this approach invites into human hearts?

Do you believe that we have fully experienced the level of intimate contact with the Lord of the universe, and the *unique* form of reliance upon Him, which this repentance establishes within a person?

Do you think that we fully realize the simultaneous sense of *personal empowerment* that this approach affords to all who are willing to embrace it?

I believe that as a church organization, we have only just begun to realize these things. However, I believe that the surging interest in personal, spiritual growth that we've seen in the last two decades--both within our church and within our culture--puts us in a unique position to take a new look at the Lord's own pathway to life change and spiritual transformation, and to discover these things nestled within it.

Without going into a whole lot of explanation or detailed evidence, I would suggest that this simple approach to the Lord will one day fill the earth,²² and that it will become the most positive, powerful, effective and efficient force for human change, for facing and dealing with our own personal problems, and for making new beginnings, that the world has ever known.

²¹ Emphasis added

²² Daniel 2:35

Why will this be so? Basically, because the whole approach centers on the Lord Jesus Christ--the one God of heaven and earth--in His Second Coming.²³

Maybe this approach has already begun to spread throughout our world, as evidenced by the different pathways to life change and spiritual transformation, and by the different approaches to God that are being developed, which hinge upon one or more of these *universal* principles of change. At the same time, however, imagine these four principles, clearly seen and understood--in all of their detail--and practiced in this distilled form and order, by millions of individuals within households, communities, businesses and other organizations, nations and cultures around the globe. It's a delight to wonder at the momentous impact that this approach to human change can and will have for good in our world.

...From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."²⁴

Then Jesus said to them that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem.²⁵

Actual repentance is examining oneself, recognizing and acknowledging one's sins, praying to the Lord, and beginning a new life.²⁶

"This is the way, and the only way, from hell to heaven"--for all people, of all nations and all cultures, and for all time.²⁷

Amen.

²³ Of note is a statement by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss, Bishop emeritus of the General Church of the New Jerusalem, which appeared in the spring 2004 issue of the *Bishop's Newsletter*, just before his retirement: "If repentance comes to be seen as a positive path toward contentment and peace, then people will stop looking for alternatives, they will confront their problems, and find that the Lord gives them strength to overcome them."

²⁴ Matthew 4:17

²⁵ Mark 6:7,12-13; Luke 24:46-47

²⁶ *True Christianity* 528

²⁷ *True Christianity* 567:6