

Begin a New Life

Original Study/Summary Outline: Steps of the BNL/Repentance Process

Introduction

The *BNL* program began as a study of Emanuel Swedenborg's definitive chapter on life change/repentance.¹ The study culminated in a concise, summary outline of the *steps* of the process based on that chapter (see pp. 2-3, below). The outline in turn became the foundation of the *worksheets* for the program.

There are two versions of the repentance process that appear in Swedenborg's definitive chapter—a short version and a longer version. The short version presents the process in general terms and four steps. The longer version fleshes the process out with further details and a total of ten steps. Among other things, the short version seems to emphasize the basics and simplicity within the process. The longer version is full and complete. Here are the two versions, color coded for reasons that will be discussed in a moment:

Short version:²

1. Examine yourself.
2. **Recognize and acknowledge your sin.**
3. Pray to the Lord.
4. **Begin a new life.**

Longer version:³

- a) Examine yourself.
- b) **Recognize and acknowledge your sin.**
- c) **Accept Responsibility.**
- d) **Confess your sin before the Lord.**
- e) Pray to the Lord for help and power in resisting your sin.
- f) **Stop doing it...**
- g) **...And live a new life.**
- h) **All of this is to be done as if you were doing it on your own.**
- i) **Do this once or twice a year in preparation for Holy Communion.**
- j) **Afterward, when the sin you're responsible for recurs, say to yourself, "I do not want this [or alternatively, "I do not will this"] because it's a sin against God."**

The *BNL* program assumes that the two versions of the process are one and the same. As a result, it views the additional steps in the long version as *sub*-steps within a broader context. **Steps b) through d)** of the long version are seen as three *levels* of recognition and acknowledgment that fit under **Step 2** of the short version. Likewise, **Steps f) through j)** are seen as sub-steps to **Step 4**, showing fully *how* to begin a new life. **Steps h) and i)** of the long version are global directives that relate to the overall process. However, they are also seen as parts of a functional *progression* within Step 4—a progression that begins with abstaining from sin and living a new life, and which culminates in a fully balanced (**Step h**) and empowered (**Step i**) exercise of new will married to clear purpose (**Step j**).^{4 5}

In addition, the *BNL* program assumes that each version of the process is true and useful. It therefore retains *both* versions, framing the process in terms of steps and sub-steps. But although the program views the process in this way, it also assumes that each of the steps or sub-steps carries equal weight and validity, such that each one can serve as its own step in the process. This is reflected in the *worksheets* for the program, in such a way that each step or sub-step is given its own worksheet.⁶ One benefit of this approach is that the short version of the process and its usefulness are not lost or forgotten. Another, practical benefit is that the process as a whole is easier to absorb and remember as a step-and-sub-step construct than as ten individual steps.

A summary outline of the process of repentance now follows. The four general steps are **underlined and in bold**. The sub-steps appear in **bold only**. Beyond that, the outline gathers in every statement and phrase from Swedenborg's definitive chapter that succinctly defines each step or sub-step of the process.

Steps of Repentance

1. **Examine yourself.**⁷
 - a. Look at yourself.⁸
 - b. Examine the actions of your life—
 - 1) [The things you do and/or say] either openly or secretly.⁹
 - c. Look inside yourself.¹⁰
 - d. Examine yourself deeply.¹¹
 - 1) What are you like on the *inside*?¹²
 - 2) What are you like in your inner self?¹³
 - 3) What are you like in your mind or spirit?¹⁴
 - e. Study yourself—¹⁵
 - 1) Your thoughts; your thinking.¹⁶
 - a) [The things you spend time thinking about.]^{17, 18}
 - b) [The things you take pleasure in contemplating.]¹⁹
 - 2) Your intentions.²⁰
 - 3) What you want and desire.²¹
 - a) [Especially] the desires you *entertain*.²²
 - 4) Your will; what you *will*.²³
 - a) Explore whether you would commit this or that evil if no fear of the law or concern for your reputation stood in the way.²⁴
 - 5) What you love.²⁵
 - 6) [In the following four statements, note the connection and progression in what the human spirit loves, wants, wills, intends, and thinks:]
 - a) That which a human spirit *loves*, it *wants* and *wills*.²⁶
 - b) A human spirit *wants* what it loves, and it *thinks* about what it wants.²⁷
 - c) The desires that are present in us are present in our will, and *from that* in our thought.²⁸
 - d) The intentions of our will *reveal* themselves in our thoughts.²⁹

Note: Prayer after self-examination³⁰

The prayer is to be a request that the Lord—

- 1) Have mercy on us,
- 2) Give us the power to resist the evils we've repented of,
- 3) And provide us an inclination and desire to do what is good.^{31, 32}

2. **Recognize and acknowledge your sin.**³³
 - a. **Recognize and acknowledge your sin.**³⁴
 - 1) [Take what you've seen during self-examination, and look at it in the light of the Ten Commandments of Judeo-Christian scripture, especially the last *six* Commandments, beginning with the one on *murder*.]³⁵
 - 2) [More broadly, look at what you've seen during self-examination in the light of the Lord's Word (the Word of God).]³⁶
 - 3) See whether you have committed a *sin*.³⁷
 - 4) See the *sins* that are within you.³⁸
 - 5) Become aware of the *vices* that are inside you.³⁹
 - 6) Discover one evil or another, one *sin* or another, within yourself.⁴⁰
 - 7) See your *sins* and call them such.⁴¹
 - a) "This evil is sinful."⁴²
 - b) "This evil is a sin."⁴³

- b. **Accept responsibility.**⁴⁴
 - 1) See the sins that are *within you*.⁴⁵
 - 2) Become sensible of the vices that are *inside you*.⁴⁶
 - 3) Discover one evil or another, one sin or another, *within yourself*.⁴⁷
 - a) Become conscious of an evil or a sin *in yourself*.⁴⁸
 - 4) See *your* sins.⁴⁹
 - a) Acknowledge that they are *in you*.⁵⁰
 - 5) [Accept responsibility.]⁵¹
 - 6) Discovery that *you* are a sinner—
 - a) [I.e., someone who is sinning or who has sinned.]⁵²
 - 7) Know that *you* are a sinner, not only in a general way but also in specific detail.⁵³
 - 8) Accept that *you* are at fault.⁵⁴
 - 9) [Hold *yourself* accountable.]⁵⁵
 - 10) Condemn yourself on account of the sins that you see *within you*.⁵⁶
 - c. **Confess your sin before the Lord.**⁵⁷
 - 1) Confess sin before God.⁵⁸
 - 2) Confession before the Lord God the Savior⁵⁹
 - 3) The confession is to be that we *see, recognize, and admit* to *our* evils, and that we are discovering that we are miserable sinners [i.e., caught up in the misery of sin, etc.].^{60, 61, 62}
3. **Pray to the Lord.**⁶³
- a. Pray for the Lord's help.⁶⁴
 - b. Pray for help and power in resisting your sin.⁶⁵
 - c. Pray to the Lord God the Savior—
 - 1) Not to some vicar of Christ on earth as we would to God;
 - 2) Not calling on some saint as we would call on God;
 - 3) In short, beware of idols.⁶⁶
4. **Begin a new life.**⁶⁷
- a. **Stop doing it... (Having completed steps 1 through 3, abstain from your sin...)**⁶⁸
 - 1) Turn away from evil.⁶⁹
 - 2) Abstain from an evil that you realize is sinful.⁷⁰
 - 3) Resist and abstain⁷¹
 - b. **...And live a new life.**⁷²
 - 1) Live a life of goodwill.⁷³
 - 2) Do what is good.⁷⁴
 - c. **All of this is to be done as if you were doing it on your own.**⁷⁵
 - d. **Do this once or twice a year in preparation for Holy Communion.**⁷⁶
 - e. **Afterward, when the sin you're responsible for recurs, say to yourself, "I do not want this [or alternatively, "I do not will this"] because it's a sin against God."**^{77, 78}
 - 1) [Stop] *wanting* an evil.⁷⁹
 - 2) Do not *will* an evil.⁸⁰
 - 3) Turn away from evil *for religious reasons*.⁸¹
 - 4) Stop doing evils *because they are sinful*.^{82 83}
 - 5) [Stop] wanting an evil *because it is a sin*.⁸⁴
 - 6) Do not will an evil *because it is a sin*.⁸⁵

Note: In addition to the full process of repentance, Emanuel Swedenborg describes an "easier kind of repentance" that we can practice.⁸⁶

Endnotes

¹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, vol. 2, chapter 9, translated by Jonathan S. Rose (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2011)

² *True Christianity*, paragraph nos. 528, 535

³ *True Christianity* 567.5

⁴ The following factors hint at this way of seeing: The close tie that exists between abstaining from sin and doing good that is truly good (**Steps f and g**), the *meaning* of **Step h**, the *effects* of Holy Communion (**Step i**), the inclusion and positioning of **Steps h and i** *between Steps g and j*, and “Afterward” in **Step j**).

⁵ The progression that the BNL program sees from **Step f** through **Step j** is based on the following line of thought:

- **Step f**): Emanuel Swedenborg suggests that if we do what is good in word and deed without abstaining from sin in intention and thought, the good we do isn’t fully good. It’s like a piece of fruit that’s good on the outside but rotten on the inside. He therefore suggests that abstaining from evil/sin is integral to doing good that is genuinely good. Swedenborg also suggests that living a good life (or living rightly) requires that we not do what is evil. In that sense, not doing evil is *part* of doing good.
- **Step g**): Once we stop committing a particular sin—first on the level of outward life, and later on the levels of intention and thought—we’re able to start doing what is genuinely good in that part of our life.
- **Step h**): Swedenborg suggests that in our practice of a good life, if we take credit for the good that we do, that goodness becomes tainted, even corrupted, by a sense of personal merit. Accordingly, **Step h** reminds us that all goodness and truth originate in God, not in ourselves. It also reminds us that we have a part to play in living a good life (and in all facets of repentance). *Our* part is to be fully invested in the process—putting the Lord’s goodness and truth to work in our lives as though we’re doing it on our own. Doing this allows these spiritual realities to find a place in our hearts, minds, and lives, and to become parts of who we truly are. **Step h** helps keep our perspective, attitude, and life practice finely tuned along these lines.
- **Step i**): Holy Communion seals and strengthens the perspective, attitude, and life practice we’ve been reminded of in **Step h**, also the Lord’s goodness and truth, within us.
- **Step j**): At that point in the process—after taking part in Holy Communion—we are fully prepared to take a stand against evil/sin, doing so in a balanced, fully empowered way, from the heart (i.e., from the next increment of new want, new will, and new life that are being built up in us by the Lord via the steps of repentance).

⁶ This equates to one worksheet for each step in the *longer* version of the process.

⁷ TC 528, 567.5

⁸ TC 564.3

⁹ TC 525

¹⁰ TC 566

¹¹ TC 534

¹² TC 568.2 (emphasis added)

¹³ TC 568.2-5

¹⁴ TC 568.2, 5

¹⁵ TC 564.3

¹⁶ TC 532, 568.2, 4

¹⁷ TC 532.2

¹⁸ Words and statements that appear in square brackets have been altered to read smoothly in outline form, or they’ve been inserted based on inference or a broader understanding of Swedenborg’s thought. All other statements and phrases in this outline are either direct quotations or nearly direct quotations from chapter 9 of Swedenborg’s *True Christianity*.

¹⁹ TC 569.1

²⁰ TC 532.1-2

²¹ TC 568.2-3

²² TC 532.2 (emphasis added)

²³ TC 568.4 (emphasis added)

²⁴ TC 532

²⁵ TC 568.2

²⁶ TC 568.2 (emphasis added) Swedenborg wrote in Latin. The Latin word here is *volo*. *Volo* is a verb that means *to want* and also *to will*.

²⁷ TC 568.2 (emphasis added)

²⁸ TC 568.4 (emphasis added) in comparison with a translation of the original Latin by John C. Agar

²⁹ TC 532.2 (emphasis added)

³⁰ TC 539 This prayer is not a step of repentance. But Swedenborg suggests that it is useful, even important. It is therefore included in this outline and featured in the program worksheets.

³¹ The *timing* of this prayer within the process of repentance is uncertain. Swedenborg says it is to happen “after we have examined ourselves” (TC 539). This indicates that the prayer is not stationary within the process but moveable: it happens *sometime* after self-examination. It is reflected here in this outline, and also in the program worksheets, at the first place where it can happen.

³² Notice that the three parts of this prayer seem to spread over the remaining three steps of the process: Step 2, which ends in humility, confession, and a sense of need for the Lord; Step 3, which involves praying for help and power in resisting sin; and Step 4, which involves beginning a new and better life—a life of goodwill and good action, a life in which you “do what is good” (TC 539).

³³ TC 528 [heading], 530.1, 567.5

³⁴ TC 528 [heading], 530.1, 567.5 (emphasis added)

³⁵ Consider the following:

- TC 532.2 This reference mentions acts of revenge, adultery, theft, and false witness; also, acts of blasphemy against God, against the holy Word, against the church, “and so on.”
- TC 567.6 This reference mentions revenge, promiscuity, cheating, slander, and especially the desire to dominate others out of love for oneself.
- TC 567.8 This reference mentions “the six commandments on the second tablet” of the Ten Commandments.
- TC 568.3 This reference talks about revenge even to the point of committing murder; the desire to indulge lust even to the point of committing adultery; the desire to commit fraud even to the point of committing theft; and the desire to lie even to the point of bearing false witness.
- TC 568.5 This reference mentions looking at our neighbor with hostile eyes, burning with murderous hatred, and uttering blasphemy against God.
- TC 570.7 This reference mentions whoring, taking revenge, cheating, and speaking blasphemy.

³⁶ TC 525, 535.2

³⁷ TC 525 (emphasis added)

³⁸ TC 513 (emphasis added)

³⁹ TC 519, 529, 564.3 (emphasis added)

⁴⁰ TC 566, 530, 567.4, 518.2, 525 (emphasis added)

⁴¹ TC 567.6 (emphasis added)

⁴² TC 525

⁴³ TC 525 (as translated from the original Latin by John C. Agar)

⁴⁴ TC 567.5

⁴⁵ TC 513 (emphasis added)

⁴⁶ TC 519 (emphasis added)

⁴⁷ TC 566, 530, 567.4, 518, 525 (emphasis added)

⁴⁸ TC 529, 564.3 (emphasis added)

⁴⁹ TC 567.6 (emphasis added)

⁵⁰ TC 530 (emphasis added)

⁵¹ TC 567.5 (a valid, alternative rendering of the original Latin)

⁵² TC 539 (emphasis added)

⁵³ TC 513 (emphasis added) Swedenborg suggests that in order for repentance to be real, effective, and lasting, it needs to involve more than a global acknowledgement that we are sinners. We need to focus in on specific behaviors, patterns of thinking, and patterns of intending that need to change, and then cooperate with the Lord to that end.

⁵⁴ TC 567.5 (a valid, alternative rendering of the original Latin) (emphasis added)

⁵⁵ TC 567.5 (a valid, alternative rendering of the original Latin) (emphasis added)

⁵⁶ TC 513 The directive, “Condemn yourself...” (Latin, “*se damnet...*”) is interesting. What does it mean, and how does it translate into practice? Among other things, the word *condemn* (in English) means *prove or show the guilt of; express complete disapproval of, censure; sentence (someone) to a particular punishment, especially death; declare to be unfit for use*. Therefore, condemning ourselves on account of sin may mean any or all of the following: We acknowledge that we’re guilty of having committed a sin; we fully disapprove of what we’ve done; we acknowledge what we ourselves will be like, or what our experience of life will be like, if we continue down a particular pathway of sin; we acknowledge what our own self truly is like, apart from the Lord’s presence, truth, and goodness in us (i.e., apart from the new desires, new will, and new life that He builds in us through active repentance). These things suggest a range of possible meaning, experience, and practice in this part of the process.

⁵⁷ TC 567.5

⁵⁸ TC 567.7

⁵⁹ TC 538 [heading]

⁶⁰ TC 539 (emphasis added) The word *miserable* means *wretchedly unhappy or uncomfortable; pitifully small or inadequate; shameful, disgraceful, contemptible (used as a term of abuse or for emphasis)*. In the fall of 2004, there were 110 instances in English renderings of Swedenborg’s theological writings in which the word *miserable* appeared. In

100 of those instances it meant (in context) *wretchedly unhappy or uncomfortable*. In the other 10 instances the meaning wasn't as clear. It could have meant *wretchedly unhappy or uncomfortable* or it could have meant something different. These things suggest a range of possible meaning, experience, and practice in this part of the process, with the main meaning of *miserable* being *wretchedly unhappy or uncomfortable*.

⁶¹ Notice that this particular confession summarizes all that is accomplished in Step 1 and (expanded) Step 2 of the process.

⁶² Here are some additional ideas from the writings of Swedenborg related to confession:

- TC 539 There is no need for us to list our sins before the Lord, and no need to beg that he forgive them [with reasons given].
- TC 539 It does no harm for people who are weighed down by a heavy conscience to lighten their load by listing their sins before a minister of the church, for the sake of absolution. [*Absolution* has to do with a formal release from guilt. The practice often invites a sense of relief, similar to when we unburden ourselves to a friend.]
- TC 562.2 This reference mentions Roman Catholics who, after they had been initiated into the practice of confession, were not afraid to list their misdeeds before a confessor—one who was not severe.

⁶³ TC 528 [heading], 530.1

⁶⁴ TC 530

⁶⁵ TC 538 [heading], 539.1, 567.5

⁶⁶ TC 538, 560, 1 John 5:20-21

⁶⁷ TC 528 [heading], 530.1

⁶⁸ TC 567.5, 535 [heading], 539

⁶⁹ TC 566

⁷⁰ TC 525, 510 Note: TC 510 recommends “running away from things that are evil and sinful as we would run if we saw hordes of hellish spirits pursuing us with flaming torches, intending to attack us and throw us onto a bonfire.”

⁷¹ TC 532.2

⁷² TC 567.5

⁷³ TC 515, 516; also 422 [heading]: “Goodwill itself is acting justly and faithfully in our position and our work, and with the people with whom we interact.”

⁷⁴ TC 539.1

⁷⁵ TC 567.5

⁷⁶ TC 567.5

⁷⁷ TC 567.5 In the original Latin, this statement appears in the plural form: *Non volumus illa*—“We do not want these.” It is here changed to singular in order to address individual people with individual sins. However, the BNL program acknowledges value in the plural form as well. This is reflected in the final worksheet of the program.

⁷⁸ The two alternatives that appear in this step of the process are equally valid renderings of the original Latin. Each has a different meaning, feel, and value within the process, though both alternatives are closely related. “**I do not want this**” means “I do not care for this, I’m even against it.” “**I do not will this**” means any or all of the following: “I do not function from my old will in this situation—I do not engage in the *will* to sin”; “I do not strive in my heart to commit this sin—I make no *internal effort* to commit it”; “I do not try to make this sin happen by the use of *mental powers*.” People who utilize this process of repentance use one or the other of these two alternatives, or they use both interchangeably, based on personal preference.

⁷⁹ TC 566 (emphasis added)

⁸⁰ TC 566 (emphasis added)

⁸¹ TC 566 (emphasis added)

⁸² TC 535 [heading], 539 (emphasis added)

⁸³ With regard to abstaining from evil *because it is a sin*, Swedenborg suggests the following: “If we turn away from an evil for any other reason or purpose than a religious one [i.e., because it is a sin] we are only doing so so that it will no longer appear before the world” (TC 566.2).

⁸⁴ TC 567.5 (emphasis added)

⁸⁵ TC 567.5 (emphasis added)

⁸⁶ TC 535 Swedenborg writes: “In the Protestant Christian world active repentance, which is examining ourselves, recognizing and acknowledging our sins, praying to the Lord, and starting a new life, is extremely difficult to practice, for a number of reasons that will be covered under the final heading in this chapter.* Therefore here is an easier kind of repentance: When we are considering doing something evil and are forming an intention to do it, we say to ourselves, ‘I am thinking about this and I’m intending to do it, but because it’s a sin, I’m not going to do it.’ This counteracts the enticement that hell is injecting into us and keeps it from making further inroads.”

*Note: The paragraph numbers that appear under this “final heading” are 564-566. However, numbers 561-563 seem to be the ones Swedenborg is referring to, as they offer an array of reasons why active repentance is (or can be) “extremely difficult to practice.” These paragraphs appear under the *second-to-last* heading in the chapter.