

THEOLOGY

REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE Pt. 5

by G. Michael Cocoris

THE MESSAGE OF PETER

John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ preached repentance. When John used the word, he meant change your mind about trusting your merit and trust God's mercy. When Jesus used the word for the forgiveness of sins, He meant change your mind about trusting your righteousness and trust God's mercy. A change of mind about forgiveness necessitates trusting Jesus Christ.

John and Jesus are not the only ones to preach repentance. Jesus commissioned His disciples to preach repentance. Actually, He did that twice.

Mark 6:12 During Jesus' ministry, His disciples preached repentance. Mark says that the disciples "*went out and preached that **people** should repent*" (Mk. 6:12). This is the only reference in the synoptic gospels to the disciples preaching repentance. There is not sufficient information in the immediate context to determine what the disciple meant by "*repent.*" No details are given. Since Mark did not explain what the disciple said about "*repent,*" it is safe to assume that they meant by it what Jesus meant by it. After all they were His disciples! Lane (and others) reached the same conclusion. He says the disciples preached "the message of repentance which Jesus preached."

Luke 24:47 After His resurrection, Jesus said, "*Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem*" (Luke 24:46-47). The disciples were to preach the death and resurrection of Christ and the remission of sins. In other words, they were to tell people that in order to receive the remission of sins, they had to repent, that is change their minds about Jesus Christ who died for sin.

The book of Acts records what the disciples did as a result of that commission. Actually, Acts is about

the acts of Peter and Paul. How did these disciples use the word repentance?

Of the fifty-eight appearances of the terms "repent" and "repentance" in the New Testament, six are related to Peter. He told people to repent (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 8:22), others said that is what happened when he preached on one occasion (Acts 11:18) and he said God wanted all to repent (2 Pet. 3:9).

TO UNBELIEVERS

Acts 2:38 On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached the death and resurrection of Christ to the Jews at Jerusalem (Acts 2:22-35). In the process he said, "*You have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death*" (Acts 2:23) the Messiah and "*this Jesus, whom you crucified, [is] both Lord and Christ*" (Acts 2:36). Notice that Peter said, "*you crucified*" (Acts 2:23, 36). He made them personally responsible.

Luke records, "*Now when they heard **this**, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men **and** brethren, what shall we do?'*" (Acts 2:37).

In response, Peter said,

"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

In the context of this sermon, the issue is not their personal sins of sexual immorality or stealing. It is their attitude toward Christ. Peter charged his listeners with thinking that Christ was a common criminal. He tells them to "*repent,*" that is, change their minds about Christ. "From regarding Him as an impostor, a false Christ, they were now to believe on Him as the true Messiah" (Gloag, who also pours more into the word "*repent*" than the

text warrants, at least understands that the word “repent” in this context is a change of mind about Christ).

Notice carefully what is going on in this passage. The people in Jerusalem thought of Jesus as a mere man worthy of death. Peter proclaims Him to be the Messiah, who died and arose, and tells them to repent, that is, change their minds about Him, so that they could receive the remission of sins. Therefore, by “repent,” Peter is saying that they must change their opinion concerning Christ and trust Him for forgiveness.

Peter also says, “let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). It sounds like Peter is saying that baptism is necessary for the remission of sins, but elsewhere baptism is never said to be the condition of the remission of sins. So, what does the expression “be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” mean? Two explanations are possible.

In the Greek text “repent” is in the plural, “baptize” is in the singular, and “receive” is in the plural. The change from the plural to the singular and back to plural again suggests that the baptism clause may be parenthetical. If so, Peter is saying that the condition of the remission of sins is repentance. Baptism, then, follows forgiveness.

On the other hand, the distance of the forgiveness phrase from the word “repent” and its closeness to baptism seem to suggest that the remission of sin is connected to baptism. That does not mean Peter is saying, “Be baptized **in order to** get remission.” It could mean he is telling them, “Be baptized **because** your sins have been remitted.”

In support of this view is the fact that throughout Luke’s writings in both his gospel and the book of Acts, repentance, not baptism, is the condition of remission (Luke 3:3; Acts 3:19, 5:31, 11:18, 17:30-31). Furthermore, the Greek word translated “for” (eis) in the expression “for the remission of sins” can mean “because.” The people of Nineveh repented “at” (eis) “the preaching of Jonah” (Mt. 12:41). They did not repent in order to get the preaching of Jonah

but because of his preaching (See comments on Mt. 3:11, esp. Dana and Mantey, p. 104).

John the Baptist preached repentance as the condition of forgiveness and baptism as a sign that one had repented (See comments on Mt. 3:11). After Pentecost, Peter told people to “repent” that their sins might be blotted out (Acts 3:19), but he made no mention of baptism. In Acts 10:34-43 Peter preached that the condition of forgiveness is faith. The people who heard him were forgiven before baptism was even mentioned (Acts 10:44-48).

To sum up, Peter told the people in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost that they need to repent for the remission of sins and then be baptized because their sins had been forgiven. In other words, “repent” in this passage means to change your mind about Christ and trust Him for forgiveness. So, baptism here is an expression of repentance (F. F. Bruce, See also Marshall).

In his book *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, Williams Evans says,

Thus, when Peter, on the day of Pentecost, called upon the Jews to repent (Acts 2:14-40), he virtually called upon them to change their minds and their views regarding Christ. They had considered Christ to be a mere man, a blasphemer, an impostor. The events of the few preceding days had proven to them that He was none other than the righteous Son of God, their Savior and the Savior of the world. The result of their repentance or change of mind would be that they would receive Jesus Christ as their long promised Messiah. (Evans, p. 140)

Ryrie concurs. He writes,

But if repentance means changing your mind about the particular sin of rejecting Christ, then that kind of repentance saves, and of course it is the same as faith in Christ. This is what Peter asked the crowd to do on the day of Pentecost. They were to change their minds about Jesus of Nazareth. Formerly they had considered Him to be only a blasphemous human being claiming to be God; now they changed their minds and saw Him as the God-man Savior whom they would

Peter proclaims Him to be the Messiah, who died and arose, and tells them to repent, that is, change their minds about Him, so that they could receive the remission of sins.

trust for salvation. That kind of repentance saves, and everyone who is saved has repented in that sense. (A Survey of Bible Doctrine, Charles C. Ryrie, p. 139)

that the people who turned from idols to the living God “believed” (Acts 14:23). Therefore, turning from idols to the living God is believing in Jesus Christ.

At the Jerusalem Counsel, James spoke of the Gentiles “turning to God” (Acts 15:19). In the context of the discussion at that council, there can be no doubt that “turning to God” is another expression of trusting Christ. Peter says the Gentiles were to “hear the word of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7) and God purified “their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). He added that “we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (Acts 15:11). James is agreeing with what Peter said (Acts 15:14-15) and therefore his expression “turning to God” is another way of speaking about believing the Gospel.

Acts 3:19 At the temple in Jerusalem, Peter preached the death and resurrection of Christ to the Jews at Jerusalem (Acts 3:13-15, 18, 26). As in the sermon in Acts 2, Peter again not only preached the death and resurrection of Christ, he also charged the Jews at Jerusalem with the personal responsibility in the death of Christ (cf. “you” in 3:13 and 14). Again, he concluded, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). In the context of Peter’s sermon in Acts 3, “repent” in Acts 3 is the same as in Acts 2, namely, that they change their minds about Christ. “All they had to do to avail themselves of this salvation was to change their former attitude of Jesus and bring it into line with God’s attitude. God had clearly declared his verdict by raising him from the dead” (F. F. Bruce).

This time Peter adds “and be converted,” a Greek word which means, “turn.” They were to change their minds about Christ and turn to the Lord (See Acts 26:20, where this same Greek word for turn is used and “to God” is added, indicating that the turning is to God).

In the book of Acts (and elsewhere) when “turning” is used of salvation, it means turning to the Lord, which is the same as trusting Christ. In Acts nine Peter healed a man, and all who saw it “turned to the Lord” (Acts 9:35). But a little later in the passage, Luke’s comments on that event is that “many believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:42).

Acts 11:21 says that “a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” The word “and” is not in the Greek text. The word “turn” is a command, and the word “believed” is a participle. Wilkin calls the participle a circumstantial participle of manner, meaning the manner in which they turned to the Lord was by believing (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 220). In Acts 14:15 Paul said that he preached “that you should turn from these useless things [idols] to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.” Luke’s comment was

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In Acts 26, Paul explains to Agrippa that Christ told him...

*To open their eyes, [in order] to turn **them** from darkness to light, and **from** the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me. (Acts 26:18)*

He then tells Agrippa that he preached “they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance” (Acts 26:20).

To turn from darkness to light, and **from** the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18) and to turn to God (Acts 26:20) is to trust Christ, which is clear from the expression “by faith in Me” at the end of verse 18.

Turning is synonymous with believing in John 12:40 (and therefore, in Mt. 13:15, Mk. 4:12, and Acts 28:27), where John says that people “could not believe, because Isaiah said” (John 12:39) “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with **their** eyes, Lest they should understand with **their** hearts and turn, So that I should heal them” (John 12:40). What Isaiah calls turning, John calls believing. When some did not believe what Paul was preaching concerning Christ (Acts 28:23-24), like John, Luke quotes Isaiah 6, indicating that turning in Isaiah is believing in Christ.

People turn (or turn to the Lord or turn to God) by believing in Jesus Christ.

To sum up, Peter told the people at the temple in Jerusalem that they need to repent, that is change their minds about Christ, and trust Jesus Christ so that their sins would be blotted out. In other words, “repent” and “turn” in this passage mean to change your mind about Christ and mean trust Him for forgiveness.

In *Basic Theology*, Ryrie says, “This saving repentance has to involve a change of mind about Jesus Christ so that whatever a person thought of Him before, he changes his mind and trusts Him to be his Savior” (p. 337).

Acts 5:31 Before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, Peter preached the death and resurrection of Christ (Acts 5:30). As in his two previous sermons recorded in Acts (Acts 2 and 3), Peter charged the Jewish leaders of being guilty of murdering Christ (Acts 5:28, 30). Even though they were guilty of murdering Christ, Peter tells them “God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). The situation (you killed Christ) and the solution (repentance) is the same as in Acts 2 and Acts 3. Therefore, the meaning of repentance in Acts 5:31 is the same as in Acts 2 and 3, namely, change your opinion concerning Christ and trust Him for forgiveness (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 75).

God giving Israel repentance (Acts 5:31) cannot mean that He gave the nation the gift of repentance. Only a few repented. Rather the expression “to give repentance to Israel” (Acts 5:31) means that God gave the people of Israel “the opportunity of repentance” (Marshall).

To sum up, Peter told the Sanhedrin that they need to repent, that is, change their minds about Christ. Of course, if they changed their minds about Christ, understanding that He died for sin and arose from the death, they would trust Him for forgiveness. In other words, “repent” in this passage means to change your mind about Christ and trust Him for forgiveness.

Acts 11:18 Peter preached the death and resurrection of Christ to Gentiles at Cornelius’s house (Acts 10:39-40). He told them that “*whoever*

believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43). Then, “*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word*” (Acts 10:44). In other words, in the middle of the sermon, the moment that they heard the message of forgiveness by faith in Christ, they trusted Christ, which is proven by the fact that the Holy Spirit fell on them.

This is the first time that Gentiles had trusted Christ. When Peter got back to Jerusalem, Jewish believers “*contended with him, saying, ‘You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!’*” (Acts 11:2-3). Peter had to explain his part in Gentiles coming to Christ, which he did (Acts 11:4-17). Peter concluded by saying, “*If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?*” (Acts 11:17). Notice: what the Gentiles did was believe in Christ (Acts 10:43-44), and in reporting this to the believer at Jerusalem, Peter spoke of “*when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 11:17). Thus far in this story, nothing has been said about repentance.

“This saving repentance has to involve a change of mind about Jesus Christ so that whatever a person thought of Him before, he changes his mind and trusts Him to be his Savior.”

Here is the response of the believers in Jerusalem: “*When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’*” (Acts 11:18). God granting them repentance means that He gave them an **opportunity** to repent (See comments on Acts 5:31, Marshall). One commentator remarks that they had “a change of mind and heart and assurance of eternal life” (F. F. Bruce).

Peter told the people assembled in Cornelius’ house that whoever believes in Christ receives the remission of sins (Acts 10:43). In reporting the incident to the Jews in Jerusalem, Peter said that the people in Cornelius’ house received the same gift we did “*when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 11:17). Yet, the Jews in Jerusalem call what happened in Cornelius’ house “*repentance*” (Acts 11:18). Therefore, what has been described as faith (Acts 10:43, 11:17) is now called repentance (Acts 11:18).

In light of the fact that in his previous evangelistic sermons, Peter conditioned salvation for Jews solely on repentance, which in context is clearly

changing one's attitude about Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:38, 3:19; 5:31), it can only be concluded that "Peter considered calling Jews to change their attitudes about Jesus Christ to be identical with calling Gentiles to faith in Him" (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 80). Moreover, since Luke does not cite Peter as mentioning repentance anywhere in this account (cf. Acts 10:34-11:17), the response of the Jewish believers at Jerusalem means that they considered "repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18) to be conceptually parallel with faith in Jesus Christ (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 81). Commenting on this passage, Chafer says "repentance, which is included in believing, serves as a synonym for the word **belief**" (Chafer, Vol. 3, p. 377).

2 Peter 3:9 In his second epistle Peter writes,

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

There is no object for repentance expressed in this verse or implied in the context. Furthermore, this is the only occurrence of either the word repent or the word repentance in Peter's epistles.

Therefore, the only available evidence for determining the meaning of the word repentance by Peter is Peter's use of the word in the book of Acts. In the book of Acts the meaning of Peter's use of repentance is a change of mind about Jesus Christ (See comments on Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31. See also Wilkin's, dissertation, p. 187).

TO BELIEVERS

Acts 8:22 "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you" (Acts 8:22).

Philip went down to Samaria and preached Christ (Acts 8:5). Simon, who had practiced sorcery, believed and was baptized (Acts 8:13). Then, Peter and John arrived, laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17).

When Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:18-19)

Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity." (Acts 8:20-23)

Commentators differ over whether or not Simon was genuinely converted. The text says he believed and was baptized, which certainly indicate that he was genuinely regenerate. The problem is that the text also says that when he went to buy the power to lay hands on people and give them the Holy Spirit, Peter told him, "Your money perish with you" (18:20), and "your heart is not right in the sight of God" (18:21).

There is nothing in the text to suggest that Simon's faith and baptism were any different from the other Samaritans who were converted. The fact that he was told that he might "perish" does not necessarily mean that he was going to go to Hell, because the Greek word translated "perish" is sometimes used of temporal destruction, ruin or loss. It is used of "wasted" perfume (Mt. 26:8, Mk.

14:4), of capital punishment (Acts 25:16) and of believers who fall into the snare of the love of money (1 Tim. 6:9, cf. 6:10). The destruction to which Peter refers could be premature physical death (Acts 5:1-11, 1 Cor. 11:30, Jas. 5:19-20, 1 Jn. 5:16-17. See Wilkin, dissertation, pp. 77-78).

Be all that as it may, it is evident from the text that what Peter meant by "repent" was a change of mind. Simon had not **done** anything in terms of behavior; he **thought** he could buy the power to lay hands on people so that they could receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:20). Peter plainly says, "**Your heart is not right in the sight of God**" (Acts 8:21) and that his problem was what he **thought** in his heart (Acts 8:22). In this case, however, the change of mind is not an unbeliever changing his mind about

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Christ. It is a believer changing his mind about buying the power to lay hands on people so that they could receive the Holy Spirit.

Summary: Peter's message of repentance was that people should change their minds about Christ (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31), and implied in that message is that they should also trust Jesus Christ. He also told a believer to change his mind about what he was thinking concerning buying the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Peter charged the Jews at Jerusalem with the murder of Jesus Christ. In telling them to repent, he was telling them to reverse their attitude about Jesus Christ from viewing Christ as a common criminal to acknowledging Him as the Messiah. Like Jesus and John the Baptist, Peter promised the forgiveness of sins for those who repented (cf. Lk. 3:3, 5:32; 16:30, 24:47, Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31).

In his only sermon to Gentiles, Peter called his listeners to believe in Christ and made no mention of repentance. Apparently, Peter considered calling Jews to change their minds about Christ to be conceptually parallel with calling Gentiles to faith in Him (cf. Acts 10:34 with 11:18. See, Wilkin, dissertation, p. 81-82). It is reasonable to conclude that Peter equated repentance, that is, changing one's mind about Christ, with believing in Christ ("New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Gospels and Acts" by Robert N. Wilkin in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring, 1990, p. 17). ■

G. Michael Cocoris pastors The Lindley Church in Tarzana, CA. His e-mail address is cocoris@cocoris.com.