One of America’s best known evangelists was a man by the name of Charles Finney. He lived in the mid 19th century and under his ministry thousands were said to be converted in New York and the surrounding regions. Finney is probably the key figure in what is commonly known as the Second Great Awakening. He is especially associated with having perfected the way for sinners to respond to the Gospel. He called for them to stand, kneel or come forward as a way of demonstrating that they were repentant and ready to give their lives to Christ. Because of his theology, Finney believed that when a sinner did so, it was automatically to be assumed that a miraculous change had occurred in their lives. Because he believed that, Finney concluded that any method was justified just as long as it got people to walk the aisle and make a decision. The fact is, it worked. Many people walked the aisle and made decisions under his ministry. What you might not know and not often reported though, is that many of his converts fell away soon after making the decision. This is similar to what we often see today.

One of his ministry associates, in a letter to Finney stated:

*Let us look over the fields where you and I have labored as ministers and what is now their normal state? What was their state within 3 months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, and contentious state into which the churches have fallen and fallen very soon after we first departed from among them.*

Something was wrong. People were making decisions but they were not demonstrating the fruits of salvation as a result of their decision. And this was not just a phenomena associated with Finney or the 19th century but one that extends even to our own time. Billy Graham, the premiere evangelist of our time, while getting a lot of people to come forward, himself saw a small percentage of true conversions. It is reported that only 2% of the people coming forward at a Billy Graham Crusade have never been Christians and are giving themselves to Christ for the first time, and of those, 80% fall away. I have nothing but the utmost respect for Billy Graham. With all of his years of ministry, there has not been a stain against him. Nevertheless, surveys show that Graham’s mass crusades have resulted in few ever joining a church.

What is the problem? Why is there such little lasting fruit from such ministries? It’s no mystery. The downplaying or in some instances the complete absence of repentance in presenting the Gospel accounts, in part, for the absence of true converting power. B.H. Carroll in an article entitled *Repentance and Remission of Sins* says,

*To leave out or minimize repentance, no matter what sort of a faith you preach, is to prepare a generation of professors who are such in name only. I give it as my deliberate conviction, founded on 25 years of ministerial observation, that the Christian profession of today owes its lack of vital godliness, its want of practical piety, its absence from the prayer meeting, its miserable semblance of missionary life, very largely to the fact that...*
old-fashioned repentance is so little preached. You can’t put a big house on a little foundation. And no small part of such preaching comes from a class of modern evangelists who desiring more for their own glory to count a great number of converts than to lay deep foundations, reduce the conditions of salvation by 1/2 and make the other half but some intellectual trick of the mind rather than a radical spiritual change of the heart... Such converts know but little and care less about a system of doctrine. They are prayerless, lifeless, and to all steady church work reprobate.

We have been in a series entitled A Kingdom Culture. We recognize the Gospel which gets us into the kingdom produces a kingdom culture; a certain way of speaking, living, sharing that expresses kingdom values. It does not matter what we say we believe; if it does not produce a kingdom culture, it is bogus. A kingdom culture is a lifestyle which clearly demonstrates that we are living under the King’s dominion. Sadly, when we look at the Church we don’t usually see the culture of the kingdom. The Church, more often than not mirrors the culture around us more than the culture of the kingdom. That fact should deeply sadden us but it should also cause us to ask “Why?” “Why do we who claim to be in the kingdom mirror the world more than the kingdom? I think the answer is a simple one. It is that we have failed to enter the kingdom through the only door by which we can enter—repentance!

In our rush to get more people “in”, we have lowered the standards. We got a lot of people coming forward, but few lasting conversions that really bear lasting fruit. If we want to change that we must get back to proclaiming a Gospel that calls people to real repentance, not merely repeating a prayer. In many Gospel presentations today people are asked if they want to “invite Jesus into their hearts.” You will look in vain for anyone asked in the New Testament to “invite Jesus into your heart.” That is not what John the Baptist and Jesus and the apostles called people to. John called people, first and foremost, to repentance expressed through the waters of baptism. When Jesus appeared, he said the same thing: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the Gospel.” And when thousands of people heard Peter’s Pentecost sermon and asked Peter and the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter’s first word was “Repent” (not repeat). Even Paul, when preaching to the philosophers of Athens, told them that “God has commanded all people everywhere to repent.” Noticeably absent from all these accounts are any instructions for people to “ask Jesus into your heart.”

Matthew’s Gospel sums it up best when it summarizes John the Baptist’s message with a terse sentence: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom has come; God has begun his reign. Therefore, this reality means everything has changed! So the only fitting response is to change everything! What exactly does it mean to repent? We must start by understanding what Matthew means by the phrase “kingdom of heaven”. Other Gospel writers use the phrase “kingdom of God” (They are the same thing; Matthew’s wording reflects that he is writing to a Jewish audience). What is important to understand is that Matthew is using the word kingdom as meaning “rule” rather than “realm”.

It points to God doing something; to God actually ruling rather than the realm over which He rules (his active rule over his people). In other words, it is a dynamic term: the kingdom is something that happens rather than something that merely exists. Now before Jesus, in the Old Testament, God was certainly sovereign and was King. But beginning with the appearing of Jesus, it was clear that that reign was now dynamically being manifested on earth. Therefore, in light of the fact that his rule is now dynamically being manifested, there is only one fitting response: Repent!
What comes to mind when we hear that word? Some, upon hearing the call to repent, think of feeling bad or sorrowful. In the church I attended as a young believer in Miami, the sisters were always better at repenting than the men. Each service they came up to the altar and had a little cry. I remember going up and trying to feel bad and leaving feeling worse because I couldn’t cry. Now, more often than not, repentance will produce feelings of sorrow. But we should not associate repentance primarily with people feeling bad or sorrowful. I feel bad when I watch the commercial for the SPCA and see those abused animals but I’ve never rushed out and adopted one.

The word ‘Repent’ in Greek (“metanoeo”) means literally to “change the mind”. An example of that is Peter’s sermon at Pentecost; he demanded that the Jews now think differently about the crucifixion of Jesus—that they had put to death no less than the perfect Son of God! In light of that fact he was now calling them to “change their mind” about Jesus. That is helpful in describing what repentance is. It is to think of things from God’s vantage point, to agree with his analysis and accept his verdict. I would say that in true repentance a person discovers two things simultaneously:

(1), We become deeply aware that God is much better than they previously thought Him to be.
We realize the Lord is absolutely holy, pure, undefiled, and totally just; He alone being righteous. Do you know why there isn’t more true repentance in the Church? It is because we have lost the essence and full weight of the Being of God upon us. In the modern Church, He is often just “one of the boys”, my pal, my friend, my co-pilot, the one who gives me parking spaces and rebates and keeps me healthy and successful. He has ceased to be the all glorious, all powerful, all knowing, completely holy Jehovah who created all things by the word of his mouth and in whom we live and move and have our being. Only if we capture the true essence of the being of God so that we feel the weight of his Person on our lives will we ever really know what it is to repent. And that always leads us to the second discovery:

(2): we become painfully aware that we are much worse than we previously thought we were.
Instead of thinking of ourselves as good people who occasionally do bad things we will see ourselves as bad people who, from time to time, manage to do good things. Worse than that, we will realize that even our supposedly good things we have done are offensive to God and requires that we repent. In the Old Testament, Isaiah describes human righteousness as a menstrual cloth, and in the New Testament Paul compares it to human excrement. This discovery, that God finds human self-righteousness more offensive than crude sin, comes as a shock to human pride and produces a revolution that leads to repentance. Many of the Jews who came to John’s baptism considered themselves righteous and must have been shocked by his insistence that they were exceedingly wicked and in need of repentance. This is the general stage of repentance and always must lead to dealing with specific or particular sins.

It is relatively easy to acknowledge that God is much better than us and that we are far worse than we ever imagined. Matthew tells us that when John preached, people came to his baptism “confessing their sins”. They didn’t come just with a general confession that they were sinners but confessing specific sins they had done. True repentance meant that deeds of darkness were to be brought into the light (John expected verbal public admission of personal guilt). I think the Old Testament prophet Hosea said it best: “Take with you words and return to the Lord; say to Him, Take away all iniquity.” This is a call to specificity when it comes to identifying our sin.

Here are two examples that clearly show the distinction of what constitutes true repentance. Sometimes we say to someone, “Will you forgive me if I have ever hurt you?” That’s not repentance. (That’s ‘I’m human so at some point I probably hurt you’). Here’s an example of true repentance: “I have
sinned when I talked to my friend behind your back and defamed you by telling them that you use people. Personal Example: It is one thing to confess that I battle the fear of man; it is quite another to stand here and tell you (to my shame) that sometimes I am more concerned about what you think of me when I preach than what God thinks of me.

Words of repentance must be followed by deeds of repentance.
John sees the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism and tells them that they must “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” In Luke’s account he tells people they are to share surplus clothing with the poor, tax collectors should stop defrauding people, soldiers should be content with their wages. Remember Zacchaeus in Luke who proved his repentance by repaying those he had defrauded in the past. Paul demonstrated his repentance by being obedient to the heavenly vision. In all these cases, the one thing that is constant is that those who changed their minds and brought words of repentance followed it up with deeds of repentance (changed behavior). Only a changed life is true evidence of repentance. Paul tells the Ephesians that they must “put off” the old self and put on the new self (Eph. 4:22-24). Then he gives some very practical application of this to their lives. One of the classes of people he addresses are thieves. Before we look at what he tells the thief, I want to ask this question: “When is a thief no longer a thief?” Most people would say when he stops stealing. But what if he is in jail for a few days? Is he no longer a thief?

No; from a biblical perspective a thief is no longer a thief not when he stops stealing, but when he stops stealing and works with his hands so he can have something to give (let him who steals steal no more but let him work with his hands that he might have something to give to him who is in need). We have repented not when we stop doing wicked behavior, but when we do the opposite. If I’m an adulterer I am now faithful. If I am lazy I am now productive. If I am a slanderer and gossip I now speak encouraging and helpful words to others. If I am a thief I am now working hard so that I can give to others.

John the Baptist gave three warnings that deal with our motives as well as reasons we don’t repent. It is found in what he now tells men who are outwardly righteous (Pharisees and Sadducees).
1) Matt 3:7: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (You’re not coming because you realize you are terrible sinners; you come to avoid judgment). They had no real repentance but a desire to escape divine retribution. Their deeds deserved this judgment but they wanted to escape retribution without really repenting.

Friends, it is wrong to preach the Gospel as a fire insurance policy to escape hell without calling for real repentance. Paul calls it “worldly grief that produces death.” We see this worldly sorrow when a person is sorry they got caught rather than sorry for their sin. Paul contrasts this with “godly grief that produces repentance that leads to salvation.” For a long time we have been offering people a choice: go to heaven or hell. What person in their right mind would willingly choose hell? (except those deluded individuals who say hell because all their friends will be there). There is a wrath to come. Repenting is the means of our avoiding that wrath. But the true motivation to change is the deep awareness of how sinful I am and how my sin offends God.

2) “And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father, for I tell you God is able to raise up these stones to raise up children for Abraham.” Jews were taught that they were children of God because they were children of Abraham (3:9). John tells them that physical descendancy is meaningless when it comes to our standing with God.
Don’t we do the same thing? I’m okay because I am a Christian, my parents were Christians, I’m in the church, I’ve been in the Church for years, etc. We don’t bear fruit but we think we’re okay because of our history from the past. If you are relying presently on a past commitment to Jesus, while you do not have lasting fruit in the present, you are deceived.

3) “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:10). John reveals that the coming of Jesus is laying the axe to the root of the tree. Those who do not bear good fruit are going to be judged. This corresponds with what Jesus said later: “the good tree bears good fruit and the evil tree bears bad fruit. The tree is known by its fruit.” John tells them a judgment is coming and each person will be judged by the fruit of their life. How does that square with the truth of the Gospel that we are saved not by works but by his mercy and grace? Salvation is by grace through faith and is not of ourselves. But when that grace is really received, it changes us at root level.

The coming of Jesus exposes the root from which everyone lives. How do I know what root I am living from? That’s easy. Look at the fruit of your life. We should not be trusting in what we did in the past when the clear evidence is that we are not bearing fruit in the present. There is a coming day of judgment when all that are not fruitful will be thrown into the fire. But that judgment is already a reality for the Church. Paul tells the Corinthians that when they are disciplined by the Lord it is so they will not be judged with the world.

Conclusion
For the body of Christ, we not only enter the kingdom through the door of repentance, we are to live in a culture of repentance. There’s a Scripture in Hosea that I want to show you that really says best the period we have entered as a church. “Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.” Do you know what fallow ground is? It is ground which has once been tilled, but which now lies waste and needs to be broken up again before it is ready to receive grain. Some of us were once plowed but through neglect, we have become hardened. There is only one answer: let God plow our hearts again so the hard areas are softened and the word can be sown and the showers from heaven can come so that we might be fruitful.

Ed Rosen has provided the questions below for House Church Group Discussion.

2. How about the 2% relating to a Billy Graham crusade?
3. Are “altar calls” biblical? If they are what are the Scripture reference(s)?
4. According to the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), what were the first words that John the Baptist and Jesus spoke? Why?
5. In one word, what was the message of Peter’s sermon on The Day of Pentecost? Why?
6. What does the Greek word that is translated as “Repent” literally mean?
7. Neil said, “I would say that in true repentance a person discovers two things simultaneously” What are the two things?
8. With regard to repentance, what is the difference between Judas and Zacchaeus?
9. How do we know that we have repented?
10. Is repentance a onetime thing or a way of life? Explain.
11. What is the meaning of The Kingdom of God, also known as The Kingdom of Heaven?
12. Neil said that in (Matthew 3:7-10) “John the Baptist gave three warnings that deal with our motives as well as reasons we don’t repent. It is found in what he now tells men who are outwardly righteous (Pharisees and Sadducees). What are the three things?
13. Do you consider the topic of repentance to be something positive or something negative? Explain.