

THEOLOGY

“REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE” Pt. 2

by G. Michael Cocoris

THE MEANING OF REPENTANCE

One popular conception is that “repent” means, “to be sorry for sin.” Preachers often proclaim that it means, “to turn from sin.” In both of these definitions repentance has to do with sin. While not all professors agree, some say it means, “to change one’s mind” and that it does not necessarily have to do with sin.

Who is right? It is obvious that some of these definitions are wrong, because they mutually exclude each other. It cannot be that repentance is always about sin and that it is not necessarily about sin at all.

WHAT IT IS

How is the definition of a word determined? Most people simply look words up in a dictionary and accept what it says, but how does a dictionary determine the meanings of words?

Compilers of a dictionary determine the meaning of a word *by its usage*. Based on all the ways a word is being used, dictionaries list all its *possible* meanings, called “the field of meaning.” The point is that the meaning of a word is determined by its usage at a given time in a given context.

Word studies of Biblical words trace the various meaning of a word throughout history. Thus, a word study of a New Testament word includes:

- 1) the root meaning of the word,
- 2) its classical usage, which means how it was used between 900-300 BC,
- 3) its usage in the Koine period (300 BC-100 AD), that is, how it was used in the common, every day world outside the New Testament,

- 4) its usage in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (ca. 250 BC), and

- 5) its usage in the New Testament.

Needless to say, the critical issue is not the root meaning, or the meaning of a word at another time or in another place, but how a word is used in the New Testament in the context in which it appears. With that in mind, here is a brief word study of the New Testament Greek words “repent” (a verb) and “repentance” (a noun).

The Root Meaning The Greek word for repentance (metanoia) is made up of the two words: “after” (meta) and “mind” (noia). The root meaning of the word “repentance” then, is “*afterthought, change of mind.*”

Classical Usage One of the recognized authorities of the meaning of Greek words in the Classical period is the *Greek-English Lexicon*, by Liddell and Scott. It says that the meaning of “repent” by Plato (427-347 BC) and Xenophon (ca 434-ca 355 BC) is to “*change one’s mind or purpose*” and that the meaning of “repentance” by Thucydides (ca 471-ca 400 BC) is “*afterthought*” (Liddell and Scott, p. 503).

Wilkin gives the specifics. Claiming that in Classical Greek, “repentance” means “*changing one’s mind,*” he cites Thucydides, who when writing about the response of the Athenian council to a revolt decided that not just those who participated in the revolt, but all the men of the city of Meytilene were to be put to death. On the next day, however, they repented, that is, changed their mind. They decided that only the participants were to be put to death. He then quotes Xenophon, who said,

We were inclined to conclude that for man, as he is constituted, it is easier to rule over any and all other creatures than to rule over men. But when we reflected that there was one Cyrus, the

Persian, who reduced to obedience a vast number of men and cities and nations, we were then compelled to change our opinions (repent) and decide that to rule men might be a task neither impossible nor even difficult, if one should only go about it in an intelligent manner (Wilkin, Journal Autumn, 1989, pp. 13-14).

Koine Period The book that gives the meaning of Greek words in papyri documents is *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* by Moulton and Milligan. It cites a use of the verb “repent” that means, “change of mind” (Moulton and Milligan, p. 404).

Again Wilkin gives the specifics. He cites Polybius (ca. 208-126 BC), who used the word “repentance” to describe what the Dardani did. They decided to attack Macedonia while Philip was away. When Philip quickly returned, they changed their minds and broke off the attack before it even began. He also quotes Plutarch (ca 46 BC-ca 120 AD), who wrote:

Cypselus, the father of Periander... when he was a new-born babe, smiled at the men who had been sent to make away with him, and they turned away. And when again they changed their minds (repented), they sought for him and found him not, for he had been put away in a chest by his mother (Wilkin, Journal, Autumn, 1989, p. 14).

The conclusion given in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Kittel) is that for the Greek philosophers *μετάνοια* was predominantly used “in the intellectual sense” “by a penitent alteration of judgment, by reconsideration, for example, by the correction of a mistaken view, the fool becoming a wise man” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 1967, Vol. 4, p. 980). “For the Greeks *μετάνοια* never suggests an alteration in the total moral attitude, a profound change in life’s direction, a conversion which affects the whole of conduct” (Kittel, Vol. 4, p. 989).

By the way, assuming that repentance in the New Testament means, “to turn from sin,” the article in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says, “Whether linguistically or materially one searches the Greek world in vain for the origin of the New Testament understanding of *μετάνεω* and *μετάνοια*” (Kittel, Vol. 4, p. 980). No wonder! The assumption is wrong. Actually, as will be seen from a study of the words

“repent” and “repentance” in the New Testament, the facts are that the Greek usage of those words are the same as in the New Testament.

Septuagint The verb “repent” occurs 19 times in the Septuagint and the noun once (Prov. 14:15). Of these twenty occurrences of “repent” and “repentance,” thirteen pertain to God repenting or not repenting (1 Sam. 15:29-twice, Jer. 4:28, 18:8, 18:10; Joel 2:13, 14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10, 4:2; Zech 8:14). Four of the references to “repent” or “repentance” in the Septuagint are in the book of Proverbs. All four concern people thinking or changing their minds about something (Prov. 14:15, 20:25,

24:32, 29:27 in LXX. See esp. Prov. 20:25). These are “non-religious” usages of the word. The other three appearances of “repent” are about sinners changing their minds about the nature of God (Isa. 46:8) or their sin (Jer. 8:6, 31:19).

God, of course, does not change His mind. He is omniscient; He knows everything before it happens. To say that God “repents,” that is, changes His mind, is an anthropomorphism, a figure of speech attributing human characteristics to God. When the Scriptures speak of God changing his mind, the change of mind is apparent not actual. Nevertheless, the fact that in the Septuagint God repents demonstrates that repentance is not always about sin. God is not sorry for sin, nor does He turn from sin.

The conclusion is that the Greek words for “repent” and “repentance” in the Septuagint mean “a change of mind.”

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New Testament In the following chapters each of the fifty-eight occurrences of “repent” and “repentance” in the New Testament will be examined. It will be demonstrated that in the New Testament these words mean, “a change of mind.” Many passages contain indications in the context that repentance is a change of mind.

These include Matthew 3:2 (cf. “do not think” in verse 9 and “fruit worthy of repentance” in verse 8), Matthew 9:13 (cf. “trusted in themselves that they were righteous” in Lk. 18:9), Luke 16:30 (cf. “hear” in verse 29 and “persuade” in verse 31), Acts 8:22 (cf. “thought” in verse 20, “heart” in verse 21 and “the thought of your heart” in verse 22), Acts 17:30 (cf. “not think” in verse 29 and “ignorance” in verse 30), Acts 26:20 (cf. “repent” versus “do works befitting repentance”), 2 Tim. 2:25 (cf. “know” in verse 25 and “come to their sense” in verse 26), Revelation 2:5 (cf. “repent” between “remember” and “do”).

There are Greek authorities who say that the meaning of the Greek word for “repent” in the New Testament is “to change one’s mind.” For example, one Greek lexicon says that the Greek word translated “repent” means, “to change one’s mind or purpose” and “repentance” means, “after-thought” (*A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, G. Abbott-Smith). In his comments on Matthew 3:2, A. T. Robinson, the great Greek scholar, defines “repent” as a “change (think afterwards) [of] their mental attitudes” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*). Julius R. Mantey, who co-authored the famous *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (known as “Dana and Mantey”) says, “It means to think differently or have a different attitude toward sin and God, etc” (*Basic Christian Doctrine*, p. 193).

There are theologians who concur. Chafer says, “The word (repentance) means a change of mind” (Chafer, Vol. 3, p. 372). Even Erickson, who pours more into the word, admits that “literally” it means, “to think differently about something or have a change of mind” (Erickson, p. 937). Ryrie defines the word “repent” as “to change your mind” (*A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, Charles C. Ryrie, p. 139).

There are commentators who agree. In his comments on Luke 3:3, Alfred Plummer calls repentance “an inward change of mind.” In his commentary on Hebrews 6:1, Bishop Westcott says,

“It follows, therefore, that ‘Repentance from dead works’ expresses the complete change of mind—of spiritual attitude—which leads the believer to abandon these works and seek some other support for life.”

Simply put, the Greek words for “repent” and “repentance” describe an inward change of thinking or attitude.

A Clarification It is commonly assumed that repentance always concerns sin. That is not the case. The Greek words rendered “repent” and “repentance” means, “a change of mind or attitude”—period. What people change their mind about is not in or implied by the word. The issue may be sin or it may not be. It is used of sin and it is used of repenting of something good! “Plutarch tells of two murderers, who having spared a child, afterwards ‘repented’ and sought to slay it” (*Synonyms of the New Testament*, Richard Chenevix Trench, p. 258).

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The Greek word “repentance” is like the English “dozen.” The word “dozen” means, “twelve.” It does not contain or imply twelve of one particular thing; it simply means “twelve.” A farmer might use the word “dozen” referring to eggs, while a baker may use it in reference to donuts. Does “dozen” mean twelve eggs or twelve donuts? The answer is neither. It simply means, “twelve”—period. The context (the farm or the bakery) determines its object. R. A. Torrey said, “What the repentance, or change of mind, is about must always be determined by the context” (*What the Bible Teaches*, R. A. Torrey, p. 355).

WHAT IT IS NOT

Admittedly, not all agree that repentance is simply a change of mind. For example, a Greek lexicon says, “repent” means, to “change one’s mind” and later states, it means “feel remorse, repent, be converted” and “repentance” means, “change of mind, remorse, turning away, a turning about” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich translated by Walter Bauer). As was noted in the previous chapter some define repentance as being sorry and/or turning from sin.

Not Sorrow for Sin Those who claim that repentance means, “to feel remorse” begin with what they say is one of the Old Testament words for

repentance. For example, Erickson says that repentance is “based upon a feeling of godly sorrow for the evil we have done” and then says that the Hebrew word that expresses repentance is *nacham*, which means, “to lament or to grieve” (Erickson, p. 935).

According to Brown, Driver and Briggs, the Hebrew word *nacham* means, “be sorry, console oneself.” Other meanings that are listed include, “moved to piety, have compassion, suffer grief, repent, be relieved,” that is, “ease ones self” by taking vengeance, “comfort, console,” etc. (A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, William Gesenius, edited by France Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, pp. 636-637).

The Hebrew word *nacham* occurs 108 times in the Old Testament. Sixty-six times it is talking about comfort (for example, cf. Ps. 23:4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”). Thirty-six times it is a reference to God repenting. In fact, when it occurs in the sense of “repent,” the subject of the verb is almost always “God” rather than “man,” a fact that Erickson himself mentions (Erickson, p. 935). Six times it is used of people doing something other than being comforted or comforting.

In other words, according to the Hebrew lexicon, the primary meaning of the Hebrew word *nacham* is “be sorry, console oneself,” but English translations usually render it as “comfort” or “repent” and in the vast majority of times it means “repent” it is God who is repenting!

Only six times is *nacham* a reference to people doing something other than being comforted or comforting. Of those six, two say that people were “grieved” (Judges 2:6, 15). Of the four remaining, one says people changed their mind (Ex. 13:17) and three say that people repented (Job 42:6, Jer. 8:6, 31:19).

So, in only four passages in the Old Testament (4 out of 108) can it be said that people “repented.” In one of those four the point has to do with the children of Israel changing their minds about leaving Egypt (Ex. 13:17) and that is the way English

translations render it (NKJV, NIV, NAS). In the other three, people are said to repent of their sins.

From this data several conclusions can be drawn.

1. There is no technical term for repentance in the Old Testament. Scholars are “generally agreed” that the Old Testament does not have any technical term for repentance (*Repentance as a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament*, a Doctorial Dissertation presented to Dallas Theological Seminary by Robert Nicholas Wilkin, 1985, pp. 12-13). There is no Hebrew word in the Old Testament which in “all or even in most of its usages refers to repentance” (“The Doctrine of Repentance in The Old Testament” by Robert N. Wilkin in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 2:1, Spring, 1989, p. 14). There is no “special” term in the Old Testament for “repentance” or “to repent” (The article on repentance by Wurthwein in Kittel, Vol. 4, p. 980).
2. The fact that so many of the references to repentance are about God repenting (36 out of 108) indicate that *nacham* is not feeling sorry for sin, or turning from sin, but can be nothing more than a change of mind.
3. There are only three references to people repenting (Job 42:6, Jer. 8:6, 31:19). In light of the other references to *nacham*, it is possible and, perhaps, even likely that in the Old Testament when *nacham* is used of people repenting it means, “a change of mind” (cf. God repenting and see esp. Ex. 13:17). It certainly does not always mean, “sorrow.” It means the opposite of sorrow, namely, “comfort” 66 times out of 108 (See esp. Jer. 31:13).
4. The three references to people repenting are about believers (In Job 42:6, it is Job. In Jer. 8:6 it is backslidden Israel. Cf. Jer. 8:4. In Jer. 31:19 it is returning Israel). Therefore, in none of the three passages in the Old Testament where *nacham* is used of people repenting is the issue gaining eternal life.
5. Given the scarcity of its use (only three times in all the Old Testament), it is not likely that this

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rare use of the Hebrew word *nacham* is the background for the word “repent” in the New Testament.

Besides usage, not one possible meaning out of a field of meanings determines the meaning of a word. The issue, the only issue, is how the word “repent” is used in the New Testament. In the New Testament repentance is definitely *not* being sorry for sin. It makes a distinction between remorse and repentance.

There is another Greek word for regret (*metamelomai*). It appears five times in the New Testament (Mt. 21:30, 32, 27:3; 2 Cor. 7:8; Heb. 7:21). This word describes “sorrow for something done and wishing it undone,” but “forgiveness of sins is nowhere promised” for it (Trench, p. 258). Judas was “remorseful” (Mt. 27:3), but he did not get saved. On the other hand, the Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*) “does not properly signify sorrow for having done amiss” (Trench, p. 257). By the way, Esau shed tears, but it did not change anything (Heb. 12:16-17).

Furthermore, Paul plainly demonstrates that sorrow and repentance are two different things. He says “your sorrow led to repentance” (2 Cor. 7:9). Sorrow may lead to repentance; sorrow may accompany repentance, but sorrow and repentance are two different things.

The New Testament records an illustration of the difference between regretting and repenting. In Acts 2 the Jews regretted what they did to Christ. They were “cut to the heart” and asked, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). It was after their regret that Peter said, “Repent” (Acts 2:38), which shows that regret is different than repentance.

It should be pointed out that sorrow does not have to precede repentance. Paul says the goodness of God can also lead to repentance (Rom. 2:4). D. L. Moody used to say the inquirer is not to seek for sorrow, but the Savior.

Gill says,

Tears of repentance will not wash away sin; notwithstanding these, iniquity remains marked before God; Christ's tears themselves did not

take away, nor atone for sin; His blood must be shed, and it was shed for the remission of it; and that is the only meritorious cause of it (Gill on Lk. 24:47).

When some change their minds, there may be emotions—and there may not be. When people change their mind, a change of action is expected, but both of these things are *results* of repentance, and not the nature of repentance. “Nowhere is man exhorted to feel a certain amount of sorrow for his sins in order to come to Christ” (Except Ye Repent, Harry A. Ironside, p. 12).

Not Turning from Sin Those who say that repentance means, “turn from sin” claim that one of the Hebrew words for “repentance” is the Hebrew word *shub* and that it means, “to turn.” Erickson states that the genuine repentance humans are to display is more commonly designated by this Hebrew word and adds that it stresses the necessity of forsaking sin and entering into fellowship with God (Erickson, p. 936). Behm says that the Greek word for repent “approximates” the Hebrew *shub* (The article on repentance by J. Behm in Kittel, Vol. 4, p. 989-90).

Actually, the Hebrew word *shub* means, “to turn back, return” (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, p. 996). It occurs 1056 times in the Old Testament, but only about 118 of those are used in a religious sense (Kittel, Vol. 4, p. 984. Wilkin counted 203. See Wilkin dissertation, pp. 210-212 and *Journal*, Spring, 1989, p. 15). In the vast majority of cases, it is used to describe a

literal change of direction. It is used of God returning to Israel (for example, Josh. 24:20) and of Israel returning to God (for example, Deut. 30:2). In a few instances, it is used of the future turning of Israel and others to the Lord (cf. Isa. 6:10), but in these cases it is another way of speaking about faith, as is indicated by the fact that Isaiah 6:10 is quoted in Acts 28:26-27 to explain why some did not believe (Acts 28:24. For a more detailed discussion of the Hebrew word *shub* see Wilkin’s article in the *Journal*, Spring, 1989, pp. 15-26).

The fatal flaw in the assumption that the Hebrew word *shub* is equivalent to the Greek word for repent is that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, “never” uses *shub* to translate “repent!” In the Septuagint the Greek

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words that are “*always*” used for *shub* are *epistrephio* and *apostrepho* (Kittel, Vol. 4, p. 989).

In the New Testament repentance is definitely *not* turning from sin. It makes a distinction between repentance and turning. There is another Greek word for turning (*epistrepho*) and it is never translated “to repent” (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 11). Acts 26:20 clearly demonstrates that repenting and turning are two different things. Paul says that the Gentiles should “repent *and* turn to God” (literal translation).

Furthermore, the New Testament speaks about repenting *and* bringing forth fruit fit for repentance (Lk. 3:8; Acts 26:20), which indicates that repenting is different than turning from sin. In his commentary on Luke 3:8, Lenski points out that

“Repentance cannot be meant by ‘fruits’... ‘Fruits’ indicate an organic connection between themselves and repentance just as the tree brings the fruit that is particular to its nature... [Repentance] is invisible; hence, we judge its presence by the [fruits], which are visible.”

Berkhof, points out that the Roman Catholic Church “*externalized the idea of repentance entirely*” (Berkhof, p. 486) and adds,

Over against this external view of repentance the Scriptural idea should be maintained. According to Scripture repentance is wholly an inward act, and should not be confounded with the change of life that proceeds from it. Confession of sin and reparation of wrongs are fruits of repentance (Berkhof. p. 487).

Luke 17:1-4 is an illustration that proves the point. Jesus teaches that if a man repented seven times in one day, he is to be forgiven seven times. There is no question that there is genuine repentance here—the whole point assumes that the repentance is genuine. Yet this genuine repentance did not affect the man’s lifestyle!

So, repentance is not sorry for sin or turning from sin. The way that some get sorry for sin or turning from sin out of repentance is they claim that New

Testament repentance is based on the Old Testament, but there is no technical term for repentance in the Old Testament. So, some say that while the word is not there, the “concept” is there (Kittel, Vol. 4, p. 980). Then, they go to the Hebrew words for sorrow or turn, but, as has been shown, the connection is not valid. Those using this approach are *assuming* that repentance is feeling sorrow for sin or turning from sin and then they find words that have those definitions. Their boat does not float on a sea of facts.

The conclusive evidence that repentance does not mean to be sorry for sin or to turn from sin is this: in the Old Testament, *God* repents! To illustrate: in the King James Version of the Old Testament, the word *repent* occurs forty-six times. Thirty-seven of these times, God is the one repenting (or not repenting). If repentance means sorrow for sin or turning from sin, God is a sinner.

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Summary: Repentance means a change of mind or attitude; it does not include tears or turning.

To define repentance as being sorry for sin or turning from sin is dangerous, because it could cause people to think that they could do something that could in some way help them obtain salvation. For example, when salvation is made to be conditioned on feelings and not on faith it encourages people “*to look inward at themselves and not away to Christ as*

Savior.” They are led “*to measure the validity of their salvation by the intensity of anguish which preceded or accompanied it.”* In such a way “*sorrow of heart becomes a most subtle form of meritorious work and to that extent a contradiction of grace*” (Chafer, vol. 3, p. 373).

Calling the view that repentance is turning from sin “*terribly dangerous,*” Wilkin says that instead of pointing people to Christ and the cross, it points their attention to their own efforts at reformation and it also “*undermines assurance*” (“*Communicating The Doctrine of Repentance*” by Robert N. Wilkin in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 4:1, Spring, 1991, p. 17). Preaching that people must turn from their sin can cause genuinely saved people, especially perfectionists, to begin doubting the reality of their salvation, because, in their opinion, they didn’t have enough tears or turning

away from sinful habits at the time they trusted Christ. Thus, preaching repentance as turning from sin is not only unbiblical, it undermines assurance.

Repentance is a change of mind—period. A change of mind should result in a change in behavior, but the word *repent* looks at the change of belief, not the change in behavior. Repentance is the root; change in behavior is the fruit. The change in action is the fruit, not the essence, of repentance.

My wife, Patricia, who is a talented interpreter for the deaf (she interpreted in a public high school for eleven and a half years and in the court system for many years), tells me that in sign language, the sign for “repent” is made up of two signs (It’s a compound word!), one for “change” and another for “mind.” There are other signs for changing your actions or behavior. Interesting. The deaf, who can’t hear, have it right. Maybe some do not have it right because of what they have “heard.” Perhaps, they should *look* what is said in the Word instead of *listening* to what they have heard. ■

In our next GFJ, Michael Cocoris will address “*The New Testament Texts on Repentance.*”

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