

# THEOLOGY

## REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE Pt. 8

by G. Michael Cocoris

### THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE APOSTLE

**J**ohn is present when Jesus tells the apostles to preach repentance to all nations (Lk. 24:47). Unlike Peter and Paul, John's sermons are not recorded in the book of Acts. He did, however, write five books of the New Testament. In four of those books, John does not use the words "repent" or "repentance" at all. The verb "repent" appears in the fifth book, the book of Revelation, twelve times. In terms of a study of repentance in the New Testament it is important to look at two of John's five books.

### THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John is the only book in the Bible that states that its purpose is to convert its readers. John the Apostle writes,

*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)*

Therefore, it is surprising to discover that the words "repent" and "repentance" do not make an appearance in the book at all, not one single time. In twenty-one chapters of evangelistic material, there is not so much as one reference to repentance.

In fact, the apostle seems to deliberately avoid the word "repent." He gives more attendance to the ministry of John the Baptist than the synoptic Gospels, each of which summarize John's ministry by reporting that he preached "repent." [Wilkin says the Gospel of John contains 29 verses concerning the preaching of John the Baptist (Jn. 1:6-8, 19-36, 3:23-30) as compared to 15 in Matthew (Mt. 3:1-15), 10 in Mark (Mk. 1:2-11) and 19 in Luke

(Lk. 3:2-20) (Wilkin, dissertation, pp. 154-155)].<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in the Gospel of John, the Apostle never mentions the word, even in connection with the ministry of John the Baptist.

The Gospel of John never mentions John the Baptist's denunciation of the self-righteous attitude of the Jews who thought that being Abraham's descent gained them a place in the world to come (Mt. 3:9, Lk. 3:8). It does not call the baptism of John the baptism of repentance (Mt. 3:11, Mk. 1:4, Lk. 3:3). It does not report that John the Baptist called for fruit fitting repentance (Mt. 3:8, Lk. 3:8). All of these observations would be appropriate when speaking of the preaching of John the Baptist. Mathew, Mark and Luke certainly thought so, but the Gospel of John, the only biblical book with an

evangelistic purpose, omits all such references to repentance.

At one point in the Gospel of John, the author records a dialogue between John the Baptist and a delegation from Jerusalem. They ask, "Who are you?" (Jn. 1:19). John denies that he is the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet and identifies himself as a voice of one crying in the wilderness (Jn. 1:20-24). The delegation then asks, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" (Jn. 1:25). According to Matthew, Mark and Luke, John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance (Mt. 3:11, Mk. 1:4, Lk. 3:3). So, it would be expected that the Gospel of John would report that John said his baptism was a baptism of repentance, but it does not do that! Instead, John says,

*I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He*

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkin, Robert Nicholas, *Repentance as a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament*, a Doctorial Dissertation presented to Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985.

*who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”*  
(John 1:26-27)

This is a place in the Gospel of John where repentance would definitely be expected, but there is nothing, not even a hint, about repentance.

It is not that the author of the fourth gospel did not know that John the Baptist preached repentance. He did know, because John, the author of the Gospel of John, was once a disciple of John the Baptist.

In the Gospel of John, after the conversation between John the Baptist and the delegation from Jerusalem, the author says, “Again, the next day, John [the Baptist] stood with two of his disciples” (Jn. 1:35). Those two disciples of John the Baptist “followed Jesus” (Jn. 1:37). One of the two is identified as “Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother” (Jn. 1:40). The second is not named, but from early times it has been thought that he was John, who later wrote the Gospel of John (Morris, Westcott, A. T. Robertson, Vincent, F. F. Bruce, etc). Indeed, “it is difficult to suppose that the other was not the author of the narrative which is to follow.”<sup>2</sup> If the author of this passage was once a pupil of John the Baptist, “his silence on the theme of repentance is made all the more amazing.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the author of the Gospel of John states that the purpose of the ministry of John the Baptist was faith. He writes,

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. (John 1:6-7)*

While the words for repent and repentance do not occur in the Gospel of John, what it does say almost one hundred times is that one must believe in order to have eternal life. If repentance is required for

the forgiveness of sins, then for John repentance must be included in believing. If repentance were required as a separate act from believing, it is inconceivable that John would never have made reference to it.<sup>4</sup>

## THE BOOK OF REVELATION

In seven different passages in the book of Revelation, the Greek verb “repent” appears twelve times. In five of these passages the word is used of believers, and in two it is directed to unbelievers.

**Revelation 2:5 (Twice)** Jesus told the church at Ephesus that they had left their first love (Rev. 2:4). He then counsels them: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamp stand from its place; unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5). Jesus gives them three commands: remember, repent and repeat the first works.

The placement of “repent” between “remember” and “do” indicates that repentance in this passage is somewhere between remembering and doing. They were to recall their former love for Christ, change their minds from their current less-than-loving attitude, and begin again to do loving deeds. The loving actions were fruit of their change of mind.

Walvoord says that the word repent means “to change the mind” and adds that the Ephesians “were to have a different attitude toward Christ and should resume that fervent love which once they had.”<sup>5</sup>

**Revelation 2:16** Jesus told the church at Pergamos that some of them had fallen into false doctrine (Rev. 2:14), which involved idolatry and, associated with it, immorality (Rev. 2:14-15). Some within the church taught that Christians had the liberty to participate in the pagan temples and their sexual

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<sup>2</sup> Godet, F. L., *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. 2 vol., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1883)

<sup>3</sup> Hodges, Zane C., *Absolutely Free*, (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), p. 148.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, Charles F., *A Dispensational Theology*. Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 1980), p. 414.

<sup>5</sup> Walvoord, John F. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 57.

immorality. The sexual immorality mentioned here was part of pagan festivities.<sup>6</sup>

The backdrop of this may be the demand for emperor worship. As Hadjiantoniou explains it, there were those in the church who reasoned that a few grains of incense have no importance whatever. They reasoned: so, throw a few grains of incense on the altar and a little smoke will go up. It is nothing but smoke. When the others bow their heads, bow yours—your head, not your heart. It is reasonable to believe that your relation to Christ will not be affected by such trivial, external things as a few grains of incense, a puff of smoke, and a slight inclination of the head.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus tells the church, *“Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth”* (Rev. 2:16). Like the church at Corinth, the church at Pergamos had failed to discipline its members.<sup>8</sup> The problem was the church (cf. “you”) tolerated those holding to false teaching (cf. “them”). They were to change their minds from an attitude of tolerance to an attitude of intolerance toward false teaching in their midst.<sup>9</sup>

**Revelation 2:21 (Twice), 2:22** Jesus tells the church at Thyatira that they have a similar problem as the church at Pergamos, namely participating in idolatry and practicing sexual immorality. In this case it comes from a different source, a prophetess, and their guilt seems to be greater. Concerning the church in Pergamos, it is said that they *“have”* members who hold to the doctrine of Balaam (Rev. 2:14). This time it is said that they *“allow”* such things to be taught and practiced (Rev. 2:20).

Thyatira was filled with trade guilds. It was difficult, if not impossible, to make a living without belong to one. The craftsman had to become a member of a guild. The problem

<sup>6</sup> Mounce, Robert H., *The Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Hadjiantoniou, G. A., *The Postman of Patmos*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p. 58-59.

<sup>8</sup> Mounce.

<sup>9</sup> Wilkin, Robert Nicholas, *Repentance as a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament*, a Doctorial Dissertation presented to Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985), p. 164.

for a believer was that belonging to a trade guild meant attending its meals, which were often held in pagan temples. Even if the meal was not in a temple, it began and ended with a formal sacrifice to the gods, and the meat eaten would be meat which had already been offered to idols. The meal also degenerated into sexual immorality.

A prophetess called Jezebel, which was probably not her real name (What Jewish couple would name their daughter Jezebel?), no doubt claimed divine revelation for teaching that it was permissible to participate in such practices. Perhaps the church allowed her to teach in the name of unity.

As hideous as her sin is, the Lord first dealt with her graciously. He says, *“and I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent”* (2:21). Instead of telling the church to repent as He did the church at Pergamos, the Lord speaks of the guilty individuals repenting. The Greek word translated “repent” means “to change one’s mind,” and it “has its literal significance here” (Smith).

She does not change her mind concerning what she was teaching (Rev. 2:20) and doing (Rev. 2:21). Since she does not respond to God’s grace and patience, He will deal with her and her followers in judgment. He says, *“Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death”* (Rev. 2:22-23). He will judge her with sickness. There is a contrast between the bed of her pleasure and this bed of her punishment. Paul taught that God uses sickness to disciple believers (1 Cor. 11:29-30). Her bed of sin would become a bed of sickness.

He will judge those who commit adultery with her with great tribulation unless they repent. These are probably believers who accepted her teaching and consequently committed adultery (cf. *“my servants”* in verse 20). The Greek word for “tribulation” means “pressure, affliction, distress.” Their affliction will be great.

He will judge her children with death. Her children are not her literal offspring but her

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followers. It is also possible that these are those who, like her, taught what she taught.

**Revelation 3:3** Jesus tells the church at Sardis that as a whole it is dead (Rev. 3:2). From a biblical point of view, it is possible to be living and dead at the same time. Paul speaks of a widow, who is assumed to be a believer but “*who lives in pleasure.*” He says that she is “*dead while she lives*” (1 Tim. 5:6). The church had some work but no vital spiritual life.

Based on their spiritual condition, the Lord says, “*Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent*” (3:2-3). Those who were about to die but had a little life are told to “*be watchful and strengthen.*” These are believers; they had heard and received the Word.

These believers are told to be watchful, strengthen what remains, remember what they had heard and received, hold it fast, and repent. They had responded right at first. They needed to remember that, hold fast to it, and repent—that is, change their attitude back to what it was then. The benefits of reflecting on one’s first experience of salvation are repeatedly recognized in the New Testament (cf. Col. 2:6, Heb. 3:14, 10:32, Gal. 5:7).

**Revelation 3:19** Jesus rebukes the church at Laodicea for their self-satisfied attitude about their spiritual condition. Nevertheless, they were believers. This letter is addressed to a church (Rev. 3:14). Spewing them out of His mouth (Rev. 3:16) does not mean that they were lost, only that their works indicated that they were lukewarm (Rev. 3:15) and therefore, they made the Lord nauseous. He tells them that they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17), but believers can be all of those things, including being deceived about their spiritual condition (Jas. 1:22), poor (1 Tim. 6:18), and blind (2 Pet. 1:9). Furthermore, the Lord tells them that He will chasten them, a Greek word that refers to child training, an activity of God to believers (Heb. 12:5-8, esp. 12:8).

The Lord tells these self-satisfied believers to “*repent*” (Rev. 3:19), which means that they needed to change their opinion of their spiritual condition.

**Revelation 9:20-21** After a third of the population of the earth is killed (Rev. 9:15),

*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 walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.* (Revelation 9:20-21)

They will worship demons and idols (Deut. 32:17, 1 Cor. 10:20) and as a result, they will commit murder, sorceries and sexuality immorality. They were so hardened, that they “*would not change their minds.*”<sup>10</sup>

In the book of Acts, Paul preaches that people need to repent concerning idols—that is, change their minds about the nature of God (Acts 17:30). In Revelation 9, John uses the word “*repent*” of people changing their minds about idols and adds that they should also change their minds about the immorality that is associated with idolatry.

**Revelation 16:9, 11** After the judgment of the fourth bowl, “*men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory*” (Rev. 16:9). After the judgment of the fifth bowl “*They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds*” (Rev. 16:11).

**Repent is the most misunderstood word in the Scripture.**

The repentance in this passage plainly has to do with changing one’s mind about God. The Greek text reads *the men* (Rev. 16:9), indicating that the ones scorched are the ones who received the mark and worshiped the Antichrist (Rev. 16:2). These judgments are on the image worshipers (Smith). Moreover, verse nine says they “*blasphemed the name of God*” and did not “*give Him glory.*” Verse eleven mentions “*their deeds,*” but does not identify them. In the context the deeds must refer to idolatry (Rev. 16:2, 9). They will blaspheme God “*instead of crying out to Him for mercy*” (Wilkin, dissertation, p. 171). The bowl judgments should have resulted in people’s

<sup>10</sup> Smith, J. B., *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1961.

“humble confession of dependence on God” (Ladd, cited by Wilkin, dissertation, p. 171). Again, John is using the word “repent” like Paul did in Acts 17:30.

The author of the book of Revelation certainly is not saying people have to turn from their sin in order to be saved because if that is what he means, he would be repudiating everything he says in the Gospel of John and what he says at the end of this book. He concludes this volume with these words: *“And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely”* (Rev 22:17). The Greek word translated “freely” means “without cost.” John would not say that people have to do something in order to be saved and in the same book say that it is without cost. He would say, however, that people have to change their minds from believing in idols and the sins of idol worship to trusting Jesus Christ.

**Summary:** In the book of Revelation, the apostle John uses the word “repent” to describe the message of Jesus to the churches and to delineate what sinners must do in the Tribulation. In both cases, it involves a change of one’s mind.

## CONCLUSION

Repent is the most misunderstood word in the Scripture. Modern definitions include changing one’s mind, feeling sorrow for sin, ceasing to sin, and even doing acts of penance. Then there is the problem of the relation of repentance to faith. Does repentance come before, with, or after faith? No wonder there is so much confusion.

In the New Testament, the Greek words “repent” and “repentance” mean “to change one’s mind.” The object of what people are changing their minds about is determined by the context. The message of repentance is preached to unbelievers and believers.

## TO UNBELIEVERS

When John the Baptist preaches “repent,” he means change your mind from trusting your merit to enter

the world to come, and trust the Christ who is about to come.

When Jesus proclaims “repent,” He means change your mind about trusting yourself and believing that you are righteous, and instead trust in God (Lk. 18:9-14).

When Peter urges people to “repent,” he means change your mind about Christ from thinking of Him as a common criminal to Him being the Messiah, the One to trust for the forgiveness of sins.

When Paul admonishes people to “repent,” he means change your mind about trusting an idol and instead trust Jesus Christ

When John the Apostle says “repent,” he means change your mind about trusting idols with the attending immorality and trust the true God, Jesus Christ.

**In other words, repentance is changing one’s mind from trusting one’s merit, righteousness, works, or idols to trusting Jesus Christ.**

The message of repentance to unbelievers is that they have to change their minds. Depending on their mindset, they need a shift in thinking about their merit to enter the world to come, their righteousness, their works, the nature of God, and who Jesus Christ is. In other words, repentance is changing one’s mind from trusting one’s merit, righteousness, works, or idols to trusting in Jesus Christ alone. Repentance, then, if not equivalent to faith in Christ, is conceptually equivalent to faith or essentially synonymous with faith.

Chafer writes, that repentance “is included in believing and could not be separated from it” (Chafer, vol. 3, p. 373). “Repentance, which is a change of mind, is included in believing. No individual can turn to Christ from some other confidence without a change of mind” (Chafer, vol. 3, p. 374). There are passages where the word repentance is a “synonym of believing” (Chafer, vol. 3, p. 377). He concludes that repentance, which is a change of mind, is a necessity to enter into the very act of believing in Christ, “since one cannot turn to Christ from other objects of confidence without that change of mind” (Chafer, vol. 3, p. 378).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Chafer, Lewis Sperry, *Systematic Theology*. Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948.

Ironside says, "So intimately are the two related that you cannot have one without the other. That man who believes God repents; the repentant soul puts his faith in the Lord when the Gospel is revealed to him."<sup>12</sup>

In his sermon entitled to "Faith and Repentance Inseparable," Charles Haddon Spurgeon says, "No repentance is worth the having which is not perfectly consistent with faith in Christ."

As Ironside says,

*Everywhere the apostles went they called upon men thus to face their sins—to face the question of their helplessness, yet their responsibility to God—to face Christ as the one, all sufficient Savior, and thus by trusting him to obtain the remission of sins and justification from all things. So to face these tremendous facts is to change one's mind completely.*<sup>13</sup>

#### TO BELIEVERS

When Jesus said that a brother needs to repent, He means that he needs to change his mind about sinning against another brother.

When Peter uses the word "repent" in speaking to a believer, he means that he needs to change his mind about buying the ability to bestow the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands.

When Paul uses the word "repent" in speaking to believers, he means that they need to change their minds concerning their toleration of sin.

When John uses the word "repent" in speaking to believers, he also means that they need to change their minds concerning the toleration of sin.

Ironside observes that since saints are sinners, there is "the need of daily and constant self-judgment which, we have seen, is the true meaning of sincere repentance."<sup>14</sup> He quotes a believer who said, "I

repented before I knew the meaning of the word. I have repented far more since, than I did then."<sup>15</sup>

**Summary:** Repentance is changing one's mind from believing one thing to believing another.

Repentance is connected with faith, even in a non-religious case in the Old Testament. Proverbs says, "*The simple believes every word, but the prudent considers well his steps*" (Prov. 14:15). In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word translated "considers well" is translated by the Greek word for repentance. Hence, in this proverb the simple believe everything they hear, but the prudent don't; they consider well what they do, meaning that in contrast to the simple, they change their minds from what they hear. Notice the connection between believe and repentance in Proverbs!

There is simply no question, but that there are places in the New Testament where repentance is a virtual synonym for faith. Jesus says that the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of

Jonah (Mt. 12:41); the book of Jonah says that the people of Nineveh believed God (Jonah 3:5). Peter told the people in Cornelius's house that "*whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins*" (Acts 10:43), but when Peter got back to Jerusalem, he says that "*God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Acts 11:17) and the people in Jerusalem declares, "*Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life*" (Acts 11:18). What has been described as faith (Acts 10:43, 11:17) is now called repentance (Acts 11:18). Paul declares to the people of Athens that God "*commands all men everywhere to repent*" (Acts 17:29-30), but the episode ends with Luke saying that some "*believed*" (Acts 17:34).

If this is the way that God's Word uses "repent," how can anyone do otherwise? Those who use the term in any other way need to repent; they need to change their minds. ■

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<sup>12</sup> Ironside, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ironside, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ironside, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> Ironside, p. 11.