

THE USAGE OF REPENTANCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The New Testament authors never use the word repent or repentance for the believer. It is always tied to their justification / salvation, to conversion. From the vantage of the New Testament, only unbelievers repent. This does not mean Christians are not changing as they grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:18), but it does mean the Christian message to Christians isn't "repent."

REPENTANCE AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

THEOCAST, a popular podcast, provides helpful information concerning the idea of repentance.

"There's definitely a collapsing of the two understandings of repentance. What I mean by two understandings is that there's a call to the sinner who is not under the grace of God, and who has not received a generation—[1] **there's a call to repentance to that individual.** [2] **And then there is a call to those who are under grace and who are children of God.** [3] **Then there's another interesting whole dynamic of being the Old Testament prophets and their preaching of repentance to a nation.** So you have three different categories of repentance, and often we collapse the three, and many times we collapse the nation repentance with the believer and confuse those two, or even the unbeliever and the nation, assuming that if one repents then God will give them mercy. It's like mercy only comes to the repentant—and that is true to the nation."¹

They conclude how many of our appeals to repentance are taken out of their biblical context. National calls to repentance should not be placed on the individual under the New Covenant.

REPENTANCE AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

From the gospel record we can see that John the Baptist preached repentance as preparatory of the kingdom's presence (Matthew 3:2; Acts 13:24; 19:4) as did Jesus Christ (Matthew 4:17). Mark adds to the Lord's message, "Repent and Believe" (Mark 1:15). Like John and Jesus the twelve disciples preached, "That men should repent" (Mark 6:12). Repentance, however, is not just preparatory for the receiving of the kingdom of heaven, it is also to avoid temporal, physical judgment (Luke 13:3 [Nineveh - Matthew 12:41; Luke 11:32; Tyre and Sidon - Luke 10:13; Matthew 11:20, 21]). It can also be an expression of remorse or regret (Matt. 27:3 [Judas]; 2 Cor. 7:8, 10) that is non-salvific in nature.

Interestingly enough Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repent (Luke 5:32 [Neither Matthew 9:13 nor Mark 2:17 include the phrase, "to repent" {It appears to be a MSS issue}]). Luke continues by noting how there is "joy in heaven" when a sinner repents. From the gospel narrative the righteous have no need to repent (Luke 15:7 [see also the previous verses]).

Why would the righteous not need to repent? Because they already have and are now in Christ. Only the unrighteous repent. It is the desire of God for repentance to be proclaimed to all nations in order that forgiveness might be attained (Luke 24:47). God's message through the apostles was for "all everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). The apostle Peter also echoed this thought, "all should come to

repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Throughout Acts repentance is coupled with forgiveness (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 5:31). Such a repentance “leads to life” (Acts 11:18).

REPENTANCE AND THE WRITINGS OF JOHN

As noted earlier, the apostle John does not use the word repent in the Gospel or the Letters [1, 2, 3]. The word “repent” [*metanoeo*], however, does occur ten times in Revelation. Again, we have made repentance more than it is. Repentance, like confession, is agreeing with God concerning your thoughts and actions. It is caused by God. God is always calling people to change the way they think and act concerning themselves and Jesus. Six times in chapters 2 and 3 the word ‘repent’ occurs and is to the corporate church and the unbelieving with it. After that, it is found in two passages four times.

- Rev. 9:20-21
²⁰The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, **did not repent of the works of their hands** nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, ²¹**nor did they repent of their murders** or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.
- Rev. 16:9, 11
⁹They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They **did not repent and give him glory**. . . ¹¹and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. **They did not repent of their deeds**.

Here, the unbelieving refuse to repent even though they are in tribulation. The word “repentance” as used in the New Testament occurs in the context of the unbelieving.

God with compassion and passion calls the unbelieving in Revelation 2 and 3 to REPENT. He says to those who do not believe, “come.”

REPENTANCE AND ‘FREE-GRACE’

“Legalist theology tends to ratchet this idea up to a new level and put back on the believer or unbeliever the ‘duty’ to repent. Either the believer is not repenting enough, or the unbeliever better get on it right away or stand the preeminent wrath of God. Unfortunately, this is a false idea of repentance.”²

There is within evangelicalism an idea promoting the absence of repentance from salvific faith (The works of Zane Hodge, *Absolutely Free*. See also Appendix B in *Salvation* by Earl Radmacher, c1999 and Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:376. See also any of Bob Wilkins work). Much is made of the fact that John never uses the word “repent” in his entire gospel account or in any of his three “John” Letters. In light of the fact that John emphasizes believe more than any other is highly unusual and perhaps a result of his audience [i.e. the world]. Because of this some argue faith alone lays hold of salvation’s promise.

Yet several times repentance is used without “faith.” Are we then to assume “faith” is not necessary (Acts 2:37, 38; 3:19; 8:22)? Hardly. Though none within evangelicalism would debate *sola fide*.

“Seeing as faith and repentance are a fruit of regeneration and come entirely from God, how could this be salvation by works? Jesus *is* Lord, (not made so by us) our saving faith and repentance is nothing more than *our* acknowledgement of what is already true concerning Christ, sin and death. Saving Faith/Repentance appropriates the redemptive provision that God has set forth for his people.”³

“John avoids the loaded terms **metavoeo [repent]** and **metavoia [repentance]**, but he, too, has the matter itself no less definitely than Paul. For him, too, faith [**pisteuo**] includes conversion.”⁴

“The fact that this group of words does not occur often in the Pauline writings (only 6 times) and not all in the Johannine (apart from Rev.), does not mean that the idea of conversion is not present there but only that in the meantime a more specialized terminology had developed. Both Paul and John convey the idea of conversion by that of faith.”⁵

REPENTANCE AND LORDSHIP

Most see faith as the positive turning where repentance is the negative turning. It is really the “two sides of one coin” analogy. One is *toward* God and the other is *from* self (1 Thess. 1:9; Acts 20:21). In the absence of the other neither one is genuine. If a penny did not have one of the two sides on it, it would not be a legitimate penny. It is only as both are present one has true penny. The same is true of faith/repentance. Either one independent of the other is false (Acts 26:20). Saving faith has a turning to Christ and a turning from sin. “When we turn to Christ *for* salvation from our sins, we are simultaneously turning *away* from the sins that we are asking Christ to save us from.”⁶

Again, the danger in the terminology of “turning from sin” is its specificity as a statement in one’s justification. Salvation happens when God opens our eyes to our true state and standing before Him and our utter helplessness of doing anything about it apart from accepting Christ’s work in our behalf as the substitutionary nature of His Life, Death, Burial, Resurrection, and Ascension. Repentance, confession, belief happen in the mind. It is changing how we think and then acting on this.

REPENTANCE AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

- The Meaning of True Repentance

The most rudimentary meaning of repentance is to change one’s mind, to turn.⁷ In the area of salvation it is to change one’s mind concerning self, sin, Jesus, and salvation. As noted earlier it is part of saving faith. No one turns *to* Christ who is not also turning *from* self. From the book of Hebrews, it is viewed as part of the elementary teachings about Christ. It is considered foundational (6:1). The author of Hebrews continues by noting how once it has been laid it cannot be laid again (6:6).

When stress is laid on “you can’t,” we are saying in that simple statement that you must **reject human autonomy** and you must **accept human inability**. You are changing your mind concerning yourself. You are repenting of past thought.

When stress is laid on “but God can,” we are saying in that simple statement that in the abandoning of human autonomy and accepting human inability, that only God can do for you what you cannot do for yourself. You are repenting of past thought and accepting something wholly new to you.

Finally, when stress is laid on “and Jesus did,” we are saying in that simple statement that what you need in your relationship with God is outside of your ability to do so. Only God can do for you what needs to be done and JESUS DID. By accepting those “simple” ideas, the individual is repenting of past thought and accepting something entirely new to them.

This is biblical faith/repentance. Whether or not those exact words occur is irrelevant. What is necessary are the ideas.

- The Elements of True Repentance

Like faith, repentance has three essential parts. There is an intellectual (knowledge), volitional (assent to), and emotional (unreserved trust in) aspect to the repentance leading to salvation. Neither one independent of the other can produce the kind of repentance leading to life. Two primary examples of such “fruitless” repentance are seen in the rich young ruler (Luke 18:23) and Judas (Matt. 27:3).

True repentance has its own “fruit” (Matt. 3:8; Lk. 3:8). And we are to “perform deeds” appropriate to repentance (Acts 26:20). This is why baptism follows repentance. Baptism is a consequence of repentance (Acts 2:38; 13:24; 19:4; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3 “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin”).

- The Origin of True Repentance

True repentance is seen as coming from God (2 Cor. 7:10 “Godly sorrow brings repentance”). It is “God who grants repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25). It is “God who gives repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (Acts 5:31). And it is God who grants even to the Gentiles the repentance leading to life” (Acts 11:18). It is the kindness of God that leads to repentance (Romans 2:4). It is this kind of repentance that leads to salvation and a knowledge of the truth (2 Cor. 7:10; 2 Tim. 2:25). No one, apart from a divine work, can understand the depth of their own depravity. It is only as we come to the end of ourselves, that we will turn *to* God and *from* self.

Only God the Holy Spirit enables us to confess, “We can’t, but God can, and Jesus did.”

“Repentance is always produced out of our regeneration. We cannot on our own volition simply repent but not exercise faith. At the same time, we cannot exercise saving faith apart from repentance. These two ideas are connected and inseparable. Like regeneration, repentance/saving faith is entirely by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It is from God; therefore, a believer cannot squelch or reject the work in which God has done in the believer.”⁸

Because of humanity’s innate depravity, they will not change what they believe about themselves unless and until God acts on them. As a consequence of this action, the newly born exhibit biblical faith. Primarily, and perhaps preeminently, the changing or repenting is first toward oneself. This is the principle in one’s justification. In regeneration, we see ourselves as we are before God and repent of this

self-independence [i.e. auto-soteric | works righteousness]. It is impossible not to see the inter-related connectedness from election to conversion. “Election is NOT salvation but it is unto salvation. The elect are not saved until the Holy Spirit regenerates them.”⁹ Repentance and faith is the work of the Spirit through regeneration. Secondly, the repenting or changing concerning the specificity of sins happens in one’s sanctification. Changing one’s actions and thoughts concerning specific sins is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believing.

- The Application of Repentance in The Life of The Believing

If we track the usage of repent/repentance through the New Testament, we would see how the idea is a salvation word and not necessarily a sanctification word. In other words, repentance is what the unbelieving are called to do, not the believing.

NOW, I recognize this seems harsh. Furthermore, I am not saying believers do not change their minds, but our reference point is not changing our minds about our past. What Paul calls us to is **accepting what is already true**.

The Apostle Paul does not use the word repent for the believing. In fact, his usage of the word is sparse [**metanoia** {Rom. 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:9, 10; 2 Tim. 2:25} and **metanoeo** {2 Cor. 12:21}].

“It is noteworthy how seldom Paul has the usual words for conversion. He expresses their meaning in his own distinctive theological terms. If in Jesus conversion includes faith, in Paul **metavoia** [repentance] is comprised in **pistis** [faith], the central concept in his doctrine of salvation.”¹⁰

What Paul calls the people of God to is the putting off of the old and the putting on of the new [**apotithemi** {Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22, 25; Col. 3:8} as do other New Testament writers {Heb. 12:1; James 1:21; 1 Peter 2:1}].

Based on the placement of this action within his Letters, this action is something that is already true. Paul calls us to be who we are. None of what Paul calls us to is achieving anything. It is simply acting on what is already true in Christ. This is also how John uses the word “confess” [**homolegeo**] in 1 John 1:9. God acts on the unbelieving so that their thinking changes concerning “sin, righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:7-15).

- John 16:7-15

⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ **And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:** ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. ¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

In fact, nowhere does the New Testament writers use the word repent or repentance for the believing. It is always of unbelievers repenting to be saved.

REPENTANCE AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

So, what should we do?

First, words and how they are used matter. The Church needs to get this right.

Second, see repentance as intrinsic to believing the gospel. **Unless and until you change your mind** concerning self, sin, God, and Jesus, you cannot be saved.

Third, as believers, rejoice in your repentance from self and toward God when you were first saved.

Fourth, we need to see how what was true then, is true now. What began in those initial moments of being saved continues to this day. We are those who's thinking, choosing, and feeling have been transformed by the gospel. Because of who He is, we are now living out gospel fruit.

"It is true for believers that the repentance is a lifelong exercise, however let us not forget it was initially produced as fruit from our regeneration by God and will be equally sustained by God until the end of the believer's life. In other words, we are ALWAYS repenting! (Whether or not we know it) **As for the unbeliever**, the Christian can (and we do) certainly pray for God to lead them to repentance, so they might enjoy the peace and eternal grace imparted to us."¹¹

Fifth, biblical repentance is a gift from God and worked by the Holy Spirit in us and through us to those around us. What began by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone continues to this day.

Finally, accept what the bible says concerning repentance. Let us use words with their proper meaning and rejoicing in what is already true.

¹ <https://theocast.org/what-is-repentance/> There is a transcript of the podcast available. It is worth a careful reading.

² **REGENERATION AND REPENTANCE**, Prepared by Les Mathson, taught on March 16, 2022 in GLORIA.

³ **REGENERATION AND REPENTANCE**, Prepared by Les Mathson, taught on March 16, 2022 in GLORIA.

⁴ TDNT, Vol. IV, p. 1005.

⁵ NIDNT, Vol. 1, p. 359.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *ST*, p. 713.

⁷ <https://escapetoreality.org/2014/08/20/hyper-grace-repentance/> I do not support all Paul Ellis teaches, but he does have an emphasis I enjoy. See further, NIDNT, Vol. 1, p. 357, "Change of mind; change one's mind."

⁸ **REGENERATION AND REPENTANCE**, Prepared by Les Mathson, taught on March 16, 2022 in GLORIA.

⁹ **ELECTION/PREDESTINATION OUTLINE**, Prepared by Angela Ketterhagen. Taught on March 9, 2022 in GLORIA.

¹⁰ TDNT, Vol. IV, p. 1005.

¹¹ **REGENERATION AND REPENTANCE**, Prepared by Les Mathson, taught on March 16, 2022 in GLORIA.