

“REPENTANCE: THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD WORD IN THE BIBLE” Pt. 1

by G. Michael Cocoris

THE PROBLEMS WITH “REPENTANCE”

Repent is the most misunderstood word in the Bible. What most think is repentance is not repentance at all. What is often said to be repentance may be related to repentance, coming before it, or resulting from it, but is not part of the *nature* of repentance.

Actually, there are several problems with the subject of repentance in the Bible. The definition of repentance is definitely a difficulty, but so is the relationship of repentance to faith. Is repentance separate from faith or is repentance inseparable from faith?

The tragedy is that repentance is such an important subject. Jesus Christ commanded that “repentance... be preached to all nations” (Lk. 24:47). God has command “all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). He desires that “all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Repentance is so important because repentance is necessary for salvation. Chafer wrote, “Therefore, it is as dogmatically stated as language can declare, that repentance is essential to salvation and that none could be saved, apart from repentance” (*Systematic Theology*, Lewis Sperry Chafer, vol. 3, p. 373).

Since repentance is so important and since it is so misunderstood, it is imperative that it be carefully examined to determine exactly what the biblical message of repentance is. First, the problems connected with repentance need to be clarified.

1. VARIOUS VIEWS OF REPENTANCE

Change Your Mind Some say that the word “repent” simply means, “to change your mind.” Chafer says, “The word (repentance) means a change of mind (*Systematic Theology*, Lewis Sperry Chafer, vol. 3, p. 372). Ryrie states, “In both the Old and New Testaments repentance means ‘to change one’s mind’”

(*So Great Salvation*, Charles C. Ryrie, p. 92). Baker writes, “It (repentance) refers to reconsidering or changing the mind after an action has taken place” (*A Dispensational Theology*, Charles F. Baker, p. 411). Others have also concluded that repentance means a change of mind.

Be Sorry for Sin It is commonly assumed that repentance is being sorry for sin. Webster defines the religious usage of “repent” as “to feel so contrite over one’s sins as to change, or decide to change, one’s way; be penitent.” Barclay says “Repentance is the admission that the fault is ours and the experience of godly sorrow that it is so” (*The Revelation of John*, William Barclay, vol. 1, p. 79).

Be Willing to Stop Sinning According to this view, repentance is not actually turning from sin; it is a *decision* to do so. Erickson declares, “It is important for us to understand the nature of true repentance. Repentance is godly sorrow for one’s sin together with a resolution to turn from it”

(*Christian Theology*, Millard J. Erickson, p. 937).

Turning from Sin Berkhof defines repentance as “change wrought in the conscious life of the sinner, by which he turns away from sin” (*Systemic Theology*, L. Berkhof, p. 486). Another book on theology says, “To repent means literally to change direction, and in the New Testament it means to change the direction of one’s life. To repent means that one has been (negatively) headed down the wrong path, but now (positively) shifts to the right path (*Introduction to Christian Theology*, Bradley C. Hanson, p. 242). Repentance has been described as “forsaking of sin, and turning from it” (*Barnes Notes on Rom. 2:4*).

Acts of Penance Early in church history, the idea arose that original sin and all sins prior to baptism were removed by baptism. As a result, people waited until they were near death before they got baptized. To deal with that problem, it was taught

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that repentance was the cure for post-baptismal sins. Repentance was said to consist of feeling sorry for and confessing post-baptismal sins, as well as doing acts of penance. To reflect this theology, the Greek words “repent” and “repentance” were translated into Latin by words that meant “do acts of penance” and “acts of penance” (“The Doctrine of Repentance in Church History” by Robert N. Wilkin in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 1:1, Autumn 1988, pp. 12-13).

When Jerome (ca. 340-420 AD), produced the Latin Vulgate, he retained the Old Latin practice of translating “repent” as “do acts of repentance.” John Wycliffe (ca. 1320-1384), who was the first to translate the Bible into English, did not base his translation on the original Hebrew and Greek, but on the Latin Vulgate. Following the Latin Vulgate, He translated “repentance” as “do penance.” When the Roman Catholic Douay version was produced (1609-1610) it did the same (“New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations” by Robert N. Wilkin in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 2:2, Autumn 1989, pp. 16-17).

Thus, the Roman Catholic view of repentance is that it consists of contrition, confession and performing acts of penance.

2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REPENTANCE AND FAITH

The Bible is emphatic that salvation is by faith. Moses wrote that Abraham “believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). Paul proclaimed, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). In these and many other passages faith is the one and only requirement for salvation.

Not only does the Bible repeatedly mention faith as the single requirement, in critical places, it does not mention repentance. The Gospel of John is the only book in the Bible that has as its purpose to bring people to Christ. At the end of his Gospel, John wrote, “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” (Jn. 20:31). Yet the gospel of John does not mention the words “repent” or “repentance” one single time.

The most detailed book in the Bible on salvation is the book of Romans. The chapter in Romans on what one must do to be saved is Romans four, but Romans four does not contain the words “repent” or “repentance.” In fact, the word “repentance” only occurs once in the book of Romans (Rom. 2:14) and there it is a virtual synonym for faith. The only book in the Bible written to defend the Gospel is Galatians. Neither the word “repent” nor the word “repentance” makes an appearance in that book at all.

On the other hand, some passages say that repentance is required (Lk. 24:47, Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 17:30, 26:20, 2 Pet. 3:9, Rev. 9:20-21, 16:9, 11) and in these verses there is no mention of faith.

To complicate matters, faith and repentance appear together in three places (Mk. 1:16, Acts 20:21, Heb. 6:1).

The absence of repentance in critical passages on salvation and yet the insistence on repentance in others is a problem. What is the relationship between faith and repentance? There are several possible solutions.

Not a Requirement Hodges is not exactly clear as to his definition of repentance. He says that the Greek verb and noun are “roughly equivalent”

to the English words “repent” and “repentance” (*Absolutely Free*, Zane C. Hodges, p. 146). In a footnote he explains that the concept of “sorrow” or “remorse” is “frequently implied,” but “by no means always implied” (Hodges, p. 224). Since “remorse” is not always present, he seems to conclude that the meaning is “regret” (Hodge, p. 224).

Be all that as it may, Hodges is clear that in his opinion repentance “is not essential to the saving transaction as such, it is in no sense a condition for that transaction” (Hodges, p. 146). It is “not a condition for eternal life” (Hodges, p. 158). Repentance is the condition for fellowship with God (Hodges, p. 146).

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It is “the call to enter into harmonious relations with God” (Hodges, p. 145).

Required and Inseparable John Calvin taught that repentance “always” followed faith (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin, Bk. 3 Ch. 3 Sec. 1). Thus, for him faith and repentance are inseparable. He says “Can true repentance exist without faith? By no means. But although they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished” (Calvin, 3, 3, 5). In other words, repentance is “the whole work of turning to God, of which not the least important part is faith” (Calvin, 3, 3, 5).

Many have followed Calvin. Not all have said that repentance follows faith, but they have said that repentance and faith are inseparable. For example, Berkhof states

True repentance never exists except in conjunction with faith, while, on the other hand, wherever there is true faith, there is also real repentance.... The two cannot be separated; they are simply complementary parts of the same process (Berkhof, p. 487).

Erickson agrees, “As we examine repentance and faith, it should be remembered that they cannot really be separated from one another” (Erickson, p. 935). In a sermon entitled “Faith and Repentance Inseparable” Charles Haddon Spurgeon put it like this:

The repentance which is here commanded is the result of faith; it is born at the same time with faith—they are twins, and to say which is the elder-born passes my knowledge. It is a great mystery; faith is before repentance is some of its acts, and repentance before faith in another view of it; the fact being that they come into the soul together.

Required, But A Separate Step One possible solution is that repentance and faith are two separate “steps” to salvation. Erickson calls repentance a “prerequisite for salvation” (Erickson, p. 937). If it is a necessary, separate step then why is it not mentioned in the Gospel of John, in Romans four and the book of Galatians?

Summary: The problems with repentance are its definition and its relation to faith. In order to sort all of this out, it is necessary to do a word study of the word “repent” and “repentance” and examine every occurrence of these word in the New Testament. ■

In our next GFJ, Michael Cocoris will address “*The Meaning of Repentance.*”

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