

# What is Repentance?

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The simplest and most basic principles of the Gospel are sometime those least understood and misinterpreted. A good example is the confusion still existing among evangelicals on the true meaning of “repentance.” Nearly a century ago Ironside observed that “The doctrine of repentance is the missing note in many otherwise orthodox and fundamentally sound circles today.”<sup>1</sup> In the attempt to defend the doctrine of “faith alone” (*Sola fide*) some Christians have weakened the concept of repentance as *only a change of mind* (specifically a change of mind about what one thinks of Christ). This is seen particularly among certain dispensationalists. Some even conclude that repentance is not essential to the Gospel or even a false addition to it, and others believe that it was required only of the Jews. But not all dispensationalists would hold this view.

## NT Terminology of Repentance

The predominant term for repentance in the NT is *metanoeo*, meaning, “**to change one’s mind**” (noun form *metanoia*).<sup>2</sup> However, if changing one’s mind doesn’t change one’s life, what does it do? The change is not restricted to the intellect alone, but it also affects the emotional and volitional aspects of a person. Since the “change of mind” is the work of the Holy Spirit, it affects the entire person, in his attitudes and actions. It is not limited to a change of mind about God or Christ alone. It affects the entire person. To repent is to alter one’s way of looking at life. This is what Solomon meant when he wrote, “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (Prov.23:7). People do not merely repent of their false beliefs but “repent of their deeds” (Rev.2:22).

Repentance involves much more than sorrow for sin; it is a change of mind, resulting in a change in the entire person, and in his or her outlook on life. “You could say that it means a change of thinking, feeling, and willing.”<sup>3</sup> “Repent therefore and be converted...” (Acts 3:19). It is a change of mind that leads to a change of direction and evidenced in changed action. This is the meaning of repentance in relation to one’s salvation.

D.A. Carson sums up the meaning of *metanoe* (“to change one’s mind”), “...the NT usage has been influenced by the Hebrew verbs *naham* (“to be sorry for one’s action”) and *sub* (“to turn around to new actions)...What is meant is not merely a change of mind or mere

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<sup>1</sup> H.A. Ironside, *Except Ye Repent*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> A similar word *metamelomai* means “to be concerned,” “to feel remorse, or “to sorrow” (“Judas....repented himself”, Matt.27:3 KJV; “Remorseful,” NKJV; “Changed his mind,” ESV; “Regretted”, NET Bible; “Felt remorse,” NASB. See also Matt. 21:30,32.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *Saved By Grace*, 125.

grief...but a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action, and including overtones of grief, which results in fruit in keeping with repentance.”<sup>4</sup>

John the Baptist called people to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt.3:8). Jesus began His public ministry, the same way His herald, John the Baptist had begun. “From that time Jesus began to preach and say, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt.4:17). *To repent is to have a change of mind, direction, of life itself, consequently of behavior – fruit in keeping with repentance* (Matt.3:8). In 2 Cor.7:10 we read about a repentance leading to salvation (and its root is godly sorrow<sup>5</sup>), and in 2 Tim.2:25 of a “repentance leading to the knowledge of truth.” God is the one granting them repentance – a genuine change of mind, change of heart, and change of direction. Acts 11:18 speaks of “repentance that leads to life.” The meaning of *metanoeo* “deepens with Christianity, and in the New Testament it is more than ‘repent’, and indicates a complete change of attitude, spiritual and moral toward God.”<sup>6</sup> The comprehensiveness of *repentance* affecting the entire person cannot be minimized on textual or theological grounds.

True repentance, “a change of mind” also involves a turning from sin. The NT refers to repentance with a word meaning “turn.” The chief word to denote this idea in repentance is the word “**turn**” (*epistrepho*) used eighteen times of turning from sin to the Lord. Luke in particular uses it repeatedly in Acts as a technical term for *conversion – a turn from sin to Christ* (Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20; 28:27). The Thessalonian believers “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess.1:9). “It would be difficult to exaggerate how radical is the change of allegiance which is implied by the turn from idols to *the living and true God*.”<sup>7</sup> The dispensational scholar Hiebert’s comments on the verb rendered “you turned” is helpful. He writes: “In a physical sense the word means to turn around (Mk.5:30); in a spiritual sense it denotes the turning which has altered the course of their lives so that they are now moving in the opposite direction.”<sup>8</sup>

**Repentance is both turning from sin and turning to God that leads to salvation.** It is NOT just a change of mind; it is the turning of the whole person from sin to God. “Though one cannot draw hard and fast lines, generally *metanoia* seems to emphasize the inner change involved in repentance, whereas *epistrepho* stresses the change in one’s outward life which implements and gives expression to the inward change.”<sup>9</sup> **Repentance does not simply**

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<sup>4</sup> D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol.8, 99.

<sup>5</sup> Literally “sorrow according to God.”

<sup>6</sup> Moulton & Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 404.

<sup>7</sup> John Stott, *The Gospel & The End of Times*, 39.

<sup>8</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Hoekema, *Saved By Grace*, 124.

**involve thinking a certain way; it does involve acting in a certain way.** It is not only turning from sin mentally or inwardly but turning from it outwardly. The gospel call to repentance throughout the NT is not limited to just a change of mind alone. "... repentance from sin, a change of mind involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God. The parable of the prodigal son is an outstanding illustration of this."<sup>10</sup>

## **Repentance and Faith**

The idea of change of mind is not simplistic or superficial. Chuck Swindoll explains: "Repentance involves making a radical decision. You are moving in one direction and then come to terms with the wrongness of that decision, so you decide to turn around and go in the opposite direction. Repentance is a change of thinking that causes a change of direction."<sup>11</sup> In turning from our sins in **repentance** we turn to Christ in **faith** for salvation. Is repentance a "work" we perform to earn our salvation? Not at all! **Repentance and faith** are really two sides of the same coin (but they are not synonymous terms). Both are part of conversion. **It is not "faith plus repentance" that saves, but rather a repentant faith.** **Repentance** is change of mind resulting in *turning from sin*. **Faith** is *turning to*, trusting in, relying on Christ for salvation.

Repentance is not a "work" any more than faith is. *As faith makes a personal commitment to Christ, repentance makes a personal commitment against sin.* Repentance and faith are inseparable. You cannot turn from sin without turning to Christ, or vice versa. Though repentance and faith are not identical, they are inseparable and necessary for salvation. Repentance is not an act separate from trusting Christ. It is part of the process of believing. Repentance and faith are both necessary for salvation, but not as separate conditions. They are always integrally connected with one another. This is the reason for the interchangeability of these terminologies in the NT.

One may argue that technically *repentance* is "a change of mind", "not a turning from sin." Yes, the primary meaning of repentance is a change of mind. But this is a transformational change and affects his approach to life. When a repentant person changes his mind about God, sin, the Savior and salvation, that change of mind naturally leads to a turning from sin. It may be viewed as *cause and effect*. The cause is repentance, a change of mind; the effect is turning away from sin. One leads to the other. The active turning from sin to God is by the exercise of faith.

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<sup>10</sup>W.E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old And New Testament Words*, 525.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Swindoll, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, 1139.

## Is Repentance Necessary For Salvation?

The answer to this question is simple and we don't have to complicate it. Jesus and the apostles preached repentance. Dispensationalists Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson warn us that, "The only way to escape repentance as necessary to salvation is to fall back on the erroneous idea that He preached this only to Jewish sinners."<sup>12</sup>

**Jesus preached repentance** as a condition to salvation at least 19 times. It was a core component of His message from the beginning.

- The first message Jesus preached was on repentance (Matt.4:17; Mk.1:14-15). He preached repentance in the imperative mood.
- It was a part of His gospel proclamation. "For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matt.9:13; Mk.2:17; Lk. 5:32). The very purpose behind His coming to people was to call them to repentance.
- Jesus warned that unless sinners repented, they would perish" (Lk. 13:3, 5) and unless they were "converted"/ "turned" (*straphete* from *strepheo*, "to turn about," or "turn around") and became as little children, they would never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt.18:3).
- Jesus declared that heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents" (Lk.15:7,10). If there is no repentance, there is no joy, because there is no salvation.
- Jesus denounced whole cities that would not repent while commending Nineveh for repenting at the preaching of Jonah (Matt.11:20-21; 12:41; Lk.10:13; 11:32).
- In the Great Commission Jesus made sure that His apostles would continue the call for repentance throughout the world – "... repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations...." (Lk. 24:47).

**The Apostles Preached Repentance.** Repentance was a prominent topic in the preaching of the apostles.

- To the Greeks on Mars Hill in Athens, Paul preached repentance (Acts 17:30).
- Paul reminded the elders of the Ephesian church of his "solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).
- Wherever Paul went to proclaim the Gospel, he insisted on the importance and necessity of repentance (Acts 26:20).
- Paul refers to repentance in his epistles (Rom.2:4; 2 Cor.7:9-10; 2 Tim.2:25).

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<sup>12</sup> Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson, "Is Repentance Part of the Gospel," *Fundamentalist Journal*, Vol.3:2 (February 1984), 10.

- Peter In his first sermon in the Book of Acts gave a straightforward command to repent (Acts 2:38).
- In his second sermon also, he preached on repentance (Acts 3:19-21).
- Peter says that the seeming delay of Christ’s return is for the purpose of allowing more people to repent (2 Peter 3:9).
- The apostles, on their preaching mission throughout Galilee, “preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:12).
- The author of Hebrews indicates that “repentance from dead works” is a first principle of the doctrine of Christ (Heb.6:1).

There is solid biblical ground to insist that the ministers of the Gospel must proclaim repentance along with faith in Jesus Christ. That is the pattern we see in the gospel proclamation of our Lord and the apostles. The unanimous testimony of the Scripture is that man must *repent and believe* the Gospel to be saved. God asks no man to change his own life, for no man can. God does not ask man to repent or believe by his own ability. Repentance is no more a “work” than *faith*. Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of action. “Repentance in the Scripture clearly comes before turning to God in trust or faith. The works of repentance then follow the turn to God in faith. Fruit – works giving evidence that the repentance and faith were genuine.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Absence of “Repentance” in the Gospel of John**

The words “repent” or “repentance” are completely absent from the most evangelistic gospel of the New Testament, the Gospel of John, while “believe” appears over 100 times. The proponents of the “no-repentance, but faith alone” view argue that since John emphasizes solely believing in Jesus for eternal life, repentance is not a condition for salvation or not part of the “faith-alone” Gospel. Is this really a valid claim?

The absence of repentance in John’s Gospel does not negate its emphasis in other NT books. This is a general principle - one doctrinal statement may be absent in certain books of the Bible, but it may may be found in other parts of the Scripture. Since there is substantial evidence of the requirement of repentance in salvation, then it does not matter whether it is mentioned in the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John is absent of Jesus’ virgin birth, hell and the doctrine of justification by faith. Does their absence in John’s Gospel suggest that the apostle rejected these doctrines? The absence of a word does not mean that the author purposely rejected the validity of the concept. For example, the word “grace” does not occur in Matthew and Mark. The Book of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 11.

Esther is devoid of any Hebrew word for God. Does this mean Esther rejects any belief in God? Though the word “repentance” is not explicitly mentioned by John, the concept of repentance is certainly present in the Gospel of John, just as God is most certainly present in the Book of Esther, and the concept of grace is seen throughout the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. The absence of a word doesn’t necessitate the absence of a concept. Interestingly, John uses the word *strephe* (“turn”) in 12:40 in his quotations from Isaiah when referring to people refusing to repent.

H.A. Ironside’s insightful observation of the apostle John’s silence of repentance clarifies the issue well. “The arrangement of the four Gospels is in perfect harmony. In the Synoptics... the call is to repent. In John, the emphasis is laid upon believing. Some have thought that there is inconsistency or contradiction here. But we need to remember that John wrote years after the older evangelists, and with the definite object in view of showing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, we might have life through His name. He does not travel over ground already well-trodden. Rather he adds to and thus supplements the earlier records, inciting to confidence in the testimony God has given concerning His Son. He does not ignore the ministry of repentance because he stresses the importance of faith. On the contrary, he shows to repentant souls the simplicity of salvation, of receiving eternal life, through a trusting in Him...<sup>14</sup>”

In some passages, repentance is given as a condition for salvation, but faith is implied in the call to repentance. Where only belief/trust/faith is mentioned, repentance also is implied. They go together, and to be saved, both are needed.

Repentance is essential for salvation; if you don’t repent, you will perish. The faith that saves is repentant faith. Saving faith presupposes repentance. Repentance is a change of mind, involving both a turning from sin and a turning to God. It is a change of mind resulting in a change of life. The meaning of repentance is clear throughout the Scripture. We don’t have to be confused by the extremes of certain Dispensational or Reformed definitions and explanations of “repentance.”

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<sup>14</sup> H.A. Ironside, *Except Ye Repent*, 37-38.