

On our behalf

By [David Henson](#)

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For Lent, I'm repenting.

And, as a progressive Christian, I'm also reclaiming repentance.

Given Lent's themes of penitence, it's actually a season well-suited for progressives. Unfortunately, it is also season often marred by the popular piety of giving up sodas and sweets and frequently misrepresented through a common misunderstanding of repentance.

For a number of American Christians, the notion of repentance often brings to mind fire-and-brimstone preachers at revivals, thundering about the hellish fate of the unsaved, and the subsequent teary-eyed altar calls that have the fearful — not the faithful — rushing to the front.

There is a long tradition of this in America, dating back to the Great Awakenings. While it might be historic in some respects, it doesn't really have much to do with repentance.

Often, though, we think of repentance in those terms, understanding it as simply saying, "I'm sorry," to God and those around us. That is part of confession and forgiveness, of course, but one can be sorry without ever engaging in repentance. Perhaps that's why in the *Book of Common Prayer* apology and repentance, though linked, aren't seen as the same thing. Rather, we confess, "we are truly sorry *and* we humbly repent."

That's because repentance isn't a momentary instance of remorse and forgiveness, but rather a journey of transformation. It is about enlightenment, being transfigured through restoring and deepening our union with God and others. It is about seeing the world as it might be, where hate, injustice and violence are no longer. It is about seeing swords shaped into ploughshares. Repentance is about hope, not fear.

Indeed for all of its warping by many hell-obsessed Christians, repentance is something progressive and liberal Christians have been talking about for decades. We often speak the language of repentance, but call it by a different name. We call it being prophetic. Or speaking truth to power. Or bending the arc of justice. But what we are truly doing is calling for repentance, for transformation, for a generative movement forward into the Reign of God.

It would be a mistake, in my mind, to think of repentance as turning around on the path, backtracking and attempting to start over at the place where we perceive everything started to go wrong. It would be a mistake to think of repenting as returning to the way things used to be. Thinking of repentance in such conservative terms misses the point.

Because that's not repentance. Rather, that is nostalgia. And it's also a fiction.

Rather than calling us to go back to a simpler time, repentance beckons us further and deeper. It is progressive, rather than regressive. If we are lost, repentance isn't about pulling out a compass and searching for the original trailhead. Instead, repentance is waiting to be found and then discovering that we have been found all along. For God is already with us in the middle of the path we're on, no matter how thorny, steep or mired it is. Repentance helps us to see where God already is. It helps us get past that heresy of believing God would quit loving us.

Repentance restores the relationship, not by bridging the gap over sin but by removing our blinders so we may see God with us, in us, before us, calling us further into the desert, into the wilderness, into the work of bringing God's Reign to earth as it is in heaven.

Repentance is the journey, the process of seeing that God has made holy the ground — whatever ground — we find ourselves on. Seeing God where we are changes us, too. It gives us that new mind, that new way of seeing and thinking and believing about the world that is the hallmark of true repentance. Suddenly there is hope for the future — not just my future, but for our future. Suddenly there is good news, and the revelation that we are that good news in the world. In repentance, we are called to action as God's holy and creative agents in the world to stand against injustice, hatred, fear and the malevolence of prosperity-at-all-cost.

And it is not primarily an individual experience. Repentance is corporate and systemic, calling us not only to examine ourselves individually but to examine our

society, how we live and what evils we may be participating in. Certainly we do wrong as individuals. Certainly we sin as individuals. Certainly we are to restore our personal relationships with those around us. But this is but a small portion of what God calls us to see with a new mind.

This systemic, community-oriented understanding of repentance is reflected in a supplementary confession for use in the Episcopal tradition, when we repent [“of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf.”](#) My guess is we spend a great deal of time thinking about the first two, and not much thinking about the last one.

*The evil done on our behalf.* As Christians in the most powerful and one of the most violent countries on the planet, this last one should pierce us.

There is so much evil done on our behalf. Capital punishment. A racist criminal justice and penal system. War, drones and torture. Systemic poverty, the absence of worker protections or living wage laws, the constriction of unions. Oppression of the poor, immigrants, people of color. Globalized capitalism and sweatshop labor. The abuse and exploitation of the environment for financial gain and our financial ease. Racial injustice. Environmental injustice. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, King once said, and his words ring true. For, in today's world, injustice isn't just anywhere. It's everywhere.

[We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness.](#)

We are complicit.

We have left good undone.

As Americans, particularly if we are white, we confess this evil done on our behalf, but what comes next is the hard part: repentance. Changing. Walking this path we are on in the United States, but walking it transformed — seeing not the privileges of nationality with misplaced gratitude to God but the excesses, violence and gluttony of privilege with penitence before God and others. Walking further into this wilderness of overconsumption that feeds on the souls of the poor and the beauty of creation. Walking in contrition, with God in us, with us, around us. Being called to something transformational.

How do we repent of this evil done on our behalf?

We must do it together. In fact, we can only do it together. Otherwise, it would overwhelm us. So I pray that this Lent, our churches will be communities of true repentance, true transformation and true hope.

May we observe, this season, a truly holy Lent.

*Originally posted at [Henson's blog](#)*