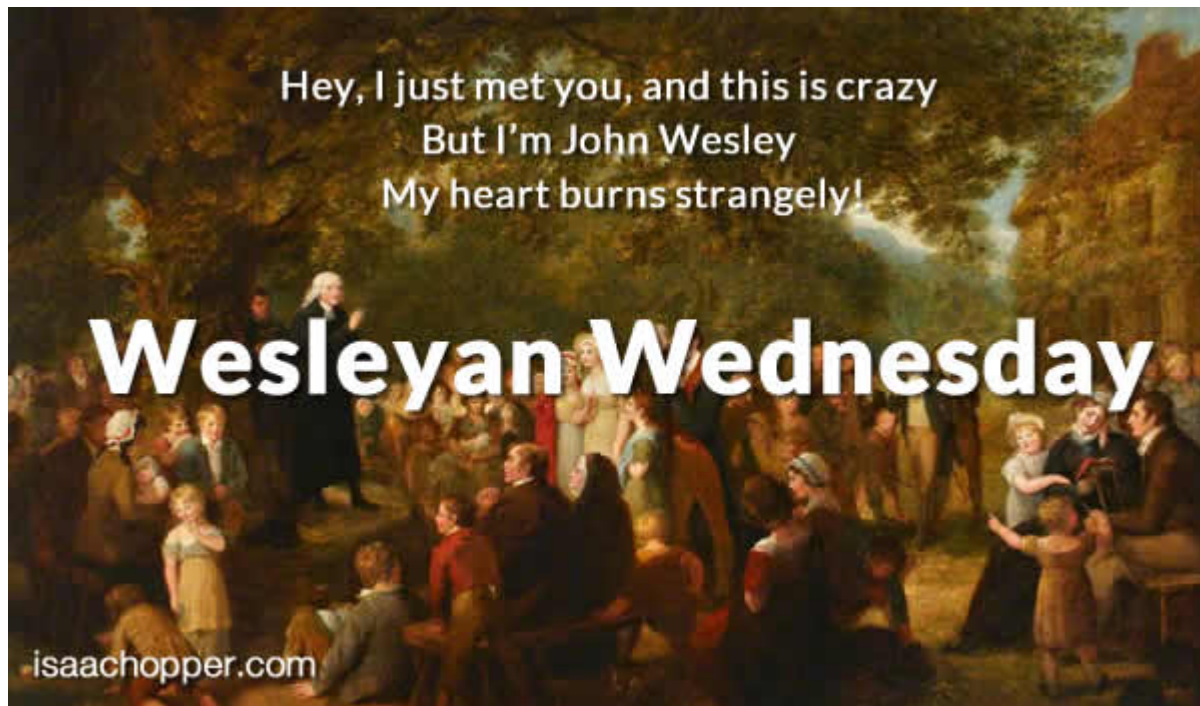


John Wesley on the Nature of Repentance



Repentance isn't a word that is often used outside of the church. It carries little to no meaning for those who aren't familiar with the 'insider' language of sermons and worship songs.

Come to think of it, I can't recall the last time I sang a worship song that spoke of repenting, nor do I remember recently hearing a sermon calling people to repentance.

I will be the first to admit that this word is, in some ways, a very ugly one. It carries with it some significant baggage. I have heard this word used to shame, ridicule, and even frighten people into adherence to certain moral behaviors. Used in this way, repentance primarily means to admit that one is wrong. 'Admit it, you're a sinner!'

More often, I have heard it used interchangeably with "saying

sorry", as though to repent means simply to say we are sorry and to God ask ask forgiveness.

In seminary, a new twist to the word 'repentance' was offered up to us. To repent, so I was told, means to make a 180 degree turn; to face the opposite way; to change direction from moving away from God to moving toward him.

I'll admit, I sort of like the last one, and I think it carries some significant weight. But I'll also admit that I have lived much of my life under the first two definitions of *admitting* that I am a sinner and *saying sorry* for it. I think this is where most people fall when they hear the dreaded word *repent*.

This word has definitely fallen out of use. This is, at least in part, because of all the baggage mentioned above. But there is more to it than this.

Repentance has fallen out of common use both inside and outside the church, because it is linked so closely with sinfulness. And let's face it, non-Christians do not like to be called sinners, and Christians do not like to be reminded of their sins.

I think the bigger problem, though, is in our common definitions of repentance as admission, saying sorry, and turning around. These definitions all miss a critical component, and one which I think speaks to our context in the 21st century as much as it did to John Wesley's context in the 18th century.

In his sermon *The Way to the Kingdom*, Wesley identifies the steps toward becoming a citizen in God's kingdom. He begins where the Biblical writers do, with repentance:

And first, repent, that is, know yourselves. This is the first repentance, previous to faith, even conviction, or self-knowledge. ((John Welsey, Works (BE), 1:225. Emphasis

mine.))

We, in the West, live in societies which value self-knowledge above all other things. This is evident in our emphasis upon self-expression, newer self-guided education systems, our advice to young people to *find themselves*, and our national past-time of protecting and promoting the self-identification of individuals against the common masses.

[Tweet “We are a self-centered society, and yet we are starving for true self-awareness.”]

John Wesley writes that repentance is true self-knowledge, in that it shows us, even before we have come to faith, just how corrupt and sinful we are.

Know that corruption of thy inmost nature, whereby thou are very far gone from original righteousness...Know that thou are corrupted in every power, in every faculty of the soul, that thou art totally corrupted in every one of these, all the foundations being out of course. ((John Wesley, Works (BE), 1:225))

For Wesley, this is the essence of self-knowledge – it recognizes the depth of the disease called [original sin](#), and understands how far the disease has spread into the life of the individual, expressing itself as both inward and outward sin.

Repentance brings the kind of self-awareness that goes farther than identifying moral failures. It shines a spotlight on the soul-corruption that manifests as moral failures, broken relationships, pride, shame, self-hatred, and, somewhat ironically, self-centeredness.

Repentance is an ugly word, because its very meaning is to recognize one’s own inability to do what is good and pleasing to God, or to turn aside his wrath, which we have duly earned.

But there is Good News on the other side of repentance. Even as we come to a true self-knowledge and see our own sin, God steps in to show us his mercy and love.

'The gospel' (that is, good tidings, good news for the guilty, helpless sinners) in the largest sense of the word means the whole revelation made to men by Jesus Christ; and sometimes the whole account of what our Lord did and suffered while he tabernacled among men. The substance of all is, 'Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;' ((Cf. 1 Tim. 1:15)) or, 'God so love the world that he gave his only begotten Son, to the end that we might not perish, but have everlasting life;' ((Cf. John 3:16)) or, 'He was bruised for our transgressions, he was wounded for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed.' ((Cf. Isa. 53:5)) ((Wesley, Works (BE), 1:229))

Once we recognize the depth of our need – when we really *know ourselves* (repent)– only then can we turn to God in faith, through Jesus Christ, and be healed.

Repentance doesn't have to be the dirty, taboo church word that nobody wants to hear. In its fullest definition, it brings hope to the hopeless and freedom for those enslaved to guilt and shame. Only when we repent, seeing clearly the depth of our sin and helplessness, can we truly turn to God in faith, knowing that he has already reached into our darkness through Jesus and the cross.

But we should also understand this to mean that, while repentance may precede faith, it should not end with it. As Christians, steadily growing in God's grace, we would do well to begin living into a pattern of repentant living.

Repentant living doesn't mean living in fear of God, constantly admitting guilt, or saying sorry with every other breath. **NO! You have been freed from those through faith in**

Jesus!

Repentant living means truly knowing yourself; recognizing your wounded brokenness, your proclivities toward sin, and even the inward and outward sins you still commit, and *continually* offering those up to God our Saviour, who is the only one who can rescue us from all these, and has already done so, if we only believe.