



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 7 | Number 1

Article 4

4-1-2006

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Flake, Lawrence R. "Beyond “Recipe Repentance” and “Formula Forgiveness”." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 7, no. 1 (2006). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol7/iss1/4>

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Christ and the Rich Young Ruler
Painting by Heinrich Hofmann

Courtesy of C. Harrison Conroy Company

Beyond “Recipe Repentance” and “Formula Forgiveness”

Lawrence R. Flake

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A bishop recently related a truly disturbing incident. He said that while making his way through the hallway toward the chapel to begin sacrament meeting, a young woman from his ward stopped him and said, “Bishop, I really need to talk to you. It will just take a minute.” Thinking it would be some minor item, he stopped and listened. “Last night,” she blurted out, “I was involved in a violation of the law of chastity.” She said just enough more that he knew it was a major violation of the law. Before he could stop her and set up an appointment for a proper interview, she continued, “But it’s okay because I stayed up all night going through the steps of repentance. Confessing to you is the only one I had left on the list. So now I think I am ready to partake of the sacrament.”

This experience, while hopefully an extreme aberration, does highlight a dangerous misunderstanding that many young people, and even some adults, seem to have concerning the nature of true repentance and forgiveness: the notion that this vital process can be reduced to a simple recipe or checklist formula. Because repentance and forgiveness are the very essence of our eternal salvation, it should not be surprising that Satan tries very hard to foster all manner of false doctrine, misinformation, and incorrect attitudes regarding this essential process.

It seems the devil loves to push the repentant sinner toward either end of a broad spectrum of ideas concerning repentance and forgiveness. On one extreme, he seeks to convince some that true repentance is just too hard and that forgiveness is almost unattainable and that

even if we do receive it, all will be lost if we do not live nearly perfectly thereafter. In other words, he tries mightily to discourage us from even trying to gain forgiveness. This strategy often succeeds, and many give up because they believe it is just too difficult. Equally false is his argument on the other end of the spectrum. As illustrated by the misguided young woman in the incident above, Satan tries to convince us that repentance is easy and that forgiveness is available just by asking or by going through a few simple steps. Before we can fully understand how hard or how easy repentance and forgiveness actually are, we need to answer a basic question: What is it that brings about a remission of our sins? Although many members of the Church believe they know the answer to that question, they often know only part of the answer, and that part is usually the least important. That least-important portion of the answer is often couched in a popular teaching device called the Rs of repentance.

This method seeks to define the repentance process by using a list of words that begin with the letter *R*. Nearly every member of the Church, even the very young, has heard a number of talks and lessons employing this pedagogical device, and most can readily list at least two or three of these *R* words. Though some teachers and speakers enumerate as many as eight or ten *R*s, the basic six on most lists are as follows:

1. *Recognize* the sin.
2. Feel *remorse* for the transgression.
3. *Resolve* to change the behavior.
4. *Relate* the sin to the proper priesthood leader when it is of a serious nature.
5. Make *restitution*, as far as possible, to those who have been injured by the sin.
6. *Refrain* from the sin thereafter.

Other creative *R* words are sometimes added to the list. For instance, when I asked a class to come up with additional *R* words, one young man volunteered, “Well, if your sin is really bad, you might need to *relocate*.”

The Forgotten Rs

That this simple device for teaching repentance has been around so long and is so well known attests to its usefulness in our understanding of certain truths about repentance. But it does not teach the whole truth or even the most important part of the truth about either repentance or forgiveness. This method of teaching repentance may actually be an obstacle, doing more harm than good by leading some people to feel that the *R* checklist is a complete recipe for repentance and a full formula

for forgiveness. The truth, however, is that two extremely important R words are seldom included in lessons and talks on repentance. These two overlooked words represent essential truths that are absolutely vital in understanding the complete repentance and forgiveness process. These two R words are far more important than the other words on the list.

Redeemer is the most important of the overlooked R words. Jesus Christ is the “author of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9). To fail to recognize our complete dependence on the Savior in seeking and receiving forgiveness is to make a truly serious oversight. What a huge mistake to speak of the process of repentance and forgiveness as if it is somehow a “do-it-yourself project.” And it is not even enough that we know, understand, and appreciate the centrality of Christ in our salvation; we must express it clearly, powerfully, and often. As Nephi observed, “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, [and why do we do these things?] *that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins*” (2 Nephi 25:26; emphasis added). Only when we realize that the purpose of repentance is to make amends to God for our sins through “the sufferings and death of him who did no sin” (D&C 45:4) do we truly begin to understand repentance and appreciate the blessing of forgiveness. We then see that the R words on the list—used individually or even collectively—do not bring about a remission of sins but at best lead us to our Redeemer, who alone can grant a forgiveness of sins (see Luke 5:21).

One of the clearest expressions in scripture of the Savior’s pre-eminence in the repentance process and of our total dependence upon Him for forgiveness is found in the Doctrine and Covenants: “Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified; wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (D&C 45:3–5). Thus, the Redeemer must be at the top of any list of R words.

The second overlooked R word is particularly intriguing, for though it is less crucial than *Redeemer*, it is the most important thing we ourselves can do to obtain forgiveness of our sins. It is true that only through the Atonement of our Redeemer is a remission of sins possible; for “after all we can do,” it is ultimately “by grace that we are saved” (2 Nephi 25:23; see also D&C 20:30–31; 138:4). But even after we have applied the principles taught in all of the listed R words and even after we fully appreciate that the Redeemer ultimately brings about our

forgiveness, we still must engage in the vital process described by the second forgotten R word to draw on the power of the Atonement.

Four passages of scripture will help us identify this often-overlooked yet absolutely essential action to lead us to Christ, who extends forgiveness to us. In writing to his son Moroni, Mormon reveals this important element. He declares, “And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the *fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins*” (Moroni 8:25; emphasis added). So, in answer to the all-important question, “What action on our part brings a remission of sins?” Moroni clearly states that we must “[fulfill] the commandments.” This same truth is powerfully enunciated by the Prophet Joseph Smith in his report of the vision of the degrees of glory, in which he proclaimed that those who inherit the celestial kingdom are washed and cleansed from all their sins “*by keeping the commandments*” (D&C 76:52; emphasis added). And, in Doctrine and Covenants 1:32, the Lord proclaims, “Nevertheless, he that repents and *does the commandments of the Lord shall be forgiven*” (emphasis added). Ezekiel illuminates this same concept, saying, “But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and *keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live*” (Ezekiel 18:21–22; emphasis added).

So, again, what is the most important thing we personally can do to obtain forgiveness of our sins? First and foremost, we must rely on the Redeemer, and second, the scriptures declare we must *fulfill, keep, and do* the commandments of the Lord.

The second R word often left off the list, then, is *righteousness*—not just the righteousness of not repeating our sins (refraining) but the type of righteousness in which we actively seek “the Lord to establish *his righteousness*” (D&C 1:16; emphasis added; see also Matthew 6:38) and in which we become “anxiously engaged in a good cause . . . and bring to pass much *righteousness*” (D&C 58:27; emphasis added). It is the difference between having a testimony of Christ and being “valiant” in that testimony. It is through this process of being actively engaged that we receive forgiveness of our sins. Forgiveness is made possible by the Atonement but is actualized by our righteousness, which flows from true faith in the Redeemer.

We exercise righteousness and thereby, through the grace of our Redeemer, receive His forgiveness. In other words, our righteousness does not of itself bring forgiveness, but it accesses His grace, which is

sufficient for our salvation. We undergo an inner change that manifests itself outwardly in righteous living. President David O. McKay, in a succinct description of repentance, said, “To repent is to change one’s mind or one’s heart with regard to past or intended action, conduct, etc.”¹ We gain a new devotion to live righteously. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained this process: “Paul said, ‘Crucify the old man of sin and come forth in a newness of life’ (see Romans 6:6). We are born again when we die as pertaining to unrighteousness and when we live as pertaining to the things of the Spirit.”² Repentance is complete only as we live “pertaining to the things of the Spirit.” We must first gain an attitude of righteousness—a desire to live righteously—to gain forgiveness. The repentance Christ requires is a lifelong endeavor rather than an instantaneous “checklist” approach.³

In the scriptures, this lifelong process is called *sanctification*. Elder McConkie explains what happens to a righteous person who has become sanctified: “Those who go to the celestial kingdom of heaven have to be sanctified, meaning that they become clean and pure and spotless. They’ve had evil and sin and iniquity burned out of their souls as though by fire, and the figurative expression there is ‘the baptism of fire.’”⁴

Sanctification is the process by which we become continually and progressively cleansed from every form of sin. Elder McConkie writes: “It is a *process*. Nobody is sanctified in an instant, suddenly. But if we keep the commandments and press forward with steadfastness after baptism, then degree by degree and step by step we sanctify our souls until that glorious day when we’re qualified to go where God and angels are.”⁵

The scriptures have many examples of how people, by living righteously, experienced the blessings of gradual sanctification. For instance, the members of the Church in Helaman’s era found divine forgiveness and sanctification as they acted with ever-increasing faith and humility. The Book of Mormon describes their experience as a repetitious, cumulative process: “Nevertheless they did fast and pray *oft*, and did wax *stronger and stronger* in their humility, and *firmer and firmer* in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God” (Helaman 3:35; emphasis added).

The Doctrine and Covenants illuminates this connection between righteous living and sanctification: “And we know also, that sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their mights, minds, and strength” (D&C 20:31). It is through our faith in Him that we develop

the desire and the ability to be righteous. Righteousness, then, is the very process by which we obtain a remission of sins through our Redeemer.

Acts of Righteousness That Lead to a Remission of Sins

Though all acts of righteousness are part of the process by which sins are remitted, the scriptures emphasize this significant connection with some specific righteous acts. The upright people in Helaman's day fasted and prayed. Those specific acts of righteousness, along with humility and firmness in the "faith of Christ" and "yielding their hearts unto God," led to the "sanctification of their hearts" (Helaman 3:35).

King Benjamin gives us another example of righteous actions that led to forgiveness of sins: "And now, for the sake of these things which I have spoken unto you—that is, *for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins* from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God—I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants" (Mosiah 4:26; emphasis added).

Another righteous action that is necessary for the remission of our sins is forgiving others. The scriptures make clear that without this kind of righteousness, we cannot be forgiven. Only when we support others' efforts to repair their lives can we expect the Lord to forgive us: "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14–15; see also 3 Nephi 13:14–15).

This principle was stated even more strongly in our own dispensation: "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men. And ye ought to say in your hearts—let God judge between me and thee, and reward thee according to thy deeds" (D&C 64:10–11).

In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord points out to the Saints of this dispensation another specific act that brings about forgiveness. He offers us forgiveness as a reward for bearing testimony of Him: "For I will forgive you of your sins," He promises, "with this commandment—that you remain steadfast . . . in bearing testimony to all the world of those things which are communicated unto you" (D&C 84:61). The Savior states this promise even more powerfully when He says, "Nevertheless, ye are blessed, for the testimony which ye have borne is recorded in heaven for the angels to look upon; and they rejoice over you, *and your sins are forgiven you*" (D&C 62:3; emphasis added). As we bear continual testimony of the gospel—not only

through our words but more importantly through our actions—we indeed fulfill an act of righteousness for which the Lord will reward us with divine forgiveness.

Those who serve in their Church callings with all their “heart, might, mind and strength” (D&C 4:2) can also have the sweet assurance of laying “up in store . . . salvation to [their] soul[s]” (D&C 4:4). An experience I had while serving as a mission president illustrates how forgiveness comes through this kind of righteousness—specifically, through valiant service to the kingdom. I routinely interviewed each new missionary on the day of his or her arrival in the field. This was always a sweet occasion as they shared their excitement, trepidation, and testimony at the commencement of their great spiritual adventure. One day a new elder surprised me during his interview by saying that he felt he should not be in the mission field. He was very downhearted and depressed. When I asked him the reason for his feelings, I learned that he had gone through a long and very difficult repentance process before his priesthood leaders could recommend him for a mission. He assured me that he had been totally honest with them and had carefully met all the requirements of repentance. Why then did he still feel burdened with unworthiness and feel uncommitted to his call as a missionary?

Clearly, he had not felt the pervading sweet peace that should follow sincere repentance. As I prayerfully sought guidance to know how to help him, I felt prompted to review with him a passage of scripture I believed he could probably quote from memory—the powerful words of the Lord to all those, including this young missionary, who “embark in the service of God.” To them the scripture says, “See that ye serve him with all your heart, might, mind and strength” (D&C 4:2).

After we spoke that line together, I asked the troubled young elder, “What will be the result of your serving him with all of your heart, might, mind, and strength?” With hope already showing in his eyes and sounding in his voice as he saw where I was leading him, he responded emphatically, “*That [I] may stand blameless before God at the last day*” (see D&C 4:2; emphasis added). I then promised him that if he would do as the Lord directed and serve his mission in the Lord’s way, he would indeed “stand blameless before God”—not just at the last day of his life but at the last day of his mission.

He met that challenge admirably. He was a wonderful, valiant missionary. As he kept the commandments and served with all his heart, might, mind, and strength, he was indeed “washed and cleansed from all [his] sins” (D&C 76:52). Because of what the Redeemer has done, this missionary, by “fulfilling the commandments,” was able to gain

“a remission of sins” (Moroni 8:25). On the last day of his mission, he could hardly contain his joy. He observed, “I feel like I have just stepped out of the waters of baptism.” He had received a remarkable appreciation of the Atonement and its application to his life and his salvation. I believe he truly stood blameless before God.

Perhaps the remarkable relationship between understanding repentance and the two missing R words, *Redeemer* and *righteousness*, is best capsulized in the third article of faith: “We believe that *through* the Atonement of Christ [Redeemer], all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel [righteousness]” (emphasis added). It is *through* our Redeemer that we may be saved, but it is by our righteousness that He brings about that salvation and fulfills the glorious promise: “If you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7). **RE**

Notes

1. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals: Selections from the Discourses of David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), 14.

2. Bruce R. McConkie, “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified,” *Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 399.

3. Elder McConkie teaches that even being born again does not happen suddenly: “Being born again is a gradual thing, except in a few isolated instances that are so miraculous they get written up in the scriptures. As far as the generality of the members of the Church are concerned, we are born again by degrees, and we are born again to added light and added knowledge and added desires for righteousness *as we keep the commandments*” (McConkie, “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified,” 399; emphasis added).

4. McConkie, “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified,” 399.

5. McConkie, “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified,” 399; emphasis in original.