

“REPENTANCE IS FOR ALL MEN”

by

David R. Anderson, Ph.D.

In his book *I Call It Heresy!* A. W. Tozer makes his position of Lordship salvation clear when he says, “. . . true obedience is one of the toughest requirements of the Christian life. Apart from obedience, there can be no salvation, for salvation without obedience is a self-contradictory impossibility. . . . we need to preach again . . . a Christ who will either be Lord of all or he will not be Lord at all!”¹ In the same chapter he reveals his understanding of the repentance in the Luke 15 parable of the “Prodigal Son” when he writes:

. . . the first thing the returning sinner does is to confess: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in Thy sight, and I am no more worthy to be called Thy son. Make me as one of Thy hired servants.”

Thus, in *repentance* [italics mine], we . . . fully submit to the Word of God and the will of God, as obedient children. . . . and if we do not give Him that obedience, I have reason to wonder if we are really converted!”²

Tozer is not alone in his convictions concerning repentance and its role in the salvation process.³ In John MacArthur’s classic “line in the sand” development of the salvation message in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, he states in no uncertain terms: “From His first message to His last, the Savior’s theme was calling sinners to repentance—and this meant not only that they gained a new perspective on who He was, but also that they turned from sin and self to follow Him.”⁴ Another who sees repentance as an essential

¹A. W. Tozer, *I Call It Heresy!* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1974), 11, 15.

²*Ibid.*, 17, 19.

³By “salvation process” we refer to the *ordo salutis*, a term first suggested by the Lutheran theologians Franz Buddeus and Jacob Carpov in the first half of the eighteenth century. The components usually discussed in Protestant circles include: calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, sanctification, perseverance, glorification, and election. The order of these has been debated for centuries. See B. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 36-44.

⁴J. F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1988), 161-62. He tries to show that L. S. Chafer, T. Constable, M. Cicoris, and C. C. Ryrie have all strayed from the true meaning of repentance by making it more or less synonymous with believing or simply changing one’s mind about Jesus. He takes note of Chafer’s arguments that the Gospel of John never mentions repentance, Ro-

part of the salvation process is D. L. Bock, who says that “repentance . . . is an appropriate summary for the offer of the gospel today.”⁵ He comes to this conclusion largely from Jesus’ use of the term in Luke 24:47, which is Luke’s version of the Great Commission.

Clearly these men understand repentance to be a requirement for justification. In other words, in their discussions repentance is for unbelievers. But others think repentance is for believers. John Calvin wrote: “Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith but is also born of faith.”⁶ And C. H.

mans uses the word only once, and Paul does not include it in his witness to the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31). But, according to MacArthur, these are all worthless arguments from silence.

⁵D. L. Bock, “A Theology of Luke—Acts,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, eds. R. B. Zuck and D. L. Bock (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 131. He understands the terms *repentance*, *turning*, and *faith* as different ways to say the same thing (ibid., 129, n. 33). He does acknowledge that turning differs from repentance in that the latter is a “change of perspective,” while the former is the “change of direction” which follows the change in perspective (ibid., 132). But for Bock faith and repentance are interchangeable, since a comparison of Acts 3:19 and Acts 11:21 shows that Luke substituted one term for the other in these parallel verses. In both instances the *turning* followed the *believing* or the *repenting*. But he goes on to make the *turning* a necessary part of the “single act” that saves. In Acts 14:15 he claims that we see the “reversal of direction necessary for salvation of unbelievers estranged from God. . . . Gentiles are said to be ‘turning to God’ in Acts 15:19, where the term alone is sufficient to describe the response that saves.”

Bock develops his understanding of repentance from Luke—Acts and calls Luke the “theologian of repentance,” since he uses the noun eleven times in Luke—Acts out of the twenty-two uses in the NT and uses the verb fourteen times out of the thirty-four uses in the NT. At first Bock appears to distinguish between repentance and the deeds which should follow it (ibid., 130-31). He claims the NT meaning only gets *close* to the meaning of שׁוּב from the OT (“to turn or turn around”) in some contexts (Luke 24:44-47). He describes repentance as a “change of perspective involving the total person’s point of view.” And “part of the change of perspective in repentance is to see sin differently and to recognize it is deadly when left untreated.”

But as Bock’s discussion proceeds, terms become muddled quickly. He claims that repentance is the change of *perspective* and turning is the change of *direction* which follows repentance. He then distinguishes between the root and fruit of a tree. But when he speaks of the root, it can be “planted by faith, repentance, or *turning* [emphasis mine]. Each of these three terms points to approaching God and resting in His provision and *mercy*.” But the repenting is first in the *ordo salutis* (as one looks at life, sin, and God in a new way); then comes the turning (which alludes to a person’s *taking up a new direction*); finally faith arrives on the scene (the focus on God where one’s attention ends up after his new orientation). And *all three* of these are described as the *root* of the tree which surely must grow before the *fruit* of the tree can be realized.

But in Bock’s discussion it appears as though there is *fruit within the root*. One’s direction in life (turning) is produced by the repentance (change of perspective). And both of these (repentance and turning) occur before one believes (an act which is still part of the root as defined by Bock). Hence, when the dust of these definitions has settled, one must both repent (get a new perspective) and turn (get a new life direction) before one can believe (get a new focus). Therefore, salvation = repentance + turning + faith, according to Bock.

⁶J. Calvin, *Institutes of Religion*, III.3.1.

Spurgeon said, “All the fruits meet for repentance are contained in faith itself. You shall never find that a man who trusts Christ remains an enemy to God, or a lover of sin.”⁷

And so it is fair to say that some Christian teachers believe that repentance is for unbelievers, while others think repentance is for believers. Which view is correct? In this study it is suggested that both are right; in other words, repentance is for all men, unbelievers and believers alike. However, we will try to demonstrate that repentance is not a prior condition for unbelievers to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The procedure for this study will be to review in more detail the positions taken on repentance throughout church history while categorizing those who thought repentance was for unbelievers and those who thought it was for believers. Then from Scriptural examples we will try to show that repentance is for all men.

Post-Apostolic Fathers Through Augustine

A completely heretical but very influential document in the early church was *The Shepherd of Hermas*. The writer claims to have been a contemporary of Clement, presbyter-bishop of Rome (A.D. 92-101). Hermas is instructed by the “angel of repentance” dressed up as a shepherd. The call is for a lackadaisical church to repent. The writing is thoroughly legalistic and never mentions the gospel or grace. He speaks of the meritorious system of good works and the atonement of sin through martyrdom. There is no mention of justification by faith, but water baptism is indispensable for salvation.⁸ And water baptism is the seal of repentance which “makes Christians into Christians. . . . Asceticism and penal suffering are the school of conversion.”⁹ Faith is the fruit of repentance and the baptism which seals it.¹⁰

⁷C. H. Spurgeon, “Faith and Regeneration,” *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 7:141.

⁸P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5th ed. (N.P.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity*, 684-87.

⁹J. Behm, “*metanoew*,” in *TDNT*, 1967 ed., 4:1008.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 4:1007.

Justin Martyr followed on the heels of Hermas and also saw water baptism as the work of regeneration. He said: “Those who are convinced of the truth of our doctrine . . . are exhorted to prayer, fasting and repentance for past sins; . . . Then they are led by us to a place where there is water, and in this way they are regenerated, as we also have been regenerated; . . . For Christ says: Except you are born again, you cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹ The importance of water baptism for Justin Martyr is underscored when he says “the laver of repentance . . . is baptism, the only thing which is able to cleanse those who have repented.”¹²

In the post-apostolic period repentance almost immediately reflected the Judaizing influence against which Paul labored long and hard. Like almsgiving, repentance was considered a good work (2 Cl., 16.4). Repentance is the achievement by which one secures salvation and life (2 Cl., 9.8). Penitence with weeping and wailing could win God’s forgiveness (Just. Dial., 141.3). And so even in the early second century repentance becomes connected with winning God’s acceptance,¹³ and repentance was linked to water baptism.¹⁴

By the time of Augustine (d. 430) infant baptism was in full vogue. And at the baptismal font, “We are justified, but righteousness itself grows as we go forward.” (Augustine, *Sermon*, 158.5). In the *ordo salutis* Augustine saw predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. But justification was the umbrella over everything from regeneration through sanctification.¹⁵ And regeneration began at baptism. He actually called it “the saving laver of regeneration” (Augustine, *Sermon*, 213.8). Here the elect receive the external sign (the water of baptism) and the spiritual reality (regeneration and union with

¹¹J. Martyr, *Apol.* I., c. 61.

¹²J. Martyr, *Dial.*, 14.1.

¹³Behm, 4:1008.

¹⁴Baptismal regeneration was taught by not just Hermas (d. 140) and Justin Martyr (d. 165), but Irenaeus (d. 200) and Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), which brings us to Augustine.

Christ). For Augustine “the sacrament of baptism is undoubtedly the sacrament of regeneration” (Augustine, *On Forgiveness of Sins, and Baptism*, II.43).

But unlike Hermas and other predecessors, Augustine did not view repentance as a work of man. It was the unmerited gift of grace which wrought regeneration, faith, and repentance in the sinner.¹⁶ But even little children could be regenerated through baptism, which “cleanses even the tiny infant, although itself unable as yet with the heart to believe unto righteousness and to make confession with the mouth unto salvation” (Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, 80.3). Nevertheless, elect children who had been baptized would inevitably go on to faith and repentance and growth in grace. All of these were elements of his understanding of justification. Since he was not familiar with Greek, he misunderstood *dikaioō* to mean “to make righteous” instead of “to declare righteous” (Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 45). This misunderstanding also led to the Catholic belief that justification is a life-long process. Of course, with this approach one could not know whether he was elect or not until he died.

Apparently the church fathers and their successors believed in a “linear view of conversion.”¹⁷ Though conversion began at baptism, it was not considered complete until death. At baptism only the pre-baptismal sins were forgiven. The post-baptismal sins were a big problem. For this reason, many early Christians waited for baptism until their death beds. But surely there must be some way for those baptized as infants to have their personal sins forgiven. *Voila!* Repentance or penance was the answer. Whereas the earlier church fathers were divided over how many times a person could repent after baptism, by the time of Augustine the number was unlimited (Augustine, *On the Creed*, 15-16). The Latin Fathers made their understanding of repentance clear by their Latin translations of the Greek terms (*metanoēō* and *metanoia*): *poenitentiam agite* (“to do [acts of] pen-

¹⁵Demarest, *Salvation*, 351.

¹⁶Ibid., 282.

¹⁷R. N. Wilkin, “Repentance as a Condition for Salvation” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985), 19.

ance” and *poenitentia* (“[acts of] penance”).¹⁸ And this translation was preserved in Jerome’s Vulgate.

So by the time of Augustine penance for post-baptismal sins was the *modus operandi* for reinstatement to the Church. The acts of penance varied according to the nature of the sin and the temperament of the Father Confessor. The acts included fasting, prayers, weeping, begging, abstinence for those married, shaving one’s head, prostration, and the like. And penance could last a few days or many years.¹⁹

To summarize, repentance was primarily pre-baptismal in the post-apostolic fathers until infant baptism became the practice. As such it was viewed as a work of man which helped him gain his salvation. Though not clearly defined, it certainly included some sort of contrition for sin and a renouncing of the same, specifically at the point of water baptism. By the time of Augustine infant baptism was the norm. Post-baptismal repentance became the focus since regeneration took place and justification *began* at water baptism. This repentance became practically synonymous with not only contrition and confession, but also doing acts of penance. This understanding of repentance held sway right through the Dark Ages and the Renaissance until the Reformers.

The Reformers and Repentance

Both Calvin and Luther rejected the notion that post-baptismal sins could be atoned for by contrition, confession, and acts of penance. It was their belief that all sins (past, present, and future) were covered by the blood of Christ when the sinner was baptized. Hence, acts of penance were unnecessary. For Calvin repentance continued throughout the life of the Christian, but it is the fruit of faith, as noted previously. And faith cannot come in Calvin’s thinking without regeneration. So after the regenerating work of the Spirit, the gift of faith is implanted in the elect, and out of this faith comes

¹⁸W. D. Chamberlain, *The Meaning of Repentance* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), 27-28.

¹⁹Wilkin, 22.

repentance, which was defined as the mortification of the old nature (the flesh) and the quickening of the new nature (the spirit) unto holiness.²⁰ “Calvin understood by repentance what most later divines called sanctification.”²¹

For M. Luther repentance began at the point of faith. It involved genuine sorrow for sins committed and renunciation of all vice. He wrote, “Repentance is not penitence alone but also faith, which apprehends the promise of forgiveness, lest the penitent sinners perish.”²² Like Calvin he connected repentance with faith and saw it as a lifelong process in Christians: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ He called for the entire life of *believers* to be one of penitence” (italics mine).²³ Unlike Calvin he did think conversion was linear and incomplete until the end of one’s life. One could fall away from the faith and lose his salvation. He could also return to the faith, but this return was not through acts of penance.

Post-Reformation Repentance

After the Reformation the understanding of repentance went off in four directions, according to R. Wilkin:²⁴ 1) a willingness or resolution to stop sinning and a concomitant commitment to the Lordship of Christ;²⁵ 2) a change of thinking;²⁶ 3) contrition, confession, and doing acts of penance;²⁷ and 4) turning away from sin.²⁸

²⁰Calvin., III.3.2,9.

²¹Demarest, *Salvation*, 248.

²²M. Luther, *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 1210.

²³B. L. Woolf, *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 32.

²⁴Wilkin, 7-10.

²⁵According to Wilkin, 7, the adherents include: J. Anderson, W. Barclay, H. Conzelmann, J. D. G. Dunn, D. Fuller, K. Gentry, J. Gerstner, L. Goppelt, W. Graham, G. Ladd, I. H. Marshall, J. I. Packer, J. R. W. Stott, and L. Strauss.

²⁶Adherents are: L. S. Chafer, G. M. Cocoris, H. A. Ironside, and C. C. Ryrie (*ibid.*, 8).

²⁷The view of the RCC. Rather than a condition for obtaining salvation, repentance is viewed as a requirement for maintaining it.

Among the reformed thinkers there is the bedrock position that regeneration must precede both faith and repentance. This follows both Augustine and Calvin. Faith and repentance are understood to be “conversion.” But an unregenerate person cannot believe, and repentance is the fruit of faith. In all reformed theology of the last two centuries read by this author justification follows repentance. C. H. Spurgeon (d. 1892) said, “Faith in the living God and his Son Jesus Christ is always the result of the new birth, and can never exist except in the regenerate.”²⁹ So out of regeneration comes faith, and faith is the mother of repentance, which includes sorrow for sins and a forsaking of the same.³⁰

A. H. Strong (d. 1921) saw three simultaneous events: regeneration, repentance, and faith (in that order logically if not simultaneously). The latter two had three elements, which corresponded to the mind, emotions, and will of man. For repentance there was: 1) mind—recognition of sin; 2) emotions—sorrow for sin; 3) will—abandonment of sin. Faith too had three elements: 1) mind—knowledge of the Gospel; 2) emotions—feeling the sufficiency of Christ’s grace; 3) will—trusting Christ as Savior and Lord. So repentance was a determination to turn from all known sin, and faith was a determination to turn to Christ.³¹ Thus for both Spurgeon and Strong, repentance is not a requirement for regeneration because regeneration precedes repentance and faith.

M. J. Erickson and B. Demarest reverse the order. That is, regeneration follows repentance and faith. Like Strong, they understand conversion to consist of repentance (the negative side) and faith (the positive side). For Erickson repentance consists in the sorrow for sin and the determination to turn from it. Faith equals the intellectual assent to the truth of the Gospel plus the emotional element of trust in the person of Christ. From a logical standpoint, repentance and faith (the two of which equal conversion) are condi-

²⁸Among those holding this view are J. Graham, G. Peters, A. H. Strong, and the *Westminster Confession of Faith Shorter Catechism* (ibid., 10).

²⁹Spurgeon, *SEE*, 7:139.

³⁰Demarest, *Salvation*, 248.

³¹Ibid., 249.

tions for regeneration, but from a temporal standpoint these three occur simultaneously.³² Demarest holds the same position.³³

It seems apparent from the previous discussion that theologians cannot agree on whether repentance precedes regeneration or not. For some, repentance is a condition for regeneration, while others say it is the fruit of regeneration. So we are right back where we started. Some say repentance is for the unregenerate, and some say it is for the regenerate. Perhaps now is the time to look at the Scriptures themselves to see what they say. Are there examples of repentance for unbelievers? Are there examples of repentance for believers?

Repentance is for Unbelievers

Can it be clearly demonstrated that repentance is for unbelievers? Of course it can. Much of John the Baptist's ministry was to unbelievers. We know this from Jn 1:7 where we are told that John came as a testimony concerning the Light (Jesus) that through him all men might *believe*. It could be argued that many of the OT saints had already exercised faith in God's promises seen through the shadow of the Law, and now these "believers" needed to believe in God's highest revelation, His Son. Even so, they needed to believe after repentance. And most of these more than likely had not believed the first time, for Jn 5:35 implies that many Jews responded to the message of John and rejoiced in his light, but when the Messiah came on the scene, they did not believe in Him (Jn 5:36-47), nor were they saved (Jn 5:34). The point is that for most of John's listeners repentance came before regenerating faith. Hence, repentance was for unbelievers.

Jesus Himself had the same ministry. We see this in Mark 1:15 where He went into the regions of Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom and telling them to *repent* and to *believe* in the gospel. Of course, this gospel is the good news of the King and His

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

King- dom, but the believing still comes after the repenting. The parallel passages in Matt 9:13, Mark 2:17, and Luke 5:32 should also be clear examples of sinners who have yet to believe. It is not the just/righteous (*dikaious*) who need repentance, but tax collectors and sinners. Nevertheless, if one went way out on a limb and said these tax collectors and sinners were simply Jews in covenant relationship with Yahweh but out of fellowship with Him, that could not be said of Luke 24:47 where repentance and forgiveness of sins is preached to *all nations*. Surely these nations were not in covenant relationship with Yahweh. Of course, the individuals in these nations needed to *believe* in order to be saved (Mark 16:16), but it is very likely that the call to repentance preceded the invitation to believe.

If the previous passages have not made it clear that repentance is for unbelievers, then surely Luke makes it obvious in Acts 17:30 where Paul speaks to Greek philosophers and other men of Athens. He says that God commands *all men everywhere to repent*. The reason for repentance is the impending judgment which will take place through Christ whom He raised from the dead. After hearing this message concerning the resurrection of Christ *some men . . . believed*. Is this not similar to the implications of 2 Pet 3:9 where God has not predetermined (*boulomai*) that any men should perish, but that *all men* might have room (*chōrēsai*) for *repentance*? Surely the “all men” refers to unbelievers.

Paul’s testimony before the Ephesian elders should also be understood as an example of his preaching (Acts 20:21), which included *repentance* toward (*eis to*) God and *faith* toward (*eis to*) our Lord Jesus Christ. Again it seems obvious the repentance preceded the faith. This is the same order of events implied by the listing in Heb 6:1ff. The writer starts with repentance and chronologically works his way through to judgment: repentance from dead works, faith toward God, baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection from the dead, and eternal judgment. Could an objective person not admit that the first step here is repentance?

In the passages referenced above repentance is for unbelievers. But repentance is also for believers.

Repentance is for Believers

The call for Israel to repent as a nation is a unique example which will be taken up in detail in our next study. But the Ninevites are an interesting case in point. Both Matt 12:41 and Luke 11:32 tell us that the people of Ninevah *repented* at the preaching of Jonah. But when we read Jonah, it says “the people of Ninevah *believed* [italics mine] God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5). The gospel accounts may be using the term *metanoēsan* (repented) as a summary for the entire response of the Ninevites to Jonah’s message (belief + repentance + fruit),³⁴ but the first recorded response on the part of the Ninevites was their faith.

If the example of the Ninevites is not perfectly clear, then what about the call to repentance in Revelation 2 and 3? Five of the seven churches are challenged to repent (Smyrna and Philadelphia being the exceptions). Surely the majority of the people in these five churches would be regarded as believers. The church at Ephesus is not accused of apostasy. Rather the accusation is dead, cold orthodoxy. They had the right faith, but their devotion had waned; they had lost their first love. Now they needed repentance. They needed to go back and do the first works, which would be a fruit of their repentance. Is this not a call to believers to repent? Of course, it is. Even in the case of the church at Laodicea, many scholars agree that the issue here is not relationship; it is fellowship. Rev 3:19 says, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten (*paideuō*).³⁵ Therefore, be zealous and repent.” But the promise to those who repent is simply this: “I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me.” The promise is not relationship; it is fellowship. The picture is one of intimacy, of dining together, of enjoying one another’s company.

³⁴Since these people initially were unbelievers, the order here could be argued to be repentance + faith + fruit, but the first recorded response was their faith.

³⁵A word consistently used in the NT for child-training.

Luke 15 with its three parables about repentance issues out of the same setting. Jesus is eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees and scribes cannot understand how He can do this. The passage has long been a favorite passage of evangelists in their appeal to sinners to “come home.” But what makes us so sure the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-7 is not a sheep? And what makes us so sure the coin of the next parable is not a coin which used to be on the necklace? And in the parable of the prodigal son, are we prepared to say he was not already a son with a father and part of the family before he took off? The call may well be to come home, but it is to people who already had a home, who were already part of the family, already part of the flock.

As Z. C. Hodges writes,³⁶ the examples in Luke 15 could go either way. If an unbeliever is in view, the call is to repentance; if a believer is in view the call is to repentance. The entire series of parables is in response to the Lord’s practices regarding table fellowship. He is eating with tax collectors and sinners. What is necessary for a holy, righteous person to have table fellowship with sinful people? Those sinful people need to make a decision to repent, whether they are justified or unjustified. With this in mind, Jesus is more comfortable eating with tax collectors and sinners who have repented than with Pharisees and scribes who have not repented.

Perhaps this will make the issues more clear. We have *relationship* truth, which we will call “A” truth. Then we have *fellowship* truth, which we will call “B” truth. If someone asks a question about “B” truth, they get a “B” truth answer. If they ask a question about “A” truth, they get an “A” truth answer. Take the rich young ruler as a case in point. He asked how he could “inherit” eternal life. Jesus told him to go sell everything he had and give it to the poor. If we understand the question as one about “A” truth, then the answer about how to get into heaven or how to establish a relationship with God is

³⁶Z. C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 148-52. Hodges understands repentance to be a call to a *harmonious* relationship with God, which he calls *fellowship*. To believe is the call to a permanent saving relationship with God. While belief for the permanent saving relationship is required only once, the need of repentance in order to establish fellowship with the Lord for the first time or to restore fellowship with Him will be repeated over and over again in the life of a believer.

through works of self-denial. Most Protestant interpreters squirm at this point and are forced into explaining the passage from some sort of “evidence of faith” answer. But even if that is the correct interpretation, how many professing believers have gone out and sold all their possessions and given them to the poor as evidence of their faith?

But what if the rich young ruler was asking a “B” question and Jesus gave him a “B” answer? What if reception of eternal life (“A” truth) is by faith, and possession³⁷ of eternal life (“B” truth) is by works (in the good sense, that is, empowered and motivated by the Holy Spirit—Eph 2:10; Gal 2:20; Phil 2:13). If the rich young ruler had asked an “A” question, Jesus would have given him an “A” answer. Instead the man asked a “B” question and got a “B” answer. Of course, Jesus knew that to get “B” one must pass through “A.” In order to *possess* eternal life one must *have* eternal life. In order to *possess* the land, one must be *in* the land.

³⁷In the OT *njl* and *yrsh* are used interchangeably, the one meaning “to inherit,” the other meaning “to possess,” respectively. A quick check of the concordance reveals that each word is translated both ways. Of course, the primary use of *yrsh* was in Deuteronomy. The people were to go in and possess the land. But there was a big difference between being in the land and possessing the land. In order to possess the land, very clear instructions were given to the people. When they failed to follow those instructions (such as with the Philistines), it was a failure in faith to possess the land. Now the Jews are in the land again, but they still have not possessed the land. They will not experience the full inheritance which belongs to them by virtue of the grant given to Abraham until Christ returns to win the land for them.

But it must be observed that this inheritance was a reward for faithfulness. So also in the Christian life every child of God is an heir (Gal 4:7) of many blessings which will be shared by all His children. But for the mature sons (Heb 2:10), there is a special inheritance/possession reserved in heaven ready to be revealed when Christ comes (1 Pet 1:4-5, 9). In fact, to drive this point home to the Hebrew Christians the author uses the word *peripoiēsin* (possession) in Heb 10:39. By faith these Christians can possess their life (*psuchēs*—their time on earth) for eternity.

And eternal life is viewed in Scripture as both a gift and a reward. It is a gift to be shared by every believer in Christ. But it is not a static concept; it is dynamic. It does not deal with length of existence. All people, believers and unbelievers alike, exist forever. The question is not one of quantity, but quality. Believers will enjoy a quality of life that is described as “eternal life.” But the quality of this life can also increase in accordance with one’s faithfulness. That is the message to Peter and the disciples in Matt 19:27-30, who are encouraged to give up everything in order to inherit eternal life. It is the message to the Galatians believers in Gal 6:8, who are encouraged to sow after the spirit instead of the flesh that they might reap eternal life. And it is the same message given by Timothy to his readers when he encouraged them to do good by sharing their wealth so they might lay hold on eternal life.

This does not mean these faithful believers earn their way to heaven by keeping the law and self-sacrifice. But eternal life is portrayed as a dynamic, expanding concept. It is the same message we offer a new Christian who has received the free gift of eternal life and begins to enjoy his new life in Christ. He might ask, “Is this as good as it gets?” Our answer would be, “No, good as it is, it can get even better.” “How?” he might wonder. Answer: Unreserved giving reaps unmeasured living—to give is to live. We all received our initial installment of eternal life as a completely free gift. But future installments are in proportion to our faith. As we believe, so shall it be done unto us.

So it is with repentance. It deals with “B” truth: fellowship. That is why Luke 17:3 and 4 are so illustrative. The discussion concerns a fractured fellowship between two brothers. In order for their fellowship to be restored, the offender must go to his brother and repent, while the offended brother must forgive the repenting brother. Then the two, who already have a permanent relationship (brother—brother), can begin to “enjoy their relationship” (= fellowship) once again. The offense had not ended their relationship; it had broken their fellowship.

From the above passages it should be clear that repentance is not simply a challenge to unbelievers. It also an appeal to believers. Repentance is for all men? But just what is repentance? Does it mean “to change the mind,” as many suggest? Or does it mean one must turn completely away from his sins, as others teach? The suggestion of this study is that repentance means more than simply a change of mind, but less than a complete turning away from one’s sins which can be externally observed. What, then, does repentance mean?

The Meaning of Repentance

We will not try to establish the meaning of this word from the comparisons to *sh|b* (“to turn or turn around”) and *n!j^m* (“to be sorry or to comfort oneself”) in the OT, although these words will be discussed in our next study. The truth is that there is no term directly equivalent to *metanoēō* or *metanoia* in the OT. That is why the LXX never translates *sh|b* as *metanoēō*. In the LXX *sh|b* is translated as *epistrephō*, a fact which has led many to either equate *epistrephō* and *metanoēō* or to include *epistrephō* in the meaning of *metanoēō*.³⁸ Is this valid? Before discussing *epistrephō* in its relationship to *metanoēō* we need to examine the root meaning of *metanoēō* to see if that meaning is sufficient in its NT contexts.

It has already been pointed out that both Luther and Calvin wished to remove the concept of penance from the meaning of repentance. An easy way to do that was to go to

the root meaning of the word: *meta* = after; *noeō* = to think. When the two were put together, the effect of the *meta* was “after the fact” or “afterwards.” It was to think about something later on and to have a reversal of opinion. So, repentance meant “to change the mind,” a valid understanding in many non-religious contexts. But is this meaning sufficient in its NT contexts, or are we guilty of the “root fallacy” when we assign this meaning to the word?³⁹

Both John and Jesus preached, “Repent because the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17). If we substitute the root meaning of *metanoēō* into this passage, does it make sense: “Change your mind because the kingdom of heaven is at hand”? Not really. Even if we start substituting items about which they were to change their mind (their own sinfulness, God’s righteousness), something seems lacking. The exhortation would make more sense if we substituted “get right with God” as a meaning for repentance. “Get right with God because the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” But “getting right with God” seems to involve more than just “changing one’s mind.”

If we look at Rev 9:20-21, repent certainly carries more weight than “change your mind:”

But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear, nor wool, and they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

Surely if there were a passage where “turning from one’s sins” appears to be involved in the meaning of repentance, this one is it. To simply say that God continued to wipe these people out because they did not “change their minds” about their murders, et cetera, takes all punch out of the passage. But does it mean “to turn away from” as B.

³⁸See Behm, 4:990-91.

³⁹D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 28-33.

Demarest claims: “Repentance is a change of mind, ultimate loyalty, and behavior whereby pre-Christians turn from sin unto God?”⁴⁰

Epistrephō is the NT term for “turning,” just as it is in the LXX where it is used to translate *sh|b* instead of *metanoō*. But the use of *epistrephō* in the NT reveals that of its thirty-nine occurrences, in all but five the turning can be externally observed by other people. Jas 5:19-20 is a case in point. In that passage a believer⁴¹ has strayed⁴² from the straight and narrow (“the truth”), and another brother *turns* him *back*. This turn about is clearly observable with the naked eye. It is not an *internal* turning or part of the root as suggested by D. L. Bock.⁴³

⁴⁰Demarest, *Salvation*, 252.

⁴¹There are two lines of argument offered to suggest the one who strays in this passage is not a believer. One is to say a brother is not a brother. Clearly the passage addresses brothers, and it hypothesizes that one of the brothers strays from the truth. It looks like James refers to a believer, unless, of course, a brother is not a brother.

The argument which says a brother is not a brother usually goes something like this. In every congregation we have professing Christians and possessing Christians. Only the latter are born again. Every church is a congregation mixed with sheep and goats, wheat and tares, believers and unbelievers, true brethren and false brethren. So just because James is addressing the brethren here does not mean all the brethren are believers.

Though that argument may work in certain contexts, it definitely falls short in James. In Jas 1:16-18 the beloved brethren are identified as the “us” and “we” of v. 18, which includes James, the author. And the passage says that “we” have been “brought forth” (*apekuōsen*—1 aorist active and a birthing term) by the word of truth that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. Could there be a more clear statement of spiritual birth? These beloved brethren have been “born again.”

But v. 19 immediately addresses these “beloved brethren” again. Surely it is the same group he just addressed in vv. 16-18. And will you notice that these beloved brethren are encouraged to receive the implanted Word with meekness, which is able to *sōsai* their *tas psychas*, the same Greek words we find in Jas 5:20 in reference to the straying believer whose life has been turned around. No, the brother-is-not-a-brother argument is specious indeed.

The only other way out of the obvious is to say the person who strays from the truth in Jas 5:19 is not identified as a brother, but as *tis* (anyone), meaning a member of the congregation but not one of the brethren. Again, the suggestion is completely out of context. All one has to do is to look in the immediate context at vv. 13-18 to see that *tis* has been used three other times to refer to believers in the congregation who have a certain need. Instructions are given as to how that need should be met. The sick person should call for the elders of the church, who will anoint him/her with oil and pray for that sick person. The prayer of faith will heal (*sōzō*) the sick. Surely no one will argue that this passage refers to an unbeliever. Neither should they argue based on the use of *tis* that Jas 5:19 refers to an unbeliever who strays from the truth.

⁴²The Greek word *planeō* is certainly picturesque in that it portrays a believer in proper orbit around the Son of God, but he strays out of his appointed place in the heavens. Here is a believer who was reflecting the light of the Son for His glory, but some sort of black hole has sucked him out of orbit.

⁴³See n. 5.

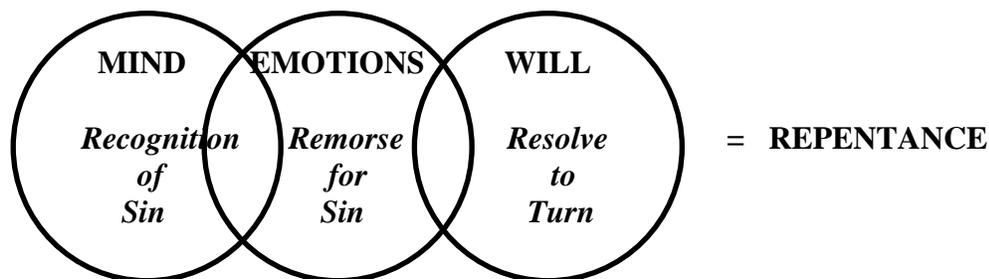
And in the five instances where *epistrephō* might have been construed to mean something internal (Matt 13:15; Mark 4:12; Jn 12:40; Acts 28:27; 2 Cor 3:16), let it be observed that all five are a reference to the nation of Israel as a whole, a subject to be treated in the next study. Even so, the first four references refer to Isa 6:9-10, which have an interesting chiastic⁴⁴ arrangement: “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed” (NKJ). Notice the message goes full circle: heart, ears, eyes: : eyes, ears, heart. Of course, the physical senses are used metaphorically, but the message has gone round the horn, so to speak. If there were some sort of internal processing involved in their “turning,” it would seem that the turning would have been in the chiasm. As it is not, and as the turning stands outside the chiasm, it appears that the turning is not part of the internalizing of the message, but rather deals with an external action.

Whether the above analysis of turning in Isa 6:10 bears any weight or not, the vast majority of the uses of the term *epistrephō* in the NT certainly deal with something externally observable. We conclude, therefore, that turning from one’s sins in an observable manner may well be the *fruit* of repentance and/or believing (cp. Acts 3:19 and 11:21), but the turning is not part of the *root*.

So, is repentance a “changing of the mind”? Yes, certainly. Repentance includes a changing of the mind. But it is more than a changing of the mind, for it is connected with sin and includes some degree of remorse for those sin. If the change of mind regarding my sin is the intellectual element of repentance, then remorse is the emotional element. But repentance is not complete without its volitional element. The who recognizes his sin (mind) and feels badly about his sin (emotions), needs to make a decision for repentance to be complete. He must resolve within himself to turn from his sins. **Nevertheless, repentance is not the actual, externally observed “turning from sin” suggested by *epistrephō*.** To avoid confusion between or the fusion of the meanings of *metanoēō* and

⁴⁴The structure of a chiasm is: A:B:C::C':B':A'.

epistrephō, the meaning of the former must be distinguished from that which is externally observable. The observable “turning” is the fruit; the internal resolve to turn from sin is the root. May we suggest this meaning: repentance is *the internal resolve to turn from one’s sin(s), a decision coming from the recognition of and remorse for the existence of those sin(s) in one’s life.* The key words are recognition (mind), remorse (emotions), and resolve (will). Repentance is a change which involves our entire inner self. We think this meaning will make good sense in every NT use. A chart of this might look like this:⁴⁵



Conclusion

Once again, we ask the question, if repentance is the internal resolve to turn from one’s sins, is repentance a condition for receiving eternal life? And once again, we conclude, no. Repentance is not a condition for receiving eternal life, but it is a condition for possessing eternal life. By possessing eternal life we refer to enjoying a quality of life that only the believer in fellowship with God can have. Repentance is not about relationship, but it is about fellowship. In order to “get right with God,” one must repent. If an unbeliever is in view, he must believe to receive the free gift of eternal life. He might repent before he believes or after he believes. It is his faith that saves him eternally, but it is his repentance which allows him to enjoy his faith. Repentance concerns fellowship.

One might ask, “But how can God have fellowship with someone who has not actually turned away and forsaken all his known sins?” Perhaps an illustration will help. As a pastor I deal week in and week out with men who are involved in addictive behavior. I

⁴⁵One might ask how this view of repentance differs from that of A. H. Strong, since he also saw three elements, each related to the mind, emotions, and will, respectively. The answer is that Strong under-

am comfortable eating lunch with these men, playing golf with them, and studying the Bible with them. But some of them are still caught up in their addictions. They have yet to turn away from them externally. But I can still feel comfortable with them and fellowship with them. How? Does not 1 Cor 5:11 tell me not to eat with them? Ah, the reason I can eat with them is that in each case these men have resolved within themselves that their behavior is wrong, and they want to be delivered from it. In other words, each of them has repented. They have not yet received the external victory. But they have internally resolved to turn away from their addictive behavior. Through the power of the Holy Spirit they will be delivered from the law of sin and death.

If any one of these men had not resolved within himself to turn from his sinful behavior, I could not enjoy fellowship with him. Is this not what Jesus was doing with winebibbers, tax collectors, gluttons, and sinners? He did not condone their sins. Nor did He indulge in the same. But He was having table fellowship with them. We can only conclude that they had repented, that is, they were convinced their wayward ways were wrong, and they wanted “to get right with God.” In other words, they had resolved within themselves to turn from their sins. With that in mind, Jesus was willing to meet with them, to eat with them, and to explain the way of deliverance to them. The fruit of their repentance was their desire to meet with Him and would be their ultimate turning from their sins.

So, who is right? Is repentance for believers or for unbelievers? Both parties are right in that repentance is for both believers and unbelievers. Repentance is for all men. But repentance is not a condition for salvation; it is a condition for sanctification. It is not a condition for relationship, but it is a condition for fellowship. To establish an eternal relationship with God, one must believe only once. But to enjoy ongoing fellowship with God, one needs to live a life punctuated by repentance.

stood the volitional element to include *epistrephō*, the actual, externally observable turning from sin.

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