

THEOLOGY

REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE Pt. 6

by G. Michael Cocoris

THE MESSAGE OF PAUL

Like John the Baptist, Jesus and Peter, Paul preached repentance. In the book of Acts he mentions it six times (twice in Acts 26:20). Two of the six are reference to the ministry of John the Baptist (Acts 13:24, 19:4). Paul speaks of repentance five times in his epistles.

IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Acts 17:30 At Athens Paul spoke to a gathering of idol worshippers. He told them,

Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:29-30)

Notice, Paul said they ought not to "think" God is like an idol (Acts 17:29). He also said that their problem was "ignorance" (Acts 17:30). Paul then moved quickly to talking about Jesus Christ and His resurrection (Acts 17:31) at which point he was interrupted (Acts 17:32). The episode ends with Luke saying that some "believed" (Acts 17:34).

From what is said in this passage, it is evident that when Paul uses the word "repent" (Acts 17:30), he means, "change your mind" about the nature of God; idols are not actually gods, and therefore idol worshippers should trust Jesus Christ instead. One commentator says Paul told them to "repent: to change their mind and their views, to renounce their idolatries" (Gloag¹). Another says that Paul is saying they are to repent "of their false concept of God (and consequent flouting of his will) and embrace the true knowledge of his being made

available in the Gospel" (F. F. Bruce²). In other words, Paul called idolaters to change their minds from faith in idols to faith in Jesus Christ. The call to change one's attitude concerning idols and God is essentially equivalent to a call to faith in Christ.³

Acts 20:21 In his farewell address to the elders at Ephesus Paul described his ministry as "Testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). This is one of only three places in the New Testament where repentance and faith appear together. The other two are Mark 1:15 and Hebrews 6:1.

In the Greek text of Acts 20:21, one article unites both repentance and faith. The meaning is that Paul called both Jews and gentiles to change their thinking about and have faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴ Hence, repentance and faith cannot be separated; they are inseparable, but they can be distinguished (See comments on Mk. 1:15).

Acts 26:20(twice) Paul told Agrippa that Christ sent him to the Gentiles (Acts 26:15-17) "To open their eyes and 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 that is in Me" (Acts 26:18). In short, Paul was sent to preach forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ.

Addressing Agrippa by name, Paul then says that he was obedient. He says that he "declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and **then** to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance" (Acts 26:20). In the context of Paul's

¹ Paton J. Gloag, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, 1979).

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New Testament Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

³ Robert N. Wilkin, *Does Your Mind Need Changing? Repentance Reconsidered*, (*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*. 11:20, Spring 1998), p. 121..

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

speech, “*repent, turn to God*” in verse 20 is the same as faith in Christ in verse 18, because verses 19 and 20 are an explanation of verse 18.⁵ Ironside says that Paul is simply insisting that sick people must recognize and acknowledge the incurableness of their terrible disease, so far as human help is concerned, in order that they may cast themselves in faith upon the Great Physician.⁶

It is obvious that repentance and turning to God are internal attitudes because they are followed by **works** befitting the repentance, which are clearly external acts of behavior. As in Luke 3:8, there is no doubt that here there is a difference between repentance, an internal change of mind, and works, an external change of conduct. The “subsequent way of life” shows the “genuineness” of repentance.⁷ It is the “practical evidence” of repentance.⁸

Paul’s message of repentance was consistent with, not contradictory to, the preaching of repentance by John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter. Granted, Paul’s message was distinctive, in that he told people to change their minds about idols (the nature of God), but his message was not different in substance. Paul used repentance as a change of attitude in order to be forgiven.

IN HIS EPISTLES

Romans 2:4 Paul begins the body of the book of Romans with the declaration that “*the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness*” (Rom. 1:18). He proceeds to demonstrate that people have rejected the knowledge of God and consequently, God in His wrath has given them over to sin (Rom. 1:19-32). After that Paul introduces a self-righteous man who thinks that he is so righteous that he judges others (Rom. 2:1). When I taught Romans, I entitled this section “But I’m Righteous.”

⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

⁶ Harry A. Ironside, *Except Ye Repent*, (New York: American Tract Society, 1937).

⁷ Bruce

⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).

Paul responded to this self-righteous individual by saying that people who judge others condemn themselves because they commit what they condemn (Rom. 2:1). If the sin people criticize is worthy of judgment, and they, who condemn it in others, do it, they condemn themselves and are inexcusable.

Paul’s message of repentance was consistent with, not contradictory to, the preaching of repentance by John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter.

Paul goes on to explain that judgment is according to truth (Rom. 2:2). Nevertheless, the self-righteous think they will escape the judgment of God (Rom. 2:3). Self-righteous people who judge others think that they are righteous and will somehow escape the judgment of God.

In the process of condemning others, the self-righteous not only do not see the same fault in themselves or think

that they will be judged, but they spurn the opportunity they have to repent themselves. So, Paul asks, “*Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?*” (2:4). In his commentary on Romans, William R. Newell writes,

Furthermore, such a “judge” of others becomes, in his self-confident importance, blind to God’s constant mercy toward himself—not feeling the need of it; and in his self-righteous blindness knows not that the “goodness” of God is meant to lead him to personal repentance instead of the judgment of his fellows.⁹

God’s goodness should lead self-righteous people to repent—that is to change their minds about their self-righteousness and see their need for forgiveness.¹⁰ To suggest that repentance here is “forsaking of sin, and turning from it” (*Barnes Notes*) would be to repudiate everything Paul teaches in Romans that no work can contribute in any way to salvation (cf. Rom. 3:20, 27-28, 4:2-5). Repentance here is “right-about face, a change of mind and attitude instead of a complacent self-satisfaction and pride of race and privilege.”¹¹

⁹ William R. Newell, *Hebrews Verse by Verse*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1947).

¹⁰ Wilkin, p. 124-126.

¹¹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. (Nashville: Broadman, 1932).

2 Corinthians 7:9, 10 In this passage, Paul says that he was comforted by the coming of Titus with a message about the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:6). He adds that Titus told him about their “earnest desire,” their “mourning” and their “zeal” for Paul (2 Cor 7:7). The Corinthians desired to see Paul again, but they mourned over having not disciplined the disobedient brother (1 Cor. 5:2) and having caused Paul grief. They were still zealous for Paul and against those who were attacking him. Upon hearing this good report from Titus, Paul rejoiced (2 Cor. 7:7).

Paul explains his comfort and joy.

For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing (7:8-9).

His explanation sounds complicated, but it is rather simple.

A man in the church at Corinth was living in sexual immorality, and the church did nothing about it (1 Cor. 5:1-13). In 1 Corinthians Paul rebuked the congregation for its negligence in not dealing with the situation. His rebuke made them sorry—that is, caused them grief and pain (2 Cor. 7:8).

Paul first says that he did not regret having written that letter and then says that he did (2 Cor. 7:8). Paul did not regret what he said because, as he explains in verse nine, it made them repent. On the other hand, he regretted writing it when he perceived that it made them sorry. Love regrets causing pain even when the pain is necessary as when a parent has to punish a child.

So, Paul says that he is not sorry that he made them sorrow, because their sorrow led them to repent. The statement that their “sorrow led to repentance” clearly demonstrates that there is a difference between sorrow and repentance. Their sorrow was that they had disappointed Paul. It led them to repent—that is to change their minds about dealing with the adultery in their mist.

Having said they were sorry in a godly manner, Paul now explains two kinds of sorrow: “*For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted, but the sorrow of the world produces death*” (7:10). Godly sorrow takes God’s will into account. It produces a change of mind that leads “*to salvation.*” The Greek word rendered “salvation” means “deliverance.” It is a flexible term which can refer to deliverance from sickness, difficulties, physical death and condemnation (Acts 27:31, 2 Cor. 1:6, Eph. 2:8-9, Phil. 1:19). In 2 Cor. 7:10, salvation refers to deliverance from God’s discipline.¹² Such sorrow is never to be regretted either by the person who causes it or the person who experiences it.

The statement that their “sorrow led to repentance” clearly demonstrates that there is a difference between sorrow and repentance.

On the other hand, a sorrow for doing something wrong that leaves God out of the account is merely remorse, “that melancholy compound of self-pity and self-disgust.”¹³ It has no healing power. “The World’s grief does not progress beyond remorse.”¹⁴ It produces death, not life. Thus, there is not a change of mind that leads to God and deliverance.

2 Corinthians 12:21 Having said that he wrote for their edification (2 Cor. 12:19), Paul goes on to say, “*For I fear, lest when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbiting, whisperings, conceits, tumults*” (12:20).

Paul was afraid that when he came the Corinthians would not be where he wanted them to be spiritually—that is that they would be carnal, practicing sins such as contentions, etc. If that happened, he would not be what they wanted him to be: that is, gentle (1 Cor. 4:21).

If Paul arrived in Corinth and some of them were practicing these sins, he would be deeply grieved; thus, he adds, “*And lest, when I come again, my God*

¹² Wilkin, p. 129.

¹³ R. V. G. Tasker, *2 Corinthians* in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983).

¹⁴ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians* in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1987).

will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication and licentiousness which they have practiced" (2 Cor. 12:21).

If such sins were present when he came, then instead of coming in joy (cf. 2 Cor. 3:2), he would be coming in sorrow (cf. 2 Cor. 2:1-3). Even though in such a case he would say God used it to humble him, he didn't want the humbling experience of lamenting unrepentant sin.

This passage poses several questions. Is Paul speaking about genuine believers? What is the meaning of his use of the word "repent"?

Some argue that the sins listed here were only being committed by a "minority" and it demonstrates that the people about whom Paul is speaking were not genuine believers (Hughes), but Paul speaks of "many who have sinned" (2 Cor. 12:21) and in light of what he says about this church (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2, 4-7, 12:13, 6:18-20, 2 Cor. 1:8, 6:14-7:1) it is hard to imagine that Paul considered "many" in the church to be unregenerate (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 131). These were believers who had continued to practice immorality "even after their conversion."¹⁵ When we find a believer committing serious sin, the response should be grief, not criticism, condemnation, anger or indifference.

What does Paul mean by "repent" in this passage? In light of Paul's use of "repent" earlier in this book (2 Cor. 7:9-10), it is reasonable to assume that the meaning of "repent" here is the same as there, namely, "to change one's mind." In other words, Paul was afraid that they had not changed their attitudes toward the sins he lists.¹⁶

The list of sins in 2 Corinthians 12:20, coupled with the ones in verse 21, is virtually a summary of the sins Paul dealt with in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians had been guilty of contentions and jealousies. Those same sins using the same Greek words are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3:3 and here. No doubt the Corinthians had also been guilty of outbursts of anger, self-seeking, evil speaking

¹⁵ Tasker.

¹⁶ Wilkin, p. 130-131.

openly and behind one another's backs ("backbiting" is speaking evil openly and "whisperings" is secret slander), pride (cf. 1 Cor. 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2, 8:1; 13:4), as well as disorder in their divisions and difficulties with each other, even though Paul does not mention these sins by name.

Uncleanness can refer to any impurity, but it is often linked to sexual sins in the New Testament. Fornication is any unlawful sexual activity including adultery and homosexuality. It is at least one form of uncleanness. Licentiousness is excessive sin that is defiant of public decency. The Corinthians had been guilty of all of these kinds of sin (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12-20, 5:1, 11:21). Though some deny that Christians are capable of such sins, this passage indicates that believers can commit all kinds of iniquity. Though conversion itself is instantaneous, growth in grace is gradual.

2 Timothy 2:25 Paul wrote to Timothy,

A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they

*may know the truth, and **that** they may come to their senses **and escape** the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to **do** his will. (2 Tim. 2:24-26)*

These verses also provoke several critical questions.

Are the members of the opposition believers or unbelievers? Several factors indicate that they are believers. The Greek word rendered "correcting" means "to child train, to teach, to correct." Child training, correcting, is for believers, not unbelievers. Furthermore, the Greek word translated "come to their senses" means "to return to soberness." Returning implies that these are "true believers."¹⁷ People cannot return to something, in this case a doctrine (See next paragraph), unless they previously held to it. Hence, "Paul has in mind the constructive re-education of misguided Christian brethren."¹⁸

¹⁷ Homer A. Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966).

¹⁸ J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986).

What does Paul mean by God granting repentance? It means that God gives people the opportunity to repent.

What were they opposing? Apparently, they were opposing the truth, because Paul says they need to “*know the truth.*” The issue in this passage is straying from the truth (2 Tim. 2:18). Hymenaeus and Philetus did that by “*saying that the resurrection is already past*” (2 Tim. 2:17-18). Paul warns Timothy to “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*” (2 Tim 2:15). In other words, even Timothy must be careful so that he will not stray from the truth.

Is it possible for a believer to deny the resurrection? Some in the congregation at Corinth either doubted or denied the idea of a resurrection from the dead or perhaps, more specifically, just the resurrection of believers. Paul says, “*Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there no resurrection of the dead?*” (1 Cor. 15:12). Some within the congregation (cf. “*among you*”) were doubting or denying (cf. “*say*”) the resurrection of the dead. They were asking such questions as, “How are the dead raised up,” and “With what body do they come.” Paul begins a long defense of the resurrection (that is, all of 1 Cor. 15) by declaring that all Christians believe Christ was raised because that is what they had to believe in order to be converted (1 Cor. 15:1-11). Evidently, some believed in the resurrection of Christ but were doubting or denying the resurrection of believers.

What does Paul mean by God granting repentance? It means that God gives people the opportunity to repent (see comments on Acts 5:31).

What does Paul mean by repentance? Timothy is to correct these believers so they will repent, know the truth and come to their senses. Therefore, in this passage, the word “repent” means, to “change one’s mind.” The result of repenting is they will come to their senses and will know the truth. Simply put, repentance here is a “change of mind to come to a recognition of truth.”¹⁹ It is a “change of attitude enabling them to arrive at an

acknowledgement of the truth.”²⁰ Simpson speaks of “seeing sound doctrine reinstated in these backsliders.”

Summary: Paul’s message of repentance to unbelievers was that they should change their minds about idols and trust Jesus Christ. People must give up attitudes that prevent them from trusting Jesus Christ. His message of repentance to believers was that they should change their minds about tolerating or practicing sin. Believers are to change their minds from believing sin is permissible to believing that it is not permissible.

Paul’s message of repentance to unbelievers was that they should change their minds about idols and trust Jesus Christ.

Wilkin says that there are approximately thirty-four references in Paul’s epistles giving a condition (s) of salvation.²¹ Of these, thirty-two condition salvation on faith alone and two on repentance alone (one of the two does not mention the word). In other words, there is a “notable lack of emphasis” on repentance as a requirement for salvation in Paul’s epistles.²² Wilkin then quotes others who say that in Paul’s writings repentance

plays a negligible role (Bultmann), or Paul almost totally neglected and ignored repentance as a condition of salvation (Andrews).

If repentance is required for the forgiveness of sins, then what is the explanation of Paul’s lack of emphasis on repentance? That is not a problem, provided that it is understood that while repentance and faith can be distinguished, they are inseparable. New Testament faith is changing one’s mind from believing one thing to believing another. In the case of salvation, it is changing one’s mind from trusting one’s own righteousness or an idol to trusting Jesus Christ. For believers, it is changing one’s mind from believing that sin does not matter to believing what God says about it. Everyone needs to repent—that is, all need to believe God! ■

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

¹⁹ Guthrie, Donald, *Hebrews*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.

²⁰ Kelly.

²¹ See Wilkin, dissertation, p. 120 for the list of reference.

²² Wilkin, p. 118.