

# REPENTANCE AND SALVATION

by Robert N. Wilkin

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*Robert Wilkin's examination of repentance in relation to salvation, exploring Old Testament teaching on turning from sins and its role in God's covenant purposes.*

5 Chapters

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## 01 - The Doctrine of Repentance in Church History

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The Doctrine of Repentance in Church History Study By: Robert N. Wilkin

Few issues are of more vital interest to those who believe in heaven and hell than the question of what one must do to gain entrance into heaven. Answers to this question nearly always include a reference to repentance. Throughout church history nearly every theologian has taught that repentance is essential for salvation from hell.<sup>1</sup> However, several disparate understandings of repentance have been advocated. This article will delineate those understandings.<sup>2</sup> I. The Pre-Reformation View From the apostolic fathers until the Reformers, essentially one view of salvific repentance prevailed. Unhappily this view knew little or nothing of grace. A system of works salvation emerged very early in the Church. Amazingly, the first generation after the Apostles distorted the good news which the Apostles had entrusted to their care.<sup>3</sup> On the theology of the apostolic fathers Torrance notes:

Salvation is wrought, they thought, certainly by divine pardon but on the ground of repentance [self-amendment before God],<sup>4</sup> not apparently on the ground of the death of Christ alone. There is no doubt about the fact that the early Church felt it was willing to go all the way to martyrdom, but it felt that it was in that way the Christian made saving appropriation of the Cross, rather than by faith ... It was not seen that the whole of salvation is centered in the person and the death of Christ .... Failure to apprehend the meaning of the Cross and to make it a saving article of faith is surely the clearest indication that a genuine doctrine of grace is absent.<sup>5</sup> Three main aspects of the pre-Reformation view of salvific repentance are apparent.

**Initial Forgiveness of Pre-Baptismal Sins Only** The church fathers and their successors believed that salvation began at one's baptism. When someone was baptized the sins which he had committed until that point in life [plus his share of original sin through Adam] were forgiven.<sup>6</sup> The fathers thus believed that a person would begin the Christian life with a clean slate. Of course, the slate would not remain clean for long. Since everyone continues to be plagued with sin after baptism (1 John 1:8, 1 John 1:10), the Church had to develop a plan whereby post-baptismal sins could be atoned for.

**Forgiveness of Post-Baptismal Sins by Repentance/Penance** With such a view of baptism and the forgiveness of, sins it is no wonder that people began putting off baptism until they were near death. In that way they could be assured of total forgiveness. The church fathers and their successors dealt with this problem by proposing repentance (i.e., penance) as the cure for post-baptismal sins. At first the early fathers debated whether major post-baptismal sins could be forgiven at all. It was generally agreed that even "mortal" sins could be forgiven; however, there was some disagreement as to how many times a person could repent and be forgiven.<sup>7</sup> A few leaders, such as Hermas, held that there could be only one opportunity for repentance after baptism.<sup>8</sup> That view did not prevail, however. The prevailing view of the early fathers was that one could repent and be forgiven on several occasions.<sup>9</sup> At first they did not specify exactly how many times someone could repent for fear of giving churchmen an implicit license to sin. This, of course,

led some people to put off penance until their deathbeds. In the fifth century, in spite of the fear of giving people a license to sin, the Church uniformly specified that a person might repent and be forgiven an unlimited number of times.<sup>10</sup> Repentance Defined as Contrition, Confession, and Performing Prescribed Acts of Penance The apostolic fathers taught that in order to retain salvation from eternal judgment one had to feel sorry for and confess his post-baptismal sins to a priest and then do whatever acts of penance were prescribed by the priest.<sup>11</sup> The Latin Fathers translated, or rather mistranslated, the NT words *metanoieo* and *metanoia* to reflect their theological bias. They translated those terms as *poenitentiam agere* and *poenitentia*, "to do acts of penance" and "acts of penance," respectively.<sup>12</sup> Those mistranslations unfortunately became part of the Old Latin and then the Latin Vulgate versions of the Bible. It was not until the Reformation that those translations were given a serious and widespread challenge.

## Summary

Imagine that you were a member of the Church in the fifth century under such a system. Your parents firmly believed these things. You were baptized as an infant. As a young child you were taught the necessity of penance and confession to your confessor priest both by your parents and the priest. By the time you became a teenager you were convinced that salvation was only in the Church and that you had to strive hard against sin if you were going to get into heaven. Oh, how you hoped you would get in! You hoped you were good enough today and that you would stay good enough tomorrow. You hoped you wouldn't die right after committing a mortal sin such as adultery, idolatry, murder, or denying the faith while being tortured.

You wondered exactly which sins were mortal sins in God's eyes. What if you died after being jealous or envious or hateful and it turned out those sins were big enough to send you to hell? Sometimes you even feared that your confessor priest may not have been strict enough with you when he meted out your penance. After all, there was no set penalty for given sins. What if your priest made a mistake? What if you didn't do enough to atone for your sins? You were terribly frightened of hell and without any assurance of escaping its flames.

Robert Williams well summed up the view of the early Church on salvific repentance when he wrote: By and large, it was far easier to gain admission to the Church than to re-enter it, once its ideals had in any way been renounced by its adherents. The initiated, through baptism, were given a clean sheet. Whatever evils had previously stained a man's life, it was forgiven and forgotten, as a new adventure in Christ began. It was when the Church had to deal with those who had soiled the sheet after their admission, that difficulties arose. Light offenders were met by different forms of censure, such as temporary exclusion from Holy Communion or varying degrees of penance. In dealing with the mortal sins of idolatry, murder, and adultery, not to mention apostasy, Church leaders differed concerning the form of punishment.<sup>13</sup>

Surely there has always been a remnant of people who knew and apprehended the grace of God in Christ, even in the years between the Apostles and the Reformation. However, the vast majority of people knew nothing of grace. They knew only legalism and pharisaism. There was a serious need for a mass reform of the Church. It was centuries in coming. Indeed, for more than a millennium terrible darkness covered the Church until the Reformation.

II. Reformation Views The Reformers challenged all three pillars of the Church's view on salvific repentance.

#### Initial Forgiveness of all Sins, Pre- and Post-Baptismal

Calvin,<sup>14</sup> and to a lesser extent Luther<sup>15</sup> taught that all of one's sins, pre- and post-baptismal, were forgiven when a person became a Christian. Such teaching clearly marked a radical break from Romanism. What would become of the practice of confessing one's sins to his priest and performing the mandated acts of penance? Logically, it would cease in churches which adopted the thinking of the Reformers on forgiveness of sin. As we know, that is exactly what happened.

#### Penance Unnecessary for Forgiveness of Post-Baptismal Sins

Calvin completely rejected the idea that one must perform acts of penance to atone for post-baptismal sins in order to maintain one's salvation.<sup>16</sup> He taught that Christ's death, once appropriated, finally and completely atoned for all the sins one would or ever could commit.

Luther, however, in light of his linear understanding of conversion,<sup>17</sup> held that while penance itself was unnecessary, one who abandoned his faith in Christ and fell into sin would perish unless he returned to Christ again through renewed faith. Commenting on Jerome's view, the established position of the Church, that penance was "the second plank after shipwreck," Luther wrote:

You will likewise see how perilous, indeed, how false it is to suppose that penance is the "the second plank after shipwreck," and how pernicious an error it is to believe that the power of baptism is broken, and the ship dashed to pieces, because of sin. The ship remains one, solid, and invincible) it will never be broken up into separate "planks. In it are carried all those who are brought to the harbor of salvation, for it is the truth of God giving us its promise in the sacraments. Of course, it often happens that many rashly leap overboard into the sea and perish; these are those who abandon faith in the promise and plunge into sin. But the ship itself remains intact and holds its course unimpaired. If anyone is able somehow by grace to return to the ship, it is not on any plank, but in the solid ship itself that he is borne to life. Such a person is the one who returns through faith to the abiding and enduring promise of God.<sup>18</sup>

Luther rejected penance formally. He felt that penance "torture[d] poor consciences to death.<sup>19</sup> However, practically speaking he still held to the necessity of something not unlike penance. In order to be saved in the end from eternal judgment, according to Luther, one must endeavor to continue in the faith, both morally and doctrinally.<sup>20</sup> Repentance (Metanoia) Defined as a Change of Mind In contrast to the Church's definition of metanoia as involving contrition, confession, and the performance of acts of penance, Calvin and Luther concluded that it retained its classical sense of "a change of mind."<sup>21</sup> Salvific repentance according to Calvin and Luther was a change of mind whereby one recognized his own sinfulness and need of forgiveness and then turned in faith to God to provide that forgiveness in Christ.<sup>22</sup> In essence, then, Luther and Calvin viewed salvific repentance as an essential part of saving faith.

Summary The Reformation introduced a new view of salvific repentance. Calvin taught that all sins were forgiven at the point of conversion, that penance was unnecessary for the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins, and that the NT term metanoia referred to a change of mind whereby one recognizes his sinfulness and need of forgiveness in Christ. Luther agreed completely with the last

of those points and somewhat with the first two. Those who are burdened for the purity of the Gospel of grace find it disappointing that Luther held to a linear view of salvation and the possibility of forfeiting it by departing from the faith. The monolithic power of the Roman Church had been broken. No longer would the proponents of grace be limited to a few modern-day Elijahs. The Reformers looked back to Christ and the Apostles rather than the church fathers for their view of salvific repentance and the Gospel. Would their followers retain a high view of grace? Or would they, like the apostolic fathers, lose a proper understanding of grace and depart into a man-made, legalistic "Gospel"?

III. Post-Reformation Views The post-Reformation period has seen the continuation of the previously held views and the emergence of new ones.

Contrition, Confession, and Performing Acts of Penance The Roman view of salvific repentance has continued from the Reformation until the present. The views of Calvin and Luther have continued as well. However, their views have in some cases been modified so that today there are basically three Protestant views of salvific repentance.<sup>23</sup> Turning Away from Sin

Those holding to this view consider salvific repentance to be the actual turning away from one's sins and not merely a willingness or intention to do so.<sup>24</sup> They would tell an alcoholic, for example, that in order to become a Christian he would first have to stop getting drunk. A Willingness or Resolution to Stop Sinning

Others argue that one needs to be willing turn from his sins.<sup>25</sup> They would tell an alcoholic that in order to become a Christian he would first have to be willing to stop getting drunk. They would stop short of saying that he actually had to stop drinking before he could be saved.

People holding to these first two views might stress to varying degrees the need to be sorry about one's sins and to commit oneself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. A Change of Thinking

Some Protestants suggest that salvific repentance does not involve turning from one's sins or even the willingness to do so. Rather, they argue that salvific repentance is a change of mind whereby a person recognizes his sinfulness and need of salvation and sees Jesus Christ as the sinless Substitute who died on the cross for his sins.<sup>26</sup> They thus understand NT metanoia in its classical sense.

They would tell an alcoholic that he had to recognize his sinfulness and need of salvation and place his faith solely in Jesus Christ in order to be saved from eternal condemnation. They would avoid giving the impression that the individual had to change his lifestyle or be willing to do so in order to obtain salvation from eternal condemnation.

Variations of the Three Protestant Views

It should be noted that some persons who hold to the three Protestant views of salvific repentance do not necessarily believe the' salvation once obtained is secure and inviolable. Some Protestants reach that salvation can be lost due to unfaithfulness subsequent to one's conversion. Such teaching is actually inconsistent with the Reformers' view of depravity and Jesus' once and for all substitutionary death. Some Protestants have, in effect, a Roman Catholic view of salvific repentance--albeit one in which confession to a priest and formal penance are substituted with confession directly to God and an informal system of penance. However, we will call these variant

views "Protestant" since those who hold them are members of Protestant and not Catholic or Orthodox churches. In reality, then, there are actually six Protestant views of salvific repentance: 1) turn from sins and keep on doing so to obtain and keep a salvation which can be lost.<sup>27</sup> 2) turn from sins to obtain an eternally secure salvation, 3) be willing to turn from sins and then, after conversion, actually turn from sins as a manner of life to gain and keep one's salvation, 4) be willing to turn from sins to obtain an eternally secure salvation, 5) change your mind about yourself and Christ to gain initial salvation and then turn from your sins as a manner of life thereafter to keep that salvation, and 6) change your mind about yourself and Christ to gain an inviolable salvation.

IV. Conclusion From the early second century until the Reformation one view of salvific repentance prevailed, the Roman position.<sup>28</sup> It held that at one's baptism only his prior sins are forgiven and that subsequent sins could only be forgiven by confessing one's sins to a priest and then carefully carrying out the acts of penance which he prescribed. The Reformation introduced two new views. Calvin held that at conversion all of one's sins, pre- and post-conversion, were forgiven and that confessing one's sins to a priest and performing acts of penance were not needed. Luther held a position somewhere between that of Calvin and the Roman Catholic Church. He believed that confession to a priest and performing acts of penance were not needed to maintain one's salvation. However, while he rejected those formally, he continued to believe that one could fail to obtain final salvation by choosing to indulge in a life of sin.

Since the Reformation the Roman view has continued and six Protestant views have emerged. We must be very careful not to base our theology on a majority vote of our contemporaries or predecessors. The majority may be wrong--and in this fallen world it often is.

Why, then, should we study the history of interpretation? Because by so doing we are better able to come to and maintain our own conclusions and to interact with others, believers and unbelievers. If, for example, I understand the Roman position on salvific repentance, my witness to Catholics is strengthened considerably. Which of the views stated is the one correct view of salvific repentance? Future articles in this series<sup>29</sup> will demonstrate that the change-of-mind-secure-salvation view is the biblical one. If a person must give up something or even be willing to do so to obtain salvation, then it is not really a free gift. If one must live an obedient life to keep salvation, then it is conditioned upon faith plus works, and grace is nullified. Other views of salvific repentance fail to grasp the gravity of our plight as sinners in the hands of a holy God. Nothing which we can do to try and clean up our lives will impress God. Only the blood of Jesus Christ can atone for our sins. And, the only way to appropriate Jesus' blood is by faith alone in Christ alone. The only thing we need to give up is a self-righteous attitude. We must cease viewing ourselves as good enough to merit salvation and instead place all of our trust on what Jesus Christ did on the cross for us as our Substitute. No one can work his or her way to God. Yet many try. The only thing people need to do is recognize their complete helplessness and need of a Savior and then put their faith in Jesus Christ and Him alone to save them from their sins. A change of thinking is needed. Once one becomes a believer in Jesus Christ, he can be assured, based on the promises of Scripture, that he is and always will be a part of God's eternal family. God has done everything for us except that we must receive the free gift. That is our part. The Gospel presents the cure for sin and its consequence, hell. The message of the Gospel is extremely powerful as long as it is not distorted. Pure living water will forever quench the thirst of

parched souls.

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1 Throughout this article the expression "salvific repentance" will be used to refer to that repentance which is necessary to escape eternal condemnation.

2 This paper draws heavily on my doctoral dissertation. Cf. Robert N. Wilkin, "Repentance as a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament" (Th. D. dissertation, Dallas Theological seminary, 1985).

3 See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).

4 *Ibid.*, 135.

5 *Ibid.*, 138.

6 See, for example, Hermas, *Mandate*, 4. 3. 1, 6; Polycarp, *Letter to the Php* 2:5; Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 15-16; Origen, *Homilies on the Psalms*, On Psalms 37:1-40 (38):2, 6; Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance*, 2.11; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.17-18; Anselm, *De Concordia III: Grace and Free Choice*, 8; and Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV:71-72.

7 For example, the two-volume work by Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance*, was his defense against the Novatianists' claim that the church could not forgive mortal sins such as apostasy. Ambrose upheld the established church position that it had the power to remit post-baptismal sins of any magnitude.

8 See Hermas, *Mandate*, 4. 3. 6. See also Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance*, 2.10, where he teaches that lesser sins could be repented of daily but not mortal ones. Ambrose held that there could be only one penance for mortal sins.

9 See, for example, Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 7-9, 50-51; 56-57; Polycarp, *Philippians*, 2, 5; and Cyprian, *Epistle 52* (56 Oxford Edition), *Treatise on the Lapsed*, and *The Seventh Council of Carthage*.

10 See, for example, Jerome, *Letter 122: To Rusticus*, 3; and Augustine, *On the Creed*, 15- 16.

11 See Hermas, *Mandate*, 4. 3. 6; Clement of Rome, *First Epistle*, 8-9; and Polycarp, *Php* 2:1-30.

12 See William Douglas Chamberlain, *The Meaning of Repentance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 27-28; Edgar R. Smothers, "The New Testament Concept of Metanoia,," *Classical Bulletin* 10 (1933):7-8; Aloys Herman Dirksen, *The New Testament Concept of Metanoia* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1932), 66-67; and John Cecil Anderson, "Repentance in the Greek New Testament" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1959), 14ff.

13 Robert Williams, *A Guide to the Teaching of the Early Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 142.

14 See *Calvin Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4. 15. 3.

15 Luther held to a linear view of conversion. That is, he believed that a person's salvation was not finalized until he died. He taught that one could lose his salvation--or better, fail to realize it in the end--if he ceased believing in Jesus Christ and indulged in a life of sin. He viewed Christ's death as covering all of one's sins, pre- and post-baptismal, as long as one strove to remain in the faith. Of course, such a disclaimer effectively contradicted his claim about the sufficiency of Christ's death and eliminated the possibility of assurance. See Luther's Works, vol. 36, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520, 60-61, Marilyn Jean Harran, The Concept of Conversion in the Early Exegetical and Reform Writings of Martin Luther" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1978), and Fred J. Prudek, "Luther's Linear Concept of Conversion" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979).

16 See Calvin, Institutes, 3. 24. 6, 4. 19. 14-17 17 See footnote 15 above.

18 Luther's Works, vol. 36, The Babylonian Captivity, 61

19 Ibid., 89.

20 Ibid., 59-61, 89, 123-24. One should also note that the study by the Lutheran scholar Lowell Green (How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel: The Doctrine of Justification in the Reformation [Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1980]) indicates that Luther held to the necessity of a believer persevering in a walk of faith in order to receive final salvation (see, e.g., 260).

21 See Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 48, Letters (May 30, 1518 Letter to John von Staupitz), 65-70; Calvin, Institutes' 3. 3. 1-16; and Dirksen, Metanoia, 79-80 and "Metanoete," The Bible Today 19 (1965):1262, 1266.

22 See Calvin, Institutes, 3. 3. 5, 18; 3. 4. 1-39; and Luther, Luther's Works, vol. 48, Letters, 66-67.

23 However, each of these views has two forms. Thus, as we shall soon see, in actuality there are six Protestant views of salvific repentance. It should be noted as well that all of these views teach that salvific repentance must be combined with faith in Jesus Christ for a person to gain salvation from eternal judgment.

24 See, for example, James Montgomery Boice, Christ's Call to Discipleship (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 105-10; James Graham, "Repentance," Evangelical Quarterly 25 (1953):233; George Peters, "The Meaning of Conversion," Bibliotheca Sacra 120 (1963):236, 239; Rudolph Schnackenburg, The Moral Teaching of the New Testament (Freiburg: Herder and Herder, 1965), 25-33; Charles Scobie, John the Baptist (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 80, 112, 148; A. H. Strong, Systematic Theology (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1912), 832-35; and Eugene La Verdere, "The Need for Salvation: A New Testament Perspective," Chicago Studies 21 (1982):234.

25 See, for example, William Barclay, Great Themes of the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 72-73; Lewis Bookwalter, Repentance (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1902), 30, 43, 53-55; William Douglas Chamberlain, The Meaning of Repentance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 47, 143-44, 216, 222-23; Daniel Fuller, Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 151-52; Kenneth Gentry, "The Great Option: A Study of the Lordship Controversy," Baptist Reformation Review 5 (1976):57-62, 77; Billy Graham, The Meaning of Repentance (Minneapolis: The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1967), 5-11; George Ladd, The Gospel of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1959), 95-106; 1. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), 37-38; J. 1. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 70-73; Kazimierz Romanink, "Repentez-vous, car le Royaume des Cieux est tout proche (Matt. iv. 17 par.)," *New Testament Studies* 12 (1966):264; Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Springfield, MO: Wescott Publishers, 1960), 324; Bob Stokes, *Repentance, Revival, and the Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 10-16, 24, John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1958), 111-32, and "Must Christ be Lord to be Savior?," *Eternity* 10 (1959):15, 17; Lehman Strauss, *Repentance* (Findley, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1959), 13-19; and Effie Freeman Thompson, *METANOEO and METAMELEI in Greek Literature Until 100 A. D., Including a Discussion of Their Cognates and of Their Hebrew Equivalentents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908), 24-25.

26 See, for example, Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-48), 3:372-78; G. Michael Cocoris, *Lordship Salvation--Is It Biblical?* (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 1983), 11-12; Milton Crum, "Preaching and Worship: Dynamics of Metanoia, n in *Preaching and Worship* (N. R: Academy of Homiletics, n.d.), 88-89; H. A. Ironside, *Except Ye Repent* (New York: American Tract Society, 1937), 34, 53, 171-76; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 116-17; Richard A. Seymour, *All About Repentance* (Fayetteville, GA: Clarity Publications, 1974), 33, 46, 62; and Treadwell Walden, *The Great Meaning of Metanoia* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1896), 4-9, 79-81,125,151.

27 A few years ago I saw the following message on the marquee of a church that teaches this view of salvific repentance: "The Way to Heaven is 'Turn Right and Keep Straight.'"

28 While the Eastern Church's position on repentance was (and is) not identical to the Roman position, it was essentially the same in its major details. The Eastern Church taught that penance was a sacrament designed to provide forgiveness for post-baptismal sins and that penance involves contrition and confession to a priest. For further information on the Eastern Orthodox view of salvific repentance see Frank Gavin, *Some Aspects of Contemporary Greek Orthodox Thought* (Milwaukee: Morehouse Publishing Co., 1923), 358-70, and Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Centenary Press, 1935), 133-34.

29 Future articles will include: "The Doctrine of Repentance in the Old Testament n "The Doctrine of Repentance in the New Testament," and "How to Communicate the Doctrine of Repentance Clearly."

## 02 - The Doctrine of Repentance In the Old Testament

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The Doctrine of Repentance In the Old Testament Study By: Robert N. Wilkin

I. Introduction In Ezekiel 18:21-22 the Lord God of Israel spoke the following words:

If a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. Is that the Gospel? Did the OT teach that one had to turn from his sins to obtain salvation? The Hebrew words which deal with salvation are general and not specific. That is, one must look to the context to determine what type of salvation is in view. This is also true of the English terms for salvation. For example, the exclamation "I've been saved!" could mean a number of things depending on the context in which it was spoken or written. A person rescued from an icy river would mean, "I have been delivered from a watery grave." Lee Iacocca, the Chief Executive Officer of the Chrysler Corporation, upon receiving a \$1.5 billion loan guarantee from the U.S. government would mean, "Chrysler has been saved from bankruptcy." A death row inmate granted a Presidential pardon would mean, "My life has been spared." Only in a context where one's eternal destiny was in view would the meaning be "I have been saved from eternal condemnation. This may seem to be an obvious point which has little to do with the subject at hand. Actually, it has everything to do with our subject and it is far from obvious to many who write and preach about the OT doctrine of salvation.

There are fifteen different Hebrew words for salvation used in the OT. The vast majority of OT references to salvation refer to various types of temporal deliverances: from one's enemies, from physical death, and from various troubles.<sup>30</sup> For example, five of the most common and most important OT words for salvation are *ya'sha'*, *pa'da*, *ga'al*, *ma'lat*, and *na'tzal*. Of the 812 uses of these terms in the OT, only 58 (7.1%) refer to eternal salvation.<sup>31</sup> Those refer to the future salvation of the nation of Israel by the Lord--a NT theme as well (Romans 11:26). In some cases the Messiah is indicated as the Savior (Micah 5:2, Micah 5:6; Zechariah 9:9-10). It is interesting to note that these verses deal with the fact of the coming kingdom, not the condition or entrance into it. In addition, there are a number of other OT passages which refer to eternal salvation, yet without using the terms of salvation: Genesis 3:15; Genesis 15:6; Psalms 22:27; Isaiah 6:10; Isaiah 10:21; Isaiah 19:22; 52:1-53:12; Jeremiah 24:7; Jeremiah 31:31-34; and Habakkuk 2:4.

Consideration will now be given to the OT terms which deal with repentance. The reader should remember that our aim is not merely to discover the OT teaching on the role of repentance in eternal salvation. Rather, our goal is to discover the OT teaching on the role of repentance in all types of salvation.

II. No Old Testament Technical Term for Repentance

Scholars are in agreement that there is no OT word which in all or even in most of its uses refers to repentance.<sup>32</sup> However, two words are commonly cited as sometimes having that meaning.

Those words *shu?b* and *na?ham*.

III. *Shu?b* This term is the twelfth most common word in the OT.<sup>33</sup> It has a basic sense of "to turn," "to turn back," "to go back," or "to return."<sup>34</sup> In the vast majority of its uses it refers to literal changes of direction. For example, Moses, after being in the tabernacle, "would return to the camp" (Exodus 33:11). Of its 1,056 OT uses only 203 occur in religious contexts.<sup>35</sup> In all but one passage those religious uses refer to Israel or God turning toward or away from one another.<sup>36</sup> A. The Turning of the Lord

There are four categories of God's turning or resuming in the OT. All four grow out of the blessings/curses provisions of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Leviticus 26:1-46; Deuteronomy 28:1-68) whereby the Lord promised that He would bless obedience and curse disobedience. The non-technical nature of *shu?b* is shown in the fact that it was often used to refer to the turning of the Lord. Obviously, if it were a technical term which always referred to turning from one's sinful ways, it could never have been used of God.

#### 1. The Four Categories of the Lord's Turning.

First, the Lord returned Israel's evil upon its head. He withdrew His blessings and sent temporal judgments whenever the nation turned away from Him in disobedience.<sup>37</sup>

Second, the Lord turned back (or, negatively, did not turn back) His Anger from Israel. He withdrew temporal judgments and sent blessings whenever the nation turned away from her sinful deeds and turned back to Him in obedience.<sup>38</sup>

Third, the Lord returned Israel to its former place of blessing. Whenever Israel turned back to the Lord from her sinful ways, He restored the nation's blessings.<sup>39</sup> In some texts the specific blessing that the Lord promised and provided was to return the nation to the promised land.

Fourth, the Lord returned to the nation.<sup>40</sup> In the three types of the Lord's turning just discussed, there was always a specific object of the turning indicated in the context (i.e., He returned evil; He turned back His anger; He returned blessings). However, in passages containing this fourth type of turning, no specific objects were mentioned. This bare expression referred generally to the Lord removing temporal judgments and sending temporal blessings.

2. Temporal, Not Eternal, Blessings and Curses. With the lone exception of Jeremiah 32:40 (which refers to millennial and ultimately eternal blessings which the Lord has promised to bestow on Israel as part of the New Covenant), the Lord's turning toward or away from the nation with blessings or curses always referred to temporal experiences. The fuming of the Lord in the OT did not concern eternal salvation or eternal judgment.

3. Israel Reaped What She Sowed. When the nation was obedient, the Lord sent blessings. When she was disobedient, He sent curses. The Lord's love for the nation moved Him to discipline and reward His chosen people so that they might learn to obey Him.

#### B. The Turning of Israel

1. The Biblical Concept. As alluded to in the preceding section, the OT record shows that the nation of Israel repeatedly turned away from the Lord. In each instance the nation would

experience temporal judgments (reaping the curses of the Mosaic Covenant) which prompted her to turn back to the Lord. There are three categories of Israel's turning, in a theological sense, found in the OT.

First, Israel turned away from the Lord in disobedience. Israel turned away from the Lord by turning to idolatry<sup>41</sup> and to other forms of willful, cold-hearted disobedience.<sup>42</sup> The following passages are illustrative.

"The Amalekites and the Canaanites are there before you, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned away from the LORD, the LORD will not be with you" (Numbers 14:43, italics mine). And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way. Then the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel . . . When the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the children of Israel, who delivered them: Othniel the son of Kenaz . . . So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. SO the LORD strengthened Eglon king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. . . . And when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them: Ehud the son of Gera . . . When Ehud was dead, the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. SO the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan . . . (Judges 2:19-20; Judges 3:9, Judges 3:11-12, Judges 3:15; Judges 4:1-2, italics mine). The non-technical nature of *shu?b* is thus further seen in the ' when it referred to Israel it often dealt with turning away from the Lord and to sinful ways.

Second, the nation turned to the Lord in obedience. Israel turned back to the Lord by turning away from idolatry<sup>43</sup> and from other forms of willful, cold-hearted disobedience.<sup>44</sup> Obedience was a condition for temporal deliverance from the curses of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Leviticus 26:1-46; Deuteronomy 28:1-68). Turning away from one's sinful practices was never presented in the OT as a condition for escaping eternal wrath.<sup>45</sup>

One chapter in the OT seems to contradict the point just made. Ezekiel 18:1-32 links life with turning from one's sinful practices and death with failing to live righteously. The following verses are representative:

"If [a man] has walked in My statutes and kept My judgments faithfully--he is just; he shall surely live!" says the Lord GOD (Ezekiel 18:9).

"The soul who sins shall die. (Ezekiel 18:20).

"But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die" (Ezekiel 18:21). When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies" (Ezekiel 18:26).

"I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord GOD. "wherefore turn and live!" (Ezekiel 18:32).

Some interpret those verses to mean that eternal salvation was conditioned upon turning from one's sins.<sup>46</sup> Such an interpretation is, however, unwarranted.

There is no reference in Ezekiel 18:1-32 to the Lake of Fire, eternal death, eternal life, entrance into God's kingdom, exclusion from the kingdom, justification, or anything remotely associated with eternal judgment. Nor is that chapter ever cited in the NT as dealing with any of those subjects. What is at issue in Ezekiel 18:1-32 is life and death--physical life and physical death. The Hebrew terms for life and death are commonly used in this way throughout the OT.<sup>47</sup>

Dyer comments:

God was not saying that a saved Israelite would lose his [eternal] salvation if he fell into sin. Both the blessing and the judgment in view here are temporal, not eternal. The judgment was physical death (cf. vv 4, 20, 26), not eternal damnation.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, in introducing his discussion of Ezekiel 18:1-32, Charles Feinberg notes, "The subject of justification by faith should not be pressed into this chapter; it is not under discussion."<sup>49</sup> Later, commenting on verse nine (which refers to life being conditioned upon obedience to the Law of Moses) he writes, "This statement, we must caution again, does not have eternal life in view, but life on earth. Eternal life is not obtained on the grounds mentioned in this portion of Scripture."<sup>50</sup> The blessings/curses motif is a prominent OT theme. The conditions of the Mosaic Covenant are spelled out in Leviticus 26:1-46 and Deuteronomy 28:1-68. Obedience would be attended by temporal blessings. Disobedience would be met with temporal curses which would intensify until the nation turned back to the Lord. While salvation is indeed the subject of Ezekiel 18:1-32, that in no way suggests that eternal salvation is in view. As Ross notes, "Throughout the OT the salvation or deliverance Israel sought or enjoyed seems most concerned with the promises of the covenant as they relate to life in this world as the people of God" (italics mine).<sup>51</sup>

There are many OT examples of blessings and curses, both involving the nation and individuals in it. One might consider, for instance, Abraham (Genesis 24:1; Hebrews 11:8-19), Moses (Exodus 14:30-31; Numbers 20:12; Hebrews 11:23-29), the golden calf incident (Exodus 32:34-35), Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:30-45), the rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16:1-50), Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3), Achan (Joshua 7:1-26), Gideon (Judges 6:11-28), David (2 Samuel 1:1-27; 2 Samuel 2:1-32; 2 Samuel 3:1-39; 2 Samuel 4:1-12; 2 Samuel 5:1-25; 2 Samuel 6:1-23; 2 Samuel 7:1-29; 2 Samuel 8:1-18; 2 Samuel 9:1-13; 2 Samuel 10:1-19, under blessing; 12-22, under cursing), Solomon (1 Kings 3:5-15; 1 Kings 20:20-34; 1 Kings 11:1-13), and the fall of the Northern (2 Kings 17:5-18) and Southern (2 Kings 24:1-20; 2 Kings 25:1-21) Kingdoms. This does not mean that all OT blessings and calamities were a direct result of obedience or disobedience (cf. Job; Luke 16:19-31; John 9:2-3). Sometimes God allowed the righteous to suffer and the wicked to prosper. However, what it does mean is that as a rule obedience brought temporal blessings and disobedience brought temporal curses.

Ezekiel 18:1-32 is simply an example of the OT blessings/curses motif.

Third, one day the nation will turn to the Lord in faith. A small number of OT texts use the term *shu?b* to refer to a future turning of Israel (and Egypt and all the ends of the world) to the Lord. In these contexts (cf. Psalms 22:27; Isaiah 6:10; Isaiah 10:21; Isaiah 19:22; Jeremiah 24:7) turning to the Lord is used as a circumlocution for faith.

Isaiah 6:10 illustrates how this conclusion is drawn. It speaks of returning to the Lord and being healed. Christ interpreted this passage for His disciples. After presenting the Parable of the Sower,

and as a lead-in to His explanation of its meaning, Jesus quoted this passage. He equated Isaiah's reference to returning to the Lord with receiving the Word and believing the Gospel (cf. Matthew 13:3-23; Luke 8:5-15, esp. w 12-13). He also identified the healing spoken of as eternal salvation (Luke 8:12).

2. The Extra-Biblical Concept. How did the Jewish rabbis understand the OT teaching on repentance? The rabbinic concept of teshu'bah. During the two centuries prior to the birth of Christ, rabbis and other Jewish authors wrote extensively. Their writings reflect a different understanding from the one I have suggested of the use of shu'b in the OT. (Teshu'bah is the noun form of shu'b.)

Rabbis were teachers of the Law of Moses. They taught in synagogues and some of their teachings were recorded in the Mishnah and Talmud.

Regarding eternal salvation the rabbis taught that the condition for having a portion in the world to come was obedience to the Law (cf. Aboth 2:7). However, they also believed in grace. They taught that God would forgive disobedience if one truly turned from his sins and made restitution where necessary.

Commenting on the rabbinic teaching of the condition of eternal salvation Herford writes, "It is not enough merely to know the will of God or to believe in it, or in God whose will it is. Before all else he must do it."52 Likewise Moore notes: For sin . . . there was but one remedy, the forgiving grace of God, and the *conditio sine qua non* of forgiveness was repentance, that is, contrition, confession, reparation of injuries to others, and a reformation of conduct undertaken and persisted in with sincere purpose and Out of religious motives.53

Rabbis believed that the righteous surely had a place in the world to come and that the wicked did not. Concerning their view of the fate of those who were neither totally righteous nor totally wicked Moore comments: The School of Shammai held that those in whom good and evil were, so to speak, in equilibrium, will go down to hell, and dive and come up, and arise thence and be healed . . . For them the fires of Gehenna are purgatorial; they are refined like silver and assayed like gold. The School of Hillel maintained that God in his abounding mercy . . . would incline the balance to the side of mercy, and not send them down to Gehenna at all.54

These two major rabbinic schools of thought agreed that all but the very wicked will ultimately have a place in the world to come. "A marked tendency of the Rabbis is to limit, in every possible way, the number of those Israelites who will have no share in the world to come. For those who repent no sin is a bar to the everlasting felicities."55 In addition to the rabbinic writings in the Mishnah and Talmud, there were also many books written by Jewish authors in the second half of the intertestamental period. These writings are known as OT Apocrypha (or Pseudepigrapha). They are non-canonical, non-inspired writings. The OT Apocrypha speaks of God weighing on balancing pans the good and bad deeds of people to determine their eternal destinies (Testament of Abraham 13:1-2, 9-14; 1 Enoch 41:1-2; 61:8). The condition of eternal salvation is specified as obedience to the Law of God (2 Baruch 51:3,7; 4 Ezra 7:19-22, 33-39; Ezra 9:3-37). The Pharisees in Jesus' day are a good illustration of this type of legalistic, self-righteous thinking (cf. Luke 18:9-14). The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is at least partly derived from the OT Apocrypha (2Ma 12:39-45).

Evaluating the rabbinic concept of *teshu'ah*. The OT does not support the rabbinic understanding. The OT teaches that eternal salvation is by God's grace and that it is received by man's response of faith, not by any acts of righteousness or by turning from any sins (cf. Genesis 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4). There is no evidence in the OT of purgatory or that the majority of people will ultimately enter God's kingdom. While there are a number of OT passages which refer to eternal salvation in some way (e.g., Genesis 3:15; Genesis 22:1-19; Isaiah 12:23; Isaiah 45:22; Isaiah 49:6 ff; 52:13-53:12; Jeremiah 31:7; Jeremiah 46:27; Zechariah 8:7; Zechariah 9:9, Zechariah 9:16), there are only a few which deal with the human condition of eternal salvation, that is, faith (Genesis 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4).<sup>56</sup> The passage which stands out most prominently as the paradigm for the OT's teaching on eternal salvation is Genesis 15:6: "And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." Genesis 15:6 is the John 3:16 of the OT. One condition only is given: belief in the Lord.

What did Abraham believe about the Lord? He believed that the Lord would take away his sins and grant him a place in His coming kingdom. Of course, it may well be that at the moment of faith Abraham's understanding of the Messiah and His substitutionary work was not fully developed.<sup>57</sup> His understanding probably grew as a result of God's asking him to offer up his one and only son and then at the last moment providing a ram as a substitute (Genesis 22:1-24).<sup>58</sup> However, it is clear from the Pauline use of this text that it is salvific, referring to Abraham's justification by faith alone (Galatians 3:6-14; Romans 4:1-25). While Abraham did many good works, none of them contributed to his justification before God in any way. A second OT passage, Habakkuk 2:4, also teaches that the sole OT condition for eternal salvation was faith in the Lord. The context concerns the Babylonian invasion. A proud people would be used by the Lord to judge Israel. Since proud people are not pleasing in the sight of the Lord, they will ultimately fall. (Pride goes before the fall.) "Shall live" here is not so much a promise as it is a statement of potential or a command. A man who has found acceptance with God by faith alone has the potential to live, to escape the temporal judgment of God. He realizes that potential by living in accordance with the righteous standing he has with God.

Paul's use of this verse confirms this understanding. He used it to show that one obtains the righteousness of God by faith alone (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11). Nygren forcefully demonstrates that when Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17 he was joining "the righteous" and "by faith" in such a way that they are viewed as a unit: "He who through faith is righteous."<sup>59</sup> In Romans 1:1-32; Romans 2:1-29; Romans 3:1-31; Romans 4:1-25 Paul elaborates on the expression, "he who through faith is righteous." Then in chapters 5-8 he deals with the attending words of Romans 1:17, "shall live." The one who is righteous by faith alone is free from God's wrath (Romans 5:1-21), from sin (Romans 6:1-23), from the Law (Romans 7:1-25), and from death (Romans 8:1-39). All of these are true of believers in our position and are the basis of our striving against the flesh to live out our new natures (cf. Romans 6:11-13; Romans 8:12-17; 12:1-15:13).

One obtains righteous standing before God by faith (Romans 1:17-32; Romans 2:1-29; Romans 3:1-31; Romans 4:1-25; Galatians 3:6-14). Yet only by living out his new life does the one who is righteous by faith maintain his temporal life (Romans 8:13; Hebrews 10:37-38). Romans 8:13 contains an explicit allusion back to Romans 1:17 and Habakkuk 2:4. There Paul tells believers, those who are righteous by faith and who are eternally secure (Romans 8:38-39), "if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you

mill live." As mentioned above, a number of OT passages (Psalms 22:27; Isaiah 6:10; Isaiah 10:21; Isaiah 19:22; Jeremiah 24:7) refer to a future fuming of Israel and other nations to the Lord in faith. They confirm our understanding of Genesis 15:6 and Habakkuk 2:4--that the one and only OT condition for obtaining eternal salvation was believing wholly and solely upon the Lord and His ultimate provision for one's sins. This understanding of the OT teaching on the human condition of eternal salvation is confirmed by several NT passages. In commenting on the OT's teaching on eternal salvation, Paul wrote in Romans 4:3-8 : For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.- Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered;

Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin..

Likewise, in Galatians 3:6-14 Paul wrote: For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.- But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "The just shall live by faith." Yet the law is not of faith, but "The man who does them shall live by them." Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. So also, the author of the Book of Hebrews noted in Hebrews 10:1-4 : For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purged, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

Luke 18:9-14 and John 1:29, both pre-Cross passages, also confirm that eternal salvation according to the OT was by grace through faith and not as a result of works. The OT conditioned eternal salvation upon faith alone. The sacrificial system was designed to lead worshipers to see their sinfulness and to place their faith in the Lord as their only hope of kingdom entrance (cf. Luke 18:13-14; Hebrews 10:1ff).

Why were so many so wrong? One may wonder why it is that when Jesus came the vast majority of Jews rejected Him and His message (John 1:11). If the OT taught that the sole condition of eternal salvation was faith in the Lord, why did most think that the condition was faithful observance of the Law? From what we can tell from the NT, much of Judaism was very much in the grip of legalism, as evidenced by the attitude of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-39; Luke 18:9-14). Most of the nation rejected Jesus Christ (John 1:11). They were not willing to own up to the fact that they were sick and needed deliverance (Luke 5:31). Most tried to approach God on their own terms--trying to establish their own righteousness rather than accepting the righteousness which God freely offered (Romans 10:2-3; 1 Corinthians 1:23). The way is narrow that leads to life and few are those who find it (Matthew 7:13-14; John 14:6). That was true in the intertestamental period and in Jesus' day, and it remains true today.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that all of the Jewish people rejected Jesus' free offer of salvation. Some did accept His offer and believe in Him (John 1:12). Indeed, John and Luke report that many (indicating a great number, not a majority) of the priests and Jewish leaders came to faith in Jesus Christ (John 12:42; Acts 6:7). Even Saul of Tarsus, an archenemy of the Gospel of Grace and the Cross of Christ, came to trust in Jesus Christ as his only hope of heaven and, indeed, to become the Apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:11-24; Galatians 2:1-21; Galatians 3:1-14).

C. Conclusion The term *shu?b* was used in the OT to refer to Israel's turning toward or away from the Lord and also to His turning toward the nation with blessings or away from her with curses. In most contexts temporal blessings or curses were in view. In a few passages, however, the expression "turning to the Lord" was used in reference to the future eternal salvation of the nation. In such contexts "Turning to the Lord" was used as a circumlocution for faith.

Extra-biblical Jewish sources (OT Apocrypha, Talmud, Mishnah) show that the rabbis of the intertestamental period and Jesus' day held a legalistic view of the condition of eternal salvation. They believed in salvation by grace through faithfulness instead of the OT teaching of salvation by grace through faith.

#### IV. *Na?ham*

Else term *na?ham* in the OT means "to be sorry" or "to comfort oneself."<sup>60</sup> It occurs 108 times in the Old Testament, but only three of those uses (Jeremiah 8:6; Jeremiah 31:19; Job 42:6) deal with the repentance of men. The non-technical nature of this term is shown in that most of its theological uses refer to the so-called "repentance of God."<sup>61</sup>

Two of the passages which use *na?ham* to refer to the repentance of men concern temporal, not eternal, salvation. Jeremiah 8:6 indicates that because the nation was not sorry for her wickedness (i.e., her idolatry) temporal judgment resulted. Job 42:6 concerns Job's remorse over foolish words he had spoken during his ordeal.

Jeremiah 31:19 says that after Israel turns back to the Lord, she will be grieved as she recalls her former actions. This passage refers to the future restoration of Israel by the Lord. After the nation returns to the Lord in faith, she will be grieved over her long history of disobedience and disbelief.

V. Conclusion The concept of human repentance in the OT is twofold. First and foremost it means turning toward or away from something (*shu?b*). A second but rare meaning is to be grieved over previous actions or attitudes (*na?ham*). The OT conditions temporal salvation upon turning from one's sinful behavior. God promised Israel blessings if she obeyed and curses if she disobeyed. There are numerous examples in the OT of the nation and of individual Israelites experiencing curses when they turned away from the Lord and blessings when they turned back to Him. The OT nowhere, however, conditions eternal salvation upon turning from one's sinful behavior. Eternal salvation in the OT was conditioned solely upon turning to the Lord in faith.

Eternal salvation has always been and always will be by grace through faith. That is why the Messiah had to die on the cross for the sins of Adam's race.

All we like sheep have gone astray;

We have turned, every one, to his own way. And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

(Isaiah 53:6) Used by permission:

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30 For further discussion of OT salvation and its temporal emphasis, see James K. Zink, *Salvation in the Old Testament: A Central Theme*,. *Encounter* 25 (1964): 405-414; Allen R Ross, "The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Discontinuity," 161-78, 352-56 in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), edited by John S. Feinberg; Colin Brown, s.v. "Redemption," *NIDNTT*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978) 3: 201-209.

31 These figures are derived from the author's personal study. The 58 references to eternal salvation include 2 Samuel 23:5, Psalms 49:15; Psalms 53:6; Psalms 130:7-8; Isaiah 1:27; Isaiah 12:2-3 (twice); Isaiah 19:20; Isaiah 25:9 (twice); Isaiah 33:22; Isaiah 35:4, Isaiah 35:9-10; Isaiah 45:17, Isaiah 45:22; Isaiah 49:6, Isaiah 49:8, Isaiah 49:24-25 (twice); Isaiah 51:6, Isaiah 51:8, Isaiah 51:11; Isaiah 52:7, Isaiah 52:9-10; Isaiah 56:1; Isaiah 62:1, Isaiah 62:11-12; Jeremiah 23:6; Jeremiah 30:7, Jeremiah 30:10-11; Jeremiah 31:7; Jeremiah 33:16; Jeremiah 46:27; Ezekiel 34:12, Ezekiel 34:22, Ezekiel 34:27; Ezekiel 36:29; Ezekiel 37:23; Daniel 12:1; Hosea 13:14; Micah 5:6; Zephaniah 3:17; Zephaniah 3:19; Zechariah 8:7, Zechariah 8:10; Zechariah 10:6, Zechariah 10:8; Zechariah 9:9, Zechariah 9:16; Zechariah 12:7.

32 See Aloys Dirksen, *The New Testament Concept of Metanoia*, 148, William Holladay, *The Root of the Old Testament*, 156-57; C. G. Montefiore, "Rabbinic Conceptions of Repentance," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 16 (1904): 212-13; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the first Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols., 1: 507; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "metanoeo, metanoia," by E. Wurthwein, 4 (1967): 980.

33 Holladay, *SUBH*, 2.

34 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* s.v. "shu?b," 996-97; Holladay, *SUBH*, 51-115.

35 Wurthwein suggests ("metanoia," 984), but does not demonstrate, that there are only About 118 theological uses." Holladay (*SUBH*, 116) suggests that there are 144 "covenantal uses. of the verb and 19 of derived nouns and adjectives. However, through my own study I have found 203 religious uses. See Robert N. Wilkin, *Repentance as a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament*. (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985), 210-12 for a complete listing.

36 Jonah 3:5-10 refers to non-Israelites (i.e., Ninevites). They turned to the Lord and, as a result, He then turned His burning anger away from them.

37 See Deuteronomy 23:14; Joshua 24:20; Judges 9:56-57, 1 Samuel 25:39, 1 Samuel 26:23, 2 Samuel 16:8, 1 Kings 2:32; Nehemiah 4:4; Psalms 7:12; Psalms 54:5.

38 See 2 Chronicles 12:12; 2 Chronicles 29:10; 2 Chronicles 30:8-9; Psalms 78:38; Psalms 106:23; Isaiah 5:25; Isaiah 9:12, Isaiah 9:17, Isaiah 9:21; Isaiah 10:4; Isaiah 12:1; Jeremiah 4:8, Jeremiah 4:28; Jeremiah 18:20, Jeremiah 23:20, Jeremiah 30:24, Lamentations 2:8, Daniel 9:16,

Hosea 14:4, Joel 2:14, Amos 1:3, Amos 1:6, Amos 1:9, Amos 1:11, Amos 2:1, Amos 2:4, Amos 2:6; Jonah 3:9 (non-Israelites).

39 See Deuteronomy 30:3; 1 Kings 8:34; 2 Chronicles 6:25; Psalms 80:3, Psalms 80:7, Psalms 80:14, Psalms 80:16; Jeremiah 32:37; Jeremiah 33:7, Jeremiah 33:11; Jeremiah 42:12; Hosea 6:11; Nahum 2:2; Zephaniah 2:7.

40 See 2 Samuel 16:12; 2 Chronicles 30:6, 2 Chronicles 30:9; Jeremiah 15:1-21; Jeremiah 18:8; Jeremiah 32:40; Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 3:7.

41 See Judges 2:19; Judges 8:33, 1 Kings 9:6, Isaiah 57:17; Jeremiah 11:10; Hosea 11:7.

42 See Numbers 14:43 ;Joshua 22:16, Joshua 22:18, Joshua 22:23, Joshua 22:29;1 Samuel 15:11 ;Jeremiah 34:16; Ezekiel 3:20; Ezekiel 18:24, Ezekiel 18:26.

43 Great emphasis in the OT is placed on the nation turning away from (or failing to turn away from) idolatry and to the Lord. The prophetic summons to repentance often was a call to the nation to turn from her idolatry. See, for example, Deuteronomy 4:30; 1 Samuel 7:3; 1 Kings 13:33; 2 Kings 5:13; 2 Kings 23:25; 2 Chronicles 7:14, 2 Chronicles 7:19; 2 Chronicles 15:4; 2 Chronicles 30:6, 2 Chronicles 30:9; 2 Chronicles 36:13; Isaiah 31:6; Jeremiah 3:1, Jeremiah 3:7, Jeremiah 3:10, Jeremiah 3:12, Jeremiah 3:19, Jeremiah 3:22; Jeremiah 4:1; Jeremiah 8:4-5; Jeremiah 18:8, Jeremiah 26:3; Jeremiah 35:15; Jeremiah 36:3, Jeremiah 36:7; Ezekiel 14:6; and Hosea 3:5; Hosea 5:4; Joshua 6:1; Hosea 11:5; Hosea 14:1-2, Hosea 14:4. These citations refer to temporal judgments being sent or removed depending on whether the nation continued in her idolatry or turned away from it to the Lord.

Two passages, Isaiah 31:6-7 and Hosea 3:5, indicate that in the latter days--a reference to the Millennial Kingdom--the nation will put away its idols and will turn to the Lord and fear Him. Thus while the OT reports that the people often turned away from the Lord to idolatry (even to the point that one of Israel's greatest kings, Solomon, died as an idolater [1 Kgs 11:1-13ff.]), it also prophesies a day when those things would no longer characterize the nation.

44 See, for example, Deuteronomy 30:2, Deuteronomy 30:10; 1 Kings 8:33, 1 Kings 8:35, 1 Kings 8:47-48; 2 Chronicles 6:24, 2 Chronicles 6:26, 2 Chronicles 6:37-38; Nehemiah 1:9; Nehemiah 9:26, Nehemiah 9:29, Nehemiah 9:35; Job 22:23; Job 36:10; Psalms 7:12; Psalms 51:13; Jeremiah 5:3; Jeremiah 15:7; Jeremiah 23:14; Jeremiah 34:16; Daniel 9:13; Amos 4:6, Amos 4:8-11; Jonah 3:8, Jonah 3:10.

45 One might think that the OT taught that an idolater would have to turn from his idolatry to obtain eternal salvation. However, no verses support this view. See footnote 14 above. If idolaters could not get into God's kingdom then Solomon would be excluded (1 Kings lima very unlikely possibility in light of the way he is spoken of in the Old and New Testaments (cf. 1 Chronicles 22:10; 1 Chronicles 28:5-7; Matthew 6:29; Matthew 12:42; Acts 7:47). Of course, anyone who trusted in idols to grant him a blessed afterlife would have to give up such confidence in order to trust only in the God of Israel (cf. Acts V:30). However, it seems that Israel did not turn to idols for that reason. Rather, Israelites worshiped idols to fit in with the surrounding nations and to obtain temporal blessings if possible.

46 See, for example, G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 201-202; Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 242-49, esp. 244 (N.B.: Eichrodt suggests that both temporal and eternal salvation are in view); H. L. Ellison, *Ezekiel: the Man and His Message* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 74-75; John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OT Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 150-52. In addition, see John Calvin, *Commentaries on the first Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1850), 247-49, and Patrick Fairbairn, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 198-202. While Calvin and Fairbairn suggest that Ezekiel 18:1-32 is dealing with eternal salvation, they suggest that the ability to turn from one's sins and do good is a gift from God which apart from His enablement is humanly impossible. They believe that Ezekiel 18:1-32 is thus showing men their absolute need of salvation and grace.

47 See Brown, Driver, Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the old Testament*, 311, 559-60.

48 Charles H. Dyer, "Ezekiel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament Edition* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1261, edited by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck.

49 Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 99.

50 *Ibid.*, 101.

51 Ross, "The Biblical Method of Salvation," in *Continuity and Discontinuity* 163. Also see Zink, "Salvation in the OT," 405-406.

52 R. Travers Herford, *A Comparative Study of the Jewish Ethical Teaching in the Rabbinical Sources in the Early Centuries* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1971), 52. See also 141-42.

53 George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927-30), 2:319.

54 *Ibid.*, 2:318.

55 C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 327.

56 In addition, as discussed above, the following passages refer to a future turning of Israel and other nations to the Lord in faith: Psalms 22:27; Isaiah 6:10; Isaiah 10:21; Isaiah 19:22 ; Jeremiah 24:7.

57 See Ross, "Salvation," 169-74. Jesus' own disciples, who knew that He was the Messiah and had placed their faith in Him (Matthew 16:16-19), were shocked when He first told them that He was going to be put to death (Matthew 16:21-23). Peter even rebuked Jesus for suggesting such a thing. Some OT believers may have trusted in the Messiah to take away their sins without contemplating how He would do it. However, Jesus' response to Peter and the other disciples' reluctance to accept His teaching about His death (Matthew 16:23-27) shows that OT believers could and should have known this. Simeon, for one, surely did. When Mary and Joseph brought the Infant Jesus to the Temple, Simeon gave a veiled prophecy concerning His death (Luke

2:25-35). Genesis 22:1-24, Isaiah 53:1-12, and the sacrificial system are clear on this point.

58 It is certainly conceivable, however, that Abraham had a fully developed messianic concept at the point of his initial faith. Not all that the Lord said to OT people is recorded in the OT. The Lord may have told Adam and Eve, for instance, about the need for a blood sacrifice (Gen. 3:31). If so, Adam and Eve would have surely passed this on to their offspring (Genesis 4:5; Hebrews 11:4), and they in turn would have told others. It is quite possible that Abraham would have been aware of this--either from writings which are no longer extant, from oral tradition, or from direct revelation from the Lord Himself.

59 Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1949), 81-92.

60 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. "na?ham," 636-37.

61 Most of its uses are non-theological in nature. Of its theological uses most refer to the so-called "repentance of God." For further information on the meaning of na?ham when used in reference to God, see H. Van Parunak, "The Repentance of God in the Old Testament" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975).

## 03 - New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations

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New Testament Repentance: Lexical Considerations Study By: Robert N. Wilkin

### I. Introduction

There he was again. I'd seen him on telecasts of baseball and football games. Now here he was on a PGA golf tournament telecast somehow repeatedly getting on camera with his rainbow Afro wig and his evangelistic T-shirt.

What did he mean with his one word message, REPENT? What did he hope that some of the millions of TV viewers would do?

What does the term repent mean according to the NT? Does it refer to turning from one's sins? If so, are all sins or only major sins in view? Or, does it mean a willingness to forsake one's sins--or even something else again?

Sincere Christians are sharply divided on this question. However, surprisingly very little has been written about NT repentance. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on this subject partly because it is a crucial and rather overlooked issue. The NT Words in Question

There are two NT Greek words which are translated repentance in modern English translations: metanoia (and its verbal counterpart metanoeo) and metamelomai. The former term is so translated fifty-eight times in the NT; the latter only six times. The much wider use of metanoia has led me to give it greater attention in this article. The Pre-Christian Meaning of Metanoia In Classical Greek metanoia meant changing one's mind about someone or something. For example, Thucydides used the term when writing about the response of the Athenian council to a revolt. The council decided that all of the men of the city of Mytilene were to be put to death--not merely those who participated in the revolt. However, on "the next day a change of heart came over them."<sup>62</sup> The Athenian council changed its mind. It decided that only those who participated in the rebellion should be put to death.

Another example is found in Xenophon's use of our term. He wrote:

We were inclined to conclude that for man, as he is constituted, it is easier to rule over any and all other creatures than to rule over men. But when we reflected that there was one Cyrus, the Persian, who reduced to obedience a vast number of men and cities and nations, we were then compelled to change our opinions and decide that to rule men might be a task neither impossible nor even difficult, if one should only go about it in an intelligent manner.<sup>63</sup>

During the pre- and early Christian period of Koine Greek (ca. 300 BC-100 AD) metanoia continued to carry the sense of a change of mind about someone or something. For example, Polybius (ca. 208-126 B.C.) used metanoia to refer to the Dardani, a people who had decided to attack Macedonia while Philip was away with his army. However, Philip caught wind of it and returned quickly. Even though the Dardani were close to Macedonia, when they heard that Philip

was coming, they changed their minds. They broke off the attack before it even began.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Plutarch, who lived and wrote in the late first and early second century A.D., wrote:

Cypselus, the father of Periander . . . when he was a new-born babe, smiled at the men who had been sent to make away with him, and they turned away. And when again they changed their minds, they sought for him and found him not, for he had been put away in a chest by his mother.<sup>65</sup>

Notice that in all of the cases cited the individual or people in view had thought one thing or made one decision and then, based on further evidence or input, changed their minds.

Thompson suggests that two other nuances emerge during this period: change of purpose and regret.<sup>66</sup> However, the evidence does not substantiate her claim. On both counts she is guilty of "illegitimate totality transfer," that is, the unwarranted transfer of the meaning of a phrase containing a given word to that word when it stands alone. She fails to show any examples where either metanoia or its verbal counterpart was used absolutely in the senses which she suggests. Rather, it is other words in the context which indicate that the change of mind in question concerned sinful practices or was accompanied by grief or sorrow.

Metanoia and metaneo occur twenty times in the canonical books of the Greek OT (Septuagint) and seven times in the apocryphal books. They retain the meaning of a change of mind about someone or something in the LXX.<sup>67</sup> The following examples are representative. When the Lord decided to take the kingdom from King Saul He instructed Samuel to say, "He will not turn nor change His mind, for He is not as a man that He should change His mind" (I Sam [1 Kingdoms in the Septuagint] 15:29; translation mine).

Likewise, Proverbs 20:25 speaks of how foolish it is for a man to rashly promise to give something to the Lord, because after such a hasty vow the man may come to change his mind.

Similarly, the Ninevites believed in the Lord and turned from their sinful ways in the hopes that the Lord might change His mind and not destroy them and their city (Jonah 3:9-10). From a human perspective God did indeed change His mind and withhold the judgment He had planned.<sup>68</sup>

Behm disagrees. He argues that metaneo in the Greek OT "approximates" shub of the Hebrew OT.<sup>69</sup> However, I believe he fails to prove his point. The term shub was used 1,056 times in the Hebrew text. None of those occurrences is translated by metaneo in the Greek OT. Not one. This is inexplicable if the translators of the LXX felt that metaneo was a good translation of shub. Rather, the translators routinely used strepho and its various compound forms to translate shub. In the OT pseudepigrapha metanoia and metaneo nearly always occur in contexts dealing with the need to abandon sinful practices in order to escape God's judgment. Behm concludes from this that metanoia had thus come to refer to turning from sins. He too, however, is guilty of illegitimate totality transfer. Metanoia did not come, by itself, to refer to a turning from one's sins. Rather, words in the context inform the reader that the change of mind in view would include a resolution to cease the sinful practices mentioned. In summary, the pre-Christian meaning of metanoia was a change of mind about someone or something. When the context specifically mentions sinful practices about which one was changing his or her mind, the translation "repentance" is acceptable. The History of NT Translations of Metanoia The Old Latin The Latin Fathers translated metanoia as paenitentia, which came to mean "penance" or "acts of penance." They felt that in

order to obtain eternal salvation men had to perform righteous acts of penance as prescribed by one's confessor priest. The Latin Vulgate

Jerome established this Old Latin translation as authoritative when he retained *paenitentia* as the translation of *metanoia*. The system of penance became an established pathway whereby one hoped to obtain grace.

### Early English Versions

John Wycliffe, "the Morning Star of the Reformation," pioneered the first complete English Bible in the late 1300's. Unfortunately his work was not based on the original Greek and Hebrew, but was a very literal translation of the Vulgate. Hence we should not be surprised that he translated the Latin *agite paenitentiam* as "do penance." This was adopted in 1609-1610 in the Roman Catholic Douay Version.

William Tyndale produced the first printed English NT in 1526. He used *repent* and *repentance* for *metanoia* and *metanoeo*, a great improvement over "do penance," but still misleading in many contexts.

Later English versions, including the Authorized or King James Version of 1611, were deeply indebted to Tyndale's phraseology, including his *repent* and *repentance*.

*Repentance* as a translation seems to keep the idea that one must turn from his sinful deeds to obtain God's favor. However, it eliminates the notion that, in addition, one must confess his sins to a priest and do prescribed good works before he can obtain (or regain) grace.

### Modern Translations

Modern translators also generally translate *metanoia* as *repentance*. While this is an improvement over the Latin translation "penance," it is in most cases, as we shall now see, a poor reflection of its meaning in the NT.

II. Meaning of *Metanoia* in the NT Basic Sense: Change of Mind The pre-Christian meaning of *metanoia* as a change of mind is its basic NT sense as well. This can readily be seen in Hebrews 12:17 which reads: "For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit a blessing, he [Esau] was rejected, for he found no place for *metanoia*, though he sought it diligently with tears." What was it that Esau could not find? It was not a turning from sinful behavior. It was not penance. What he could not find was a way to change his father's mind. The matter was settled. No matter how much he pleaded, he couldn't change Isaac's mind.

All NT uses include the sense of a change of mind present. However, if the context clearly indicates what one is changing his mind about, it could be that a more polished English translation can be found. For instance, if one is to change his mind about his sinful deeds, the term *repentance* conveys that thought nicely.

There are four specialized types of uses of *metanoia* in the NT. We will now consider these. A Synonym for Eternal Salvation In a few passages *metanoia* is used via metonymy as a synonym for eternal salvation. These cases involve a metonymy of cause for the effect. The cause is a change of mind about Christ and His Gospel. The effect is eternal salvation. Thus when we read in

2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is . . . not willing that any should perish but that all should come to metanoia," the idea is the same as 1 Timothy 2:4, "[God] desires all men to be saved."

Luke 5:32 illustrates this same usage: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to metanoia." That is, Jesus is affirming that He didn't come to call those who think that they are righteous, but those who know themselves to be sinners, to salvation. Metanoia is used as a synonym for eternal salvation. A Change of Mind Regarding Sinful Behavior =Repentance On some occasions metanoia is used in contexts where the change of mind in view is clearly indicated as having to do with one's sinful practices. For example, in Luke 17:3-4 Jesus taught the disciples that they were to forgive all who sinned against them if they came and indicated that they had changed their minds regarding their sin. In this case and others like it "repentance" would be a good translation choice. We are to forgive anyone who sins against us and then repents.

It is important to note, as shall be brought out further in future articles, that eternal salvation is never conditioned upon changing one's mind about (i.e., repenting concerning) his sinful practices. A Change of Mind Regarding Self and Christ

Many NT passages use metanoia in contexts where what one is to change his mind about is himself and Christ. For example, in Acts 2:38, after having indicted his Jewish audience for crucifying their Messiah and in response to their question "What shall we do?" Peter called them to change their minds about Jesus Christ. They had rejected Him. Now they could accept Him. They were to believe that He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world. Such a mindset includes a recognition that one is a sinner in need of the Savior. Self-righteousness is clearly antithetical to faith (cf. Luke 18:9-14). In this use metanoia occurs as a virtual synonym for pistis (faith). A Change of Mind Regarding Idols and God In one passage the object of metanoia is stated as idols and God (Acts 17:29-31). Paul told the Athenian philosophers that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and that He would be coming back to earth as Judge. He told his listeners that in order to escape eternal condemnation they had to change their minds about their idols and about God and the Man whom He had sent and would send again. They had to transfer their faith from their idols to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Summary

Metanoia is used in the NT in a number of different ways, all of which have the idea of a change of mind at the root. In a few contexts it is used via metonymy as a synonym for eternal salvation. When it is used in contexts dealing with temporal salvation from life's difficulties, a change of mind about one's sinful ways (i.e., repentance) is given as the condition. However, when used in contexts dealing with eternal salvation from hell, a change of mind about oneself and Christ (or, in one passage, regarding idols and God) is given as the condition. In such contexts metanoia is used as a synonym for faith.

III. Meaning of Metamelomai The basic meaning of metamelomai is "to feel regret." In 2 Corinthians 7:9 Paul indicates that he no longer regretted sending them a letter which made them sorry, though at first he did regret sending it.

Regret usually carries with it the idea of a change of mind. In Matthew 21:29 Jesus told the Parable of the Two Sons. Both were told to go work in the vineyard. One said he would not, but later changed his mind (or regretted his decision) and went. The other said that he would go, but

did not.

After betraying Christ, Judas regretted what he had done, gave back his blood money, and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3). Judas "repented" in this sense; or more precisely, he "was remorseful" (NKJV). Yet he did not come to faith in Christ. He never changed his mind about Christ being His Savior. He rejected Him to his death.

While it is commonly translated in that way, there are no uses of *metamelomai* in the NT where "repentance" is a good translation. It always refers to regret, remorse, or to a change of mind. It never refers to turning from one's sins.

#### IV. Meaning of *Strepho* Compounds

While they are never translated as "repentance," the compounds of *strepho* in some contexts carry the idea of turning from sins. The basic sense of these compounds is turning from or to someone or something. These compounds are the true corresponding terms to the OT word *shub*.

"Turning to the Lord" is used in the NT, as it was in the OT, as an expression for faith and conversion.<sup>70</sup> When Paul reported in Acts 15:3 that Gentiles were turning to the Lord, he was simply saying that Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ, were being saved.

Nowhere in the NT are these verbs used to indicate that one must turn from his sins to obtain eternal salvation.

#### V. Conclusion

I'm still not sure what the man at the athletic events meant by his one-word message on his T-shirt. The word *repent* has a well-defined meaning in English. However, not all who use it mean the normal dictionary definition. Some mean merely a recognition of one's sinfulness. Others mean a change of thinking about Jesus Christ. Still others mean turning from one's sins, a willingness to do so, or a sense of remorse over one's sins.

I wish we could retranslate the NT. It would make teaching and preaching passages using *metanoia* simpler. It would eliminate the confusion many have when they read their Bibles and see the word *repent*. However, this is not likely to happen. It seems that "repentance" as a translation for *metanoia* (and *metamelomai*) will probably be with us for a long time. In most cases when the English word *repent* occurs in the NT it is translating *metanoia*. *Metanoia* is not the equivalent of the OT term *shub*. It certainly does not mean "penance." Nor does it normally mean "repentance." Rather, in the NT it retains its pre-Christian meaning of a change of mind. The English reader thus generally needs to read "change of mind"--not turn from sins--when he sees the word "repent" in the NT. The context must be consulted to determine the object of a person's change of mind. The only times *repent* is actually a good English translation is when the object of *metanoia* is sinful deeds. A change of mind about sinful behavior is equivalent to repentance.

Nearly a century ago, in *The Great Meaning of Metanoia*, Treadwell Walden decried the Latin and English translations of *metanoia* as being "extraordinary mistranslations."<sup>71</sup> I would agree.<sup>72</sup> Used by permission:

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society Volume 2, No. 2 -- Autumn 1989 62 Thucydides, Thucydides 3. 36. 4. Compare 3. 37. 1. Author's translation, emphasis supplied.

63 Xenophon, Cyropaedia 1. 1. 3. Translation by Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library, emphasis supplied.

64 Polyblus The Histories 4. 66. 7.

65 Plutarch, Moralia 163 F. Translated by Frank Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library, emphasis supplied.

66 Effie Freeman Thompson, 'METANOEO' and 'ME TAMELEI' in Greek Literature Until 100 A.D., Including a Discussion of Their Hebrew Equivalents (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 14.

67 Cf. 1 Samuel 15:29; Proverbs 14:15; Proverbs 20:25 (19); Proverbs 24:24 (Proverbs 29:27), 47 (32); Isaiah 46:8; Jeremiah 4:28; Jeremiah 8:6; Jeremiah 18:8; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3, Amos 7:6; Jonah 3:9, John 3:10; John 4:2; Zechariah 8:14.

68 In a number of OT passages God is said to have changed His mind, relented, or repented of calamities which He had planned to send. The Hebrew word used is naham. In each of these cases God did not actually change His mind, relent, or repent. God is omniscient and thus nothing which happens ever takes Him by surprise. The so-called "repentance of God" is actually a figure of speech known as an antropomorphism. At times the Scriptures speak to us as though God were a man. For example, we read of His strong arm (Exodus 6:6; Psalms 77:15; Jeremiah 21:5), His hand (John 10:28-29), and the like, as figures of His might and ability to deliver us from difficulty and protect us. So, too, from a human perspective it appears at times that God has changed His mind. In reality, He knew all along what the final outcome would be. The change of mind is apparent, not actual. For further discussion of this subject see H. Van Parunak, 'The Repentance of God in the Old Testament,' unpublished Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975, and "A Semantic Survey of NHM," *Biblica* 56 (1975):512-32.

69 Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. "metanoeo, metanoia, " by J. Behm, 4 (1967):989-90.

70 E.g., Matthew 13:15; Mark 4:12; Luke 1:16; John 12:40; Acts 9:35; Acts 15:3; Acts 28:27; 1 Peter 2:25.

71 Walden, *The Great Meaning of Metanoia* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1896), p.24.

72 Upcoming articles in this series will deal with "Repentance in the Gospels and Acts," "Repentance in the Epistles and Revelation," and "Suggestions on the Practical Preaching of Repentance."

## 04 - New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Gospels and Acts

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New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Gospels and Acts Study By: Robert N. Wilkin

I. Introduction The books of the NT vary in the emphasis that they place on various doctrines. John's Gospel, for example, is evangelistic in emphasis (John 20:30-31). Galatians presents a defense of the Gospel in the face of the Judaizers, who were trying to pervert it. The Book of Revelation deals extensively with what is yet future. This article will examine how Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John treat a specific doctrine--the doctrine of repentance.

Luke in his two-volume work, Luke-Acts, emphasizes repentance more than any other NT author. Nearly one half, or twenty-five of the fifty-eight uses of the primary NT terms for repentance (metanoeo and metanoia ) occur in Luke-Acts. On the other hand, there is not even one use of either term in John's Gospel. This is especially surprising since John uses those terms twelve times in Revelation. Matthew and Mark use those terms eight and four times respectively.

Why this disparity--especially between Luke-Acts and John?

Scripture does not contradict itself. Different authors may have different emphases, but not disparate views, on a given doctrine.

We begin this study with a consideration of the requirement of eternal salvation as found in the Gospels and Acts.

II. The Gospel in the Gospels and Acts The four Gospels and Acts present a united front. There is but one condition of eternal salvation: faith in Christ alone. The following references from John's Gospel are clear on this point:

John 3:16 : "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."

John 6:47 : "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life."

John 11:25 : "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."

John 20:31 : "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."

Recently I read a paper on repentance and salvation at the 1989 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society held in San Diego, California. I made the above point that John's Gospel is clear that the sole condition of salvation is faith in Christ. During the question and answer period a person asked me why I had limited myself within the Gospels to John's Gospel. Could I substantiate my point from the Synoptics?

Yes, the Synoptics also present faith as the one and only condition. However, they do so less often and less forcefully than John's Gospel. Why? Because the Synoptics are written to people who were already believers. References to the Gospel in them are not central to their purposes. John's Gospel, however, is written primarily to unbelievers (John 20:30-31) and references to the Gospel are central to his purpose. The hermeneutical principle called "the analogy of faith" suggests that we can best understand unclear passages of Scripture by allowing related clear passages to shed light on them. This principle suggests that one should understand the occasional references to the Gospel in the Synoptics in light of the Gospel of John and not vice versa. John's Gospel clearly says that the sole condition of salvation is faith in Christ. That will inform our understanding of any so-called problem passage in the Synoptics.

Some passages from the Synoptics clearly confirm that the sole condition of eternal salvation is faith in Christ.

Luke 8:12 : "Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts; lest they should believe and be saved." The sole condition of salvation given by the Lord here is faith in Him alone. All who believe are saved.

Acts 16:31 : "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. " In direct answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?" Luke reports Paul's sole condition: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Other passages from the Synoptics and Acts, though less clear, conform to this understanding.

Matthew 7:21 : "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in Repentance in the Gospels and Acts 13:1-52 heaven." The will of the Father, in relation to the Gospel, is that one believe in the Son whom He sent. Compare John 5:24; John 6:29.

Matthew 18:3 : "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Little children are naturally trusting. The sole condition of salvation is childlike trust in Christ.

Mark 16:16 : "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."<sup>73</sup> The Lord indicates that the sole condition for condemnation is unbelief. This is clearly parallel to the Lord's teachings as reported by John (compare, for example, John 3:18 and 8:24). Whether one views the reference to baptism as parenthetical<sup>74</sup> or the reference to salvation as broader than eternal salvation,<sup>75</sup> the sole condition of escaping eternal condemnation is given as faith in Christ.

III. Which Views of Salvific Repentance Are Compatible with Faith as the Sole Condition of Salvation?

There are basically three views of salvific repentance: (1) Turn from or be willing to turn from one's sins--a concept which is included in saving faith, or (2) Change one's mind about Jesus Christ--a concept which is essentially synonymous with saving faith, or (3) Repentance (turning from one's sins) is not a condition of eternal salvation at all.

A. Turning from Sins as a Condition of Eternal Salvation: A View Inconsistent with Faith as the Sole Condition of Salvation Some suggest that the Greek terms for faith have within their fields of meaning the concept of turning from sins. For example, in another paper on repentance and salvation presented at the 1989 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Dr. James Rosscup wrote: The Gospel of John always refers to "believe," never using the word for repenting. The Apostle John heard Jesus's [sic] command in Luke 24:47 to proclaim repentance to Jews and Gentiles. Assuming that John obeys his Lord, and also authors the Gospel that bears his name, his use of only "believe" can have a reasonable solution. To him, believing draws into its attitude all that it means to repent, to change the attitude in a turn from the old life to Christ and the new life.<sup>76</sup> Shortly thereafter he added:

Faith which includes repentance involves obedience. Faith is a dependence on Christ and also an appropriation of Christ's free gift. At the same time, faith also embraces repentance, repentance including a changed attitude that has commitment, direction, purpose, loyalty.<sup>77</sup> This argument utilizes the analogy of faith in reverse. It involves reading a questionable understanding of Luke 24:47 into all of John's uses of belief. It infuses into the concept of faith ideas wholly foreign to it. This view is inconsistent with faith as the sole condition of eternal salvation. And, in spite of assertions claiming that it does not, this view violates the concept of salvation as a free gift. Salvation is not free if the recipient must change his lifestyle and pledge to serve God to obtain it.

Notice the frank admission of one holding this view who baldly asserts that to be saved one must pay for it by turning from his sins. Under the heading What must I pay to be a Christian? Dr. James Montgomery Boice answers:

I must pay the price of those sins I now cherish. I must give them up, every one. I cannot cling to a single sin and pretend at the same time I am following the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>78</sup>

Rather than the Lord Jesus Christ alone buying our redemption, this view demands that the recipient pay part of the price himself. Something is found wanting in Christ's work on the Cross. This view is a return to Rome.

B. Changing One's Mind as a Condition of Eternal Salvation: A View Consistent with Faith as the Sole Condition of Salvation The view of Chafer, Ryrie, and this writer is that the "repentance" which is required for eternal salvation is a change of mind about Christ.<sup>79</sup> The Jews of Jesus' day knew and rejected Jesus' claims. The Apostles called on them to change their minds about Jesus Christ in light of the new evidence of His resurrection. This call for a change of mind about Christ is synonymous with the call to trust in Him. This view is consistent with the position that faith is the sole condition of salvation. It harmonizes John's Gospel and the Synoptics by viewing saving repentance as equal to saving faith.

C. Repentance Not a Condition of Eternal Salvation: A View Consistent with Faith as the Sole Condition of Salvation In his recent book Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation, Zane C. Hodges suggests a view of repentance which approaches this subject from a completely different perspective.<sup>80</sup> He asserts that repentance is rightly understood as turning to God from one's sins. However, he goes on to say that there are no passages in which repentance is required for eternal salvation. Rather, he argues that repentance is a condition of coming into harmonious fellowship with God.

One is eternally saved, according to this view, by faith alone in Christ alone. Repentance may, but need not, occur before faith and salvation. Thus this view clearly is consistent with the faith-only view of salvation.

#### D. Conclusion

Two views are theologically possible: that repentance is a change of mind or that it is not a condition of eternal salvation.

These views need not be taken as mutually exclusive. One can take some passages one way and some the other.

However, the view that repentance is turning from one's sins and that it is required for eternal salvation is theologically impossible. Such a view contradicts grace, faith, and the freeness of the Gospel. The sections which follow will consider various passages in the , Gospels and Acts which deal with repentance. Representative verses have been selected, since to consider every passage would require more space than is available. Most major passages have been considered, however.

IV. Gospels-Acts Passages in Which Repentance Is a Change of Mind about Christ and a Condition of Salvation A. Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 5:31; Acts 11:17-18 These five references form the heart of the recorded preaching of salvific repentance in the early church. Of the five references to the Great Commission in the Gospels and Acts, only in Luke did Christ cite the preaching of repentance. In Luke 24:46-48 He 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. And you are witnesses of these things." The disciples were told that they would promise the remission or forgiveness of sins to those who "repent." Not surprisingly, this is exactly what we find in the recorded evangelistic messages of the disciples (Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 5:31).

It is conceivable that the forgiveness of sins in question is a non-salvific, fellowship sort of forgiveness, as in 1 John 1:9.<sup>81</sup> However, there are several reasons why this is unlikely.

First, the majority of the uses of the term for remission or forgiveness (aphesis; verb form, aphemi ) refer to salvific forgiveness. "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28). "Whoever believes in Him will receive the remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). "Through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified" (Acts 13:38). "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered" (Romans 4:7). "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1:7). "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14). "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22). "I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" (1 John 2:12).<sup>82</sup> This is especially evident when only the noun form is considered--the form used in Luke 24:47, Acts 2:38, and 5:31. There are no clear references to fellowship forgiveness using the noun. Yet it clearly often refers to salvific forgiveness.

Second, Jesus said in Luke 24:47 (and Acts 1:8) that the disciples would be witnesses concerning His death and resurrection. Witnessing to Christ's death and resurrection fits much better with the

view that eternal salvation is in view.

Third, a comparison of Peter's preaching about the forgiveness of sins in Acts 2:38, Acts 3:19, Acts 5:31, and Acts 10:43 supports this conclusion as well. In the first three passages Peter linked forgiveness with "repentance":

Repent and let every one of you be baptized<sup>83</sup> in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

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). The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:30-31) In the last passage, however, Peter conditioned forgiveness upon believing in Jesus Christ: To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins (Acts 10:43).

It seems reasonable to conclude that Peter in each case was preaching about salvific forgiveness and that he was equating "repentance" (i.e., changing one's mind about Christ) with believing in Christ.

Peter's audience in Acts 2:1-47; Acts 3:1-26, and 5 was Jewish. These were people who had rejected Christ and His claims. Now new evidence was in the resurrection. Peter was a witness to this dramatic new evidence. Peter called his unbelieving Jewish listeners to change their minds about Jesus Christ. To change their minds about Him was to believe in Him.

Talbert put it beautifully: The evangelist thinks that after Jesus' resurrection His trial is reopened and fresh evidence is presented by the apostles to get the Jews to change their verdict. The new evidence is the event of Jesus' resurrection. The condemnation of Christ had been done in ignorance (Acts 3:17; Acts 13:27), but in raising Jesus God showed the Jews they had made a mistake: they had crucified the Christ (Acts 2:36). Now, however, the Jews are given a chance to change their minds, to repent ([Acts] Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 5:31).<sup>84</sup>

Fourth, Acts 11:18 is a commentary on Acts 10:43 ff. and the conversion of Cornelius and his household. After Peter told believing Jews that Cornelius and his household had been baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, they said: "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

Two points are noteworthy. One, this "repentance" was to life. It is quite unlikely that physical life was meant. Cornelius already possessed physical life. Two, Peter never mentioned "repentance" to the Jewish brethren. Rather, he referred to believing (Acts 11:17). Thus the text explicitly equates "repentance" to life with believing for the remission of sins and eternal salvation. In light of all this evidence, it can be asserted with reasonable certainty that Luke 24:47, Acts 2:38, Acts 3:19, Acts 5:31, and Acts 11:18 all refer to changing one's mind about Jesus Christ as a condition of eternal salvation.

B. Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32

Several passages in the Gospels and Acts use "repentance" as a virtual synonym for eternal salvation. Matthew 9:13, Mark 2:17, and Luke 5:32 are parallel accounts. I have selected Mark's account as representative. In Mark 2:17 Jesus responded to scribes and Pharisees who were grumbling because Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He said: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

All are sinners. Jesus was not suggesting that some didn't need Him. Rather He was asserting the opposite. All who see their need are invited by Him to heed His call: "Repent" and be saved. "Repentance" is used here as a metonymy of cause for the effect. The cause is changing one's mind about Christ, believing in Him. The effect is eternal salvation.

Thus Jesus was saying in effect: I have not come to call those who think that they are righteous, but those who recognize that they are sinners, to eternal salvation.

## V. Gospels-Acts Passages in Which Repentance is a Turning from Sins and Is Not a Condition of Salvation

### A. Luke 17:3-4

If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, "I repent, you shall forgive him.

Clearly this passage does not refer to eternal salvation. The forgiveness in view is man-to-man. It involves fellowship. The repentance in question is a change of mind about sinful behavior. In such a passage the English word repentance is a good translation.

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

Peter spoke these words to Simon Magus. The wickedness in question was Simon's attempt to buy the power to convey the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands (Acts 8:18-19). The English word simony, the buying or selling of positions in the church, is derived from Simon's act.

Luke left no doubt as to Simon's spiritual condition. In Acts 8:13 he explicitly indicates that Simon came to faith in Christ and testified to his faith by water baptism, just as many other Samaritans had (v 12). The forgiveness spoken of by Peter in v 22 thus refers to forgiveness of a believer--not to salvific forgiveness.

Peter commanded Simon to repent concerning (i.e., change his mind about) his wicked request so that he might obtain fellowship-forgiveness from God. Simon's physical life was probably on the line. The reader would not be surprised should the text go on to say that shortly thereafter Simon died and was carried away to be buried,<sup>85</sup> as was the case with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-42.

There may be other passages in the Gospels and Acts in which repentance is a condition for fellowship forgiveness and temporal salvation. However, other passages are not nearly as clear as the ones cited. It is to the more questionable passages that we now turn our attention.

VI. Gospels-Acts Passages Which Are Difficult to Categorize Regarding Their Use of Repentance  
A. John the Baptist's Preaching of Repentance (Matthew 3:2-15; Mark 1:4, Mark 1:15; Luke 3:3-20; Luke 19:1-10; Acts 19:4) In the five years since I completed my dissertation on this subject, I have had second thoughts about my treatment of John the Baptist's preaching of repentance. I argued that John's preaching of repentance was a call to a change of mind about oneself and Jesus Christ in order to obtain eternal salvation. I am now much torn between that view and Hodges's view.

Hodges suggests that John the Baptist's call to repentance was a call for the nation to turn from its sins.<sup>86</sup> However, he also suggests that this reformation of life was not a condition of eternal salvation. Rather, Hodges suggests that John's baptism of repentance "was designed to prepare the nation for faith in the Coming One."<sup>87</sup> As self-righteous Jews recognized their sinfulness and turned back toward God, barriers to faith in Christ were removed.

Here are some excerpts from or about John the Baptist's preaching of repentance as recorded in the Gospels and Acts (italics mine):

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand ! . . . Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repeneance<sup>3</sup>' (Matthew 3:2, Matthew 3:5-8).

John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins . . . Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, . . . "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:4, Mark 1:14-15). And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Luke 3:4).

Then he [John the Baptist] said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3:7). The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.' I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water" (John 1:29-31) .

[John said] He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36).

Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John. (John 4:1).

Then Paul said, John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" (Acts 19:4).

Several points can be observed from these passages.

First, the Apostle John presents John the Baptist as conditioning eternal salvation solely upon believing in Jesus Christ John 3:36).

Second, John the Baptist gave two reasons for "repenting." The nation was to repent: (1) since the kingdom was near (Matthew 3:2) and (2) in order to obtain the remission of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:4).

Repenting in light of the nearness of the kingdom fits well with Hodges's view. It is a common OT theme that the nation was to turn from its sins to prepare itself for the kingdom. It is one thing to prepare oneself to meet the king. It is another to be a subject of the king. It is quite conceivable that among the many who were baptized by John there were some who had already come to faith in Christ. On the other hand, repenting in order to obtain the remission of sins does not fit as well with Hodges's view. As shown above, that same expression is used elsewhere in the Gospels and Acts (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 5:31) to refer to salvific forgiveness.

Third, those being baptized by John were confessing their sins (Matthew 3:5). This may have been a spontaneous response by people. Possibly John did not call for this as a condition of baptism. However, in light of his role as the forerunner who was to make straight the Messiah's paths (Luke 3:4) and his response to those who asked, "What shall we do?" (Luke 3:10), it seems more likely that John required the confession of sins before one could be baptized.

Fourth, it is very telling that the Lord Jesus baptized more people than John did and that He baptized "disciples" (John 4:1-54:1).<sup>88</sup> Jesus baptized those who had already committed to follow Him. Of course, some of those, Judas being a prime example, were unsaved (John 6:64). If all of the Lord's disciples were baptized by Him and some of them were unbelievers, He did not require people to believe in Him in order to undergo His baptism. Likely John did not require faith in Christ of those he baptized either. If not, then it is hard to conceive of John's call to repentance as a call to eternal salvation.

Jesus' baptism, while never called a baptism of repentance, seems to have been parallel to John's. John 4:1 mentions both baptisms without distinction as to purpose. Our Lord's first recorded exhortation in Matthew, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17) is identical to John's preaching of repentance as recorded in Matthew 3:2.

Fifth, people undergoing John's baptism were fleeing from the wrath to come (Luke 3:7). While this may well refer to God's eternal wrath, it is at least equally possible that temporal wrath was meant. The Jewish Wars and the fall of Jerusalem with the resultant destruction of the temple in A.D. 66-70 could have been in view.

Sixth, after John was in prison Jesus said "Repent, and (kai) believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He might have meant "Repent, that is (ascensive use of kai), believe in the gospel." If so, He equated the two. It is just as likely, however, that Jesus was distinguishing between the two. He may have called for "repentance" as one act and believing the Gospel as another--the latter being the condition of eternal salvation and the former of fellowship and temporal salvation.

What conclusion can we draw from these observations regarding John's preaching of repentance?

One element in John's preaching keeps me from wholeheartedly embracing Hodges's view: that the forgiveness of sins is explicitly linked to John's preaching of repentance (e.g., Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). As already pointed out above, repentance for the forgiveness of sins commonly refers to salvific forgiveness.

I am torn between the two views. I am slightly inclined, however, in light of the many points in favor of a fellowship-temporal salvation view, to conclude that the forgiveness of sins mentioned looks to a forgiveness that results in temporal deliverance from God's wrath. Thus even nonbelievers who turn from their sins will find that God's judgment against their sin begins to subside. This seems to be the point of Revelation 9:20-21 and Revelation 16:9-11. While entrance into the kingdom and positional forgiveness are conditioned solely upon faith in Christ--or changing one's mind about Him--temporal forgiveness and temporal salvation are conditioned upon obedience.

I feel that this is a topic which needs much additional attention. Hopefully someone from the Free Grace Salvation perspective will soon write a thesis, or better yet a dissertation, on John the Baptist's preaching of repentance.

B. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) The prodigal son planned in his heart to do more than was necessary to gain reconciliation with his father. He did not need to pledge to be a servant and work for his father. On the other hand, such a pledge did not hinder his reconciliation, since the young man understood, or possibly came to understand when he met his father, that reconciliation was available just for the asking--by grace alone with no working or pledging to work. In the first two parables of Luke 15:1-32, the Parables of the Lost Sheep and of the Lost Coin, the term for repentance, *metanoia*, is explicitly used. It is not, however, used in the third parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When did the prodigal "repent" and what did his repentance consist of?

These questions cannot be answered dogmatically since the text does not explicitly say. It is possible that he "repented" when he met his father and found that he accepted him with open arms and would not let him finish his planned speech. Bailey argues that only when he met his father did he repent--that is, only then did he realize that reconciliation could not be earned--that it could only be accepted as a pure gift.<sup>89</sup> Alternately, he may have "repented" when he was in the far country and "came to his senses" (v 17). The latter view allows for two possible understandings of the content of the prodigal's repentance in the far country. One view is that he repented when he decided that any role in his father's house would be better than his pigpen existence outside of his house. The problem with this view is that the prodigal seemed to believe he could earn reconciliation by working. If this was the prodigal's "repentance," then that was not required for reconciliation. Indeed, this thinking would need to be corrected before he could be reconciled.

Another view is that the prodigal repented when he decided to turn from his sinful ways. Again, if one holds this view he would have to argue that this repentance was not a condition of reconciliation with the father. This is the position of Zane Hodges on the parable.<sup>90</sup> The prodigal changed his mind in two senses at two different times. When in the far country he changed his mind about his lifestyle and decided to seek reconciliation with his father. When actually in his father's presence he realized that reconciliation was only available as a completely free gift. It could not be bought. Which change of mind led to the prodigal's reconciliation with his father? Clearly the latter. The father would not let him buy his way into the household. The prodigal had to accept reconciliation as a free gift. Which change of mind represented the prodigal's "repentance"? I am inclined to the view that his "repentance" was his recognition and acceptance of the free gift of reconciliation. It, of course, was built upon his recognition of his sinfulness and need of reconciliation. When the prodigal accepted his father's grace gift there was joy in heaven

in a parallel fashion to the finding of the lost coin and the lost sheep in the first two parables.<sup>91</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

There are only two views of salvific repentance which are consistent with the Gospel: the view that repentance is essentially synonymous with saving faith and the view that repentance is not a condition of eternal salvation at all.

It has been shown that in some passages one can understand repentance as a condition of eternal salvation and in others not. These views are not exclusive.

It is my view that the Gospels and Acts primarily use the terms *metanoia* and *metanoeo* essentially as synonyms for faith in Christ. The call to change one's mind about Christ, after the new evidence of the resurrection is brought forth (e.g., Acts 2:38), is parallel to calling one to place his or her faith in the Risen Christ in light of the proof of the resurrection (Acts 10:40-43).

Nevertheless, it is clear in some passages (e.g., Luke 17:3-4) that those terms are used to refer to changes of mind about one's sinful behavior. In such cases what is at stake is fellowship, not eternal salvation. The preaching of John the Baptist and the Parable of the Prodigal Son are very difficult to categorize. At this time I am inclined to view John the Baptist's call to repentance as a call to turn from one's sinful deeds. John's Gospel is clear that John the Baptist conditioned eternal salvation upon faith in Christ alone and not on turning from one's sins as well. It seems likely, though, that temporal and not eternal salvation is what the Synoptic authors are focusing upon in John the Baptist's preaching. The Parable of the Prodigal seems to deal with eternal salvation--this best fits the motif of "joy in heaven in the presence of the angels" in the first two parables of Luke 15:1-32. The repentance, while not clearly identified, seems to be the prodigal's acceptance of the free gift of reconciliation. The call to repentance is not uniform in the Gospels and Acts. In some cases it is a call to eternal salvation (e.g., Acts 2:38; Acts 11:18). In other cases it is a call to temporal salvation (e.g., Acts 17:3-4). In some cases the change of mind called for is about Christ. In others it is about one's sinful ways. When studying the concept of repentance in the Gospels and Acts and the rest of the NT, it is important to ask two questions: (1) Is temporal or eternal salvation in view? and (2) What is one being called to change his mind about--Christ, one's sinful ways, or something else?

We will explore these questions further in the next article in this series: "Repentance in the Epistles and Revelation."

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<sup>73</sup> Two early Greek manuscripts and one twelfth-century one omit the so-called longer ending of Mark's Gospel, including this verse. However, the vast majority of manuscripts (over one thousand), including some early ones, include it. In my opinion there is no doubt that this is canonical.

<sup>74</sup> This view can be illustrated in this way: "Get on the bus (and take a seat) and you will get to the stadium. He who doesn't get on the bus won't get there. In this illustration taking a seat is a parenthetical thought. The sole condition for getting to the stadium is getting on the bus.

75 About half of the NT uses of the terms of salvation, *sozo* and *soteria*, refer to temporal salvation. If that is the case here, Jesus' point is this: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved from the wrath of God, eternal and temporal. He who does not believe will be eternally condemned." Faith is necessary to be saved eternally. Baptism, and the commitment which it signifies to begin the course of discipleship (Matthew 28:19), is necessary to be saved temporally.

76 James E. Rosscup, "The Relation of Repentance to Salvation and the Christian Life" (unpublished paper), p. 17.

77 *Ibid.*, 18.

78 James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Chicago Moody Press, 1986), 12-13.

79 See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press 1948), 3:372-78; Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 91-100.

80 Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). See especially pp. 143-63.

81 See also, Matthew 6:12-15; Mark 11:26; Luke 11:4; Luke 17:3-4; Acts 8:22; James 5:15.

82 See also Matthew 12:31-32, Mark 3:29, Mark 4:12, Luke 1:77, Acts 26:18, Hebrews 10:18.

83 In Acts 3:19 and 5:31 Peter links the forgiveness of sins with "repentance" only--not with a repentance" plus baptism. This strongly suggests that the reference to baptism here is not a condition of forgiveness. It is most likely a parenthetical thought: "Repent (and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ) for the forgiveness of sins . . ." This is much as we might say, "Get on the bus (and take a seat) and you will arrive at the destination." Those who fail to sit down would still get to the destination, although they would displease the bus driver. For further discussion of this and other views of Acts 2:38 and baptism, see the article by Lanny Tanton in this issue of the Journal.

84 Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 231.

85 For fuller details regarding Luke's account of the conversion of Simon Magus see James Inglis, "Simon Magus, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 2 (Spring 1989):45-54.

86 Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 158-59.

87 *Ibid.*

88 The physical acts of baptizing were done by His disciples (John 4:2). However, since this was done under His direction, it could be spoken of as baptizing which Jesus did.

89 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 183 -84.

90 Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 153-54.

91 The problem with equating the prodigal's repentance with his change of mind regarding his lifestyle is that it is hard to see why that would necessarily lead to joy in heaven. He could have

turned from his sinful ways and yet refused to accept reconciliation as a free gift. Many clean up their lives and think that by so doing they are earning reconciliation. It seems likely that the reference to joy in heaven (found in the first two parables of the triad) finds its resting place in the prodigal's acceptance of the free gift of reconciliation. And, based on the first two parables of Luke 15:1-32, joy is experienced in heaven at precisely the point at which repentance occurs.

## 05 - New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Epistles and Revelation

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New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Epistles and Revelation Study By: Robert N. Wilkin

### I. Introduction

There is some disagreement among Bible scholars as to the intended readership of the NT books from Romans through Revelation. Two major schools of thought exist.

One school of thought suggests that the Epistles and Book of Revelation were addressed to professing Christians.<sup>92</sup> This group, they argue, contained both true and false professors. Hence they find many passages in Romans through Revelation which they interpret as warning professing believers that they will go to hell if they fail to live consistent, godly lives. A second school of thought is that the Epistles and Revelation are addressed to believers in Jesus Christ. According to this view all of the people to whom the books were specifically addressed were genuine believers.

Within this group some argue that there are passages which warn believers (i.e., genuine believers) that they will end up going to hell if they fail to live consistent, godly lives.<sup>93</sup> This would be the Arminian understanding.

Others in this group argue that there are no passages which warn believers, professing or otherwise, that they will go to hell if they fail to live consistent, godly lives.<sup>94</sup> This would be the Free Grace understanding.

How a person views the readership of these books greatly affects his or her understanding of the doctrine of repentance expressed within them. This article will proceed with the understanding that the Epistles and Revelation are addressed to believers in Jesus Christ--not to a mixture of believers and unbelievers. While unbelievers surely have read these letters, the letters were addressed to actual believers in Jesus Christ, as the authors plainly indicated in their letters.<sup>95</sup> We begin this study with a consideration of the condition of eternal salvation as found in the Epistles and Revelation.

II. The Gospel in the Epistles and Revelation The Epistles and Revelation, while not evangelistic in purpose, affirm the truth of John 3:16: whoever believes in Jesus Christ, and Him alone, has eternal life. The following references give support to this point:

Romans 3:21-24 : But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 4:5 : But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

Galatians 2:16 a: Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:6-7 : Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.

Ephesians 2:8-9 : For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

1 John 5:1 a: Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.

1 John 5:10-13 a: He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life....

I did not attempt to provide passages from First or Second Peter, James, or Hebrews, since to do so would require citing extended portions--and even then I would need to provide exegetical comments.

Needless to say, if the NT is consistent and does not contradict itself--if the Pauline and Johannine Epistles can be shown clearly to teach that the sole condition of salvation is faith in Christ alone--then the, other books must agree.

It is clear from the passages cited above that anyone who believes in Jesus Christ has eternal life. It logically follows from this that if repentance is also said to be a condition (a point which some question<sup>96</sup>), then it must either be a synonym for faith or else an essential precursor to it.

Let us now turn to a consideration of passages in the Epistles and Revelation in which repentance is given as a condition of eternal salvation. In my estimation, there are very few. I have identified only three.

III. Repentance as a Condition of Eternal Salvation A. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (emphasis supplied). The normal NT word for repent, *metanoëo* is not used here. Rather, the verb *epistrepho* is used. It means to turn. The Thessalonians turned to God from idols. The question is, was this turning necessary for eternal salvation or was Paul merely reporting what the Thessalonians had done?

Since an idolator cannot obtain eternal salvation without giving up his faith in idols and then placing his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, this passage almost certainly is speaking of what the Thessalonians did to gain eternal life.

According to Luke, some in Thessalonica were persuaded by Paul's preaching about the death and resurrection of Christ (Acts 17:1-4). The reference to being persuaded (*peitho*) about Christ is synonymous with coming to faith (*pisteuo*) in Him. The Thessalonians were saved when they

turned from faith in idols to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some see this verse differently. They suggest that the Thessalonians were saved both because they turned to God from idols and also because they made a commitment to serve God,<sup>97</sup> MacArthur uses this verse to suggest that to be saved one must make "a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead."<sup>98</sup> The infinitival clause at the end of our verse is used by some to support this view. Paul indicates that the Thessalonians turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." This interpretation does not stand up under careful scrutiny.

Paul does not say that the Thessalonians made a commitment to serve God. Nor does he say that their serving God was a condition of salvation. What he does say is that they turned to God from idols with the result that or for the purpose of serving God. Whether we understand the infinitival clause as expressing purpose or result is inconsequential as far as the Gospel message is concerned. In either case their salvation was not contingent upon this action.

Note, too, that Paul does not say that all people who trust in Christ do so with the result that they serve God or for the purpose of serving God. He simply reports that this was true of the Thessalonians. This verse cannot even rightly be used to show that all believers will definitely begin the Christian life by serving God, although that is clearly God's desire.

#### B. Hebrews 6:1

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God (emphasis supplied).

Here we meet again the normal NT word for repentance--metanoia. The people being addressed were Jewish believers (cf. Hebrews 3:1; Hebrews 10:10, Hebrews 10:19-25; Hebrews 12:1-2; Hebrews 13:22). According to the passage we are now considering, they had already laid the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God. The word repentance (metanoia) literally means a change of mind or perspective.<sup>99</sup> The readers had already come to change their perspective about human works. Formerly, before their salvation, they had thought that all good Jews would obtain kingdom entrance. They thought that good works were the ticket. Now, however, they understood well the error of such thinking. They now believed that the one and only ticket to the kingdom was faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Good works, they came to understand, are dead--that is, they produce death. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life (Romans 6:23).

Repentance from dead works is the reverse side of faith in God and in His Messiah. In order to come to faith in Christ one must first recognize the bankruptcy of his own works. It is impossible to trust in Christ alone and cling to some confidence in one's own deeds.

C. 2 Peter 3:9 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 (emphasis supplied). In this passage Peter is discussing the Lord's return to set up His kingdom. While some may scoff and suggest that He isn't coming ("Where is the promise of His coming?" 2 Peter 3:4), Peter is affirming that His return and kingdom are sure. No doubt about it.

Peter even gives a reason for the delay. God doesn't want anyone to perish. Rather, He wants all to come to repentance.

Zane Hodges suggests that metanoia here refers to turning from one's sinful ways with the result that one is in harmonious fellowship with God.<sup>100</sup> This view certainly maintains a Free Grace view of the Gospel. Although it is a possible view, I find it unlikely.

Peter is contrasting two things: perishing and repentance. Clearly the latter is a metonymy of the cause for the effect. That is, repentance is a figure for whatever it produces. If the effect is eternal life there is a quite natural antithetical parallelism with the idea of perishing. The opposite of perishing eternally is being saved eternally. If Hodges's view is correct, and it may be, then the effect is eternal rewards. But rewards are not the opposite of perishing. This same concept is found elsewhere in Scripture. In 1 Timothy 2:4 we read that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Clearly eternal salvation is in view there.

I suggest that repentance in 2 Peter 3:9 refers to a change of mind about the Person and work of Christ. Those who come to a proper perspective regarding the Gospel, those who come to faith in it, will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Since Peter was writing to a believing readership, he did not give an extended discussion on this point. His topic was the seeming delay of the Second Coming and the Kingdom. His point is that one reason the Lord hasn't returned yet is because He is giving additional time for more people to be saved.

#### IV. Repentance as a Condition of Temporal Salvation

There are a number of passages in the Epistles and Revelation which present repentance as a condition of temporal salvation. I have chosen six representative passages.

##### A. 2 Corinthians 7:9-10

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. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death (emphasis supplied). This passage is taken by some to be referring to repentance as a condition of eternal salvation.<sup>101</sup> However, the context is clearly not dealing with eternal salvation. Those being addressed are believers, the Corinthian Christians (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Corinthians 8:7; 2 Corinthians 13:11-14).

There is no mention of eternal life, the lake of fire, justification, condemnation, or terms which normally (or exclusively in the case of the lake of fire) deal with eternal salvation. The difficulty to which Paul refers is the failure of the church to deal with overt sin in its midst (2 Corinthians 7:11-12). He rebuked the church for this; the result was that they were stung by it (2 Corinthians 7:8-9). Paul was afraid that their indifference might lead to forfeiture of eternal rewards. He didn't want them to suffer such a loss (2 Corinthians 7:9). The Corinthians changed their minds (i.e., repented) and stopped tolerating the sin in their midst (2 Corinthians 7:9-10). Evidently they removed the offending person from their fellowship until he changed his ways (2 Corinthians 7:11).

2 Corinthians 7:10 is a summary statement on the value of godly sorrow in the lives of believers. Sorrow which is in accordance with God's will results in deliverance. Worldly sorrow, however, is

grief unrelated to the will of God. Such sorrow results not in deliverance, but ultimately in death. The fact that baseball legend Pete Rose, for example, is sorry for his gambling and tax evasion offenses is not necessarily a good sign. If he is only sorry because he was caught, banned from baseball, and sentenced to jail, and yet would do it all again if he thought he could get away with it, that is not helpful. Many are in prison today for the fourth or fifth time because, while they felt sorry upon getting caught and sentenced each time, they never had a fundamental change of heart and lifestyle.

If, however, Pete Rose is sorry that he gambled and cheated on his taxes because he now knows that it is wrong; and if he has taken steps never to do these things again (e.g., by seeking counseling for his gambling addiction), then his sorrow is a very positive thing. His sorrow will have led to a positive change in thinking and behavior. The repentance of the world, then, is sorrow unaccompanied by a positive change in thinking and behavior. Judas experienced this. He was remorseful for betraying the Lord (Matthew 27:3). Yet, rather than turning in faith to the Lord and crying out for His mercy, he committed another sin: he hanged himself. As mentioned above, the salvation in view here is not eternal salvation. Since the context is dealing with believers and with a change of behavior as the condition for the deliverance, temporal salvation is in view. When believers experience godly sorrow, when they learn and turn from their sinful ways, they escape the many unpleasant correctives which God would have sent into their lives if they had continued in that lifestyle. The Free Grace view of the Gospel believes in "turn or burn" temporally, not turn or burn eternally.

#### B. 2 Corinthians 12:21

[For I fear] lest when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced" (emphasis supplied). This passage is very similar to the one we just considered. Paul was afraid that many of the believers at Corinth were still indulging in sinful practices such as quarreling, backbiting, and immorality (2 Corinthians 12:20-21)--things about which he had previously rebuked and warned them (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 5:1-6:20). On the one hand some commentators suggest that Paul may have been wondering if unbelievers were in the church of Corinth.<sup>102</sup> They do not believe that a Christian is constitutionally able to fall into sin and fail (over any significant--but unspecified--length of time) to repent of it. On the other hand, however, many other commentators feel that Paul was not laying down conditions for eternal salvation.<sup>103</sup> They feel that he was simply challenging believers to godly living.

There is nothing in this verse to suggest that eternal salvation is in view--unless, of course one maintains a very strong view of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, something which is biblically unwarranted. Indeed, any unbiased reading of the other canonical book to the Corinthians shows clearly that genuine believers can fall into sin and fail to repent of it over an extended period of time (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; 1 Corinthians 6:1-20).

#### C. Hebrews 6:6

If they fall away [it is impossible] to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame (emphasis supplied). This much-discussed verse is talking about those who (1) "were once enlightened," (2) "have tasted the

heavenly gift," (3) "have become partakers of the Holy Spirit," (4) "have tasted the good word of God," and (5) "[have tasted] the powers of the age to come" (Hebrews 6:4-5). I. Howard Marshall notes that "the conclusion is irresistible that real Christians are meant."<sup>104</sup> A person would be hard pressed to come up with a more unambiguous reference to believers.<sup>105</sup> Regardless of what v 6 means, vv 4-5 are describing genuine believers. The real question is what judgment believers who apostatize will receive. The author of the Book of Hebrews warns that a fiery judgment awaits such people (vv 7-8). While some understand this to be a reference to hell and the lake of fire,<sup>106</sup> there are powerful reasons to suggest otherwise.

First, believers are in view, and believers cannot be sent to hell. Second, the author does not say that the ground itself (representing the believer) is destroyed. Rather, the ground remains. What is destroyed by fire is the worthless production of the ground. This suggests temporal judgment. Third, a good case can be made--but will not be made here due to space restrictions--that all of the other warning passages in Hebrews threaten genuine believers with temporal judgments and loss of eternal rewards--not with burning in the lake of fire.<sup>107</sup> Fourth, there seems to be a deliberate allusion to Genesis 3:1-24 and the cursing of the ground. Part of the curse of the fall was that the ground would yield thorns and thistles. The author of Hebrews indicates that if a believer's life yields thorns and thistles he will receive a curse. Just as the judgment upon the ground was temporal, so is the judgment upon the believer who falls away. Fifth and finally, other NT passages (e.g., 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; John 15:6) speak of the burning up of the unfruitful works of believers without any suggestion that they lose their salvation.

Therefore, even though the word fiery is used, the evidence suggests that temporal and not eternal judgment is in view. The believer who falls away from the faith cannot humanly be renewed again to repentance--that is, to his recognition of his sinfulness and need of grace and forgiveness through Christ alone. If a Christian ever comes to the point where he stops trusting in Christ, no amount of reasoning with him can win him back. Temporal judgment is coming upon him from God. Only by a miracle of God can such a person be renewed to his former attitude and opinion. Of course, since eternal salvation is conditioned on faith in Christ, not on eternal faith, such a person would still be saved. Nothing can separate a believer from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:38-39).

Some object to this view because they believe that a true believer could never depart from the faith.<sup>108</sup> Such an objection, however, is both unbiblical and impractical.

Biblically speaking there are a number of other passages which clearly show that believers are not immune to falling from the faith. Luke 8:13 refers to those "who believe for a while" and in time of temptation fall away. The preceding verse clearly indicates that those who believe are saved. Thus those who fall are believers. In Acts 20:30 Paul warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would arise and would "draw away the disciples after themselves." 1 Timothy 1:19 refers to those who suffered shipwreck concerning the faith. One can only experience shipwreck if he was at one time on board. 2 Timothy 2:18 refers to men who "strayed concerning the truth." Once again, one can only stray from somewhere he once was. Similarly, Peter warns his believing readers in 2 Peter 3:17 to "beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away by the error of the wicked."

Practically speaking, anyone who has spent any time in pastoral ministry has dealt with genuine believers who fell away from the faith. My second year in seminary I remember a fourth year student saying that he doubted the existence of God. He dropped out of seminary, left his pregnant wife, moved in with another woman, and took to alcohol. This from a young man who as a college student had memorized two chapters of the Bible a week and who as a seminary student had majored in NT Greek.

Also in my second year in seminary I recall talking with a fellow student who told me about one of his former professors from college. The man was an agnostic who was teaching philosophy. However, he had an obvious knowledge of the Bible. After class one day my friend went to witness to him. To start the conversation along spiritual lines he told his prof that he was going to seminary the following year. "Oh, is that right?" the prof said. "Where are you going?" When my friend told him Dallas Theological Seminary the prof smiled and said, "I'm a graduate of DTS." Many today underestimate the persuasiveness of the arguments of liberal graduate schools such as the one which turned a Dallas Seminary graduate into an agnostic. The minds of Christians can be turned. Believers can be duped. Lay people know this well. That is one reason why some lay people wouldn't even think of going to seminary. They are actually afraid that they might lose their faith at seminary!

I could multiply examples, but there is no need. Nothing in Hebrews 6:4-8 even remotely hints at eternal condemnation for believers who apostatize. Fire is a normal biblical metaphor for temporal judgment.

D. Hebrews 12:17 For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it diligently with tears (emphasis supplied). This passage deals with familial blessings, not eternal life. Whether Esau was a believer or not is not in question here. (Although I feel the example fits the context better if Esau is an example of a profane believer.) Esau is an example of one who set his priorities on fleshly pleasures rather than on lasting spiritual values.

Esau came to the place where he realized his error and sought to reverse the consequences of his former decision to sell his birthright for a meal. However, some things are irreversible. His father, Isaac, could not be moved. He couldn't be made to budge in his thinking.

So, too, the believer who sets his heart on earthly treasures will forfeit eternal treasures. No amount of tears at the Judgment Seat of Christ will reverse the matter. The time for spiritual action is now. A modern motto catches this point well:

Only one life, 'twill soon be past;

Only what's done for Christ will last.

E. Revelation 2:5

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place--unless you repent (emphasis supplied). This is part of the first of the seven letters in Revelation 2:1-29; Revelation 3:1-22. These were letters from the Lord to seven local churches in Asia Minor.

Clearly the Lord wanted the members of the church at Ephesus to repent--to change their attitudes regarding their works. "You have left your first love" (v 4b). "Repent and do the first works" (v 5b). Works of love no longer characterized the church at Ephesus. The preceding (vv 2-3) and following (v 6) verses make it clear that this church was not totally displeasing to the Lord. He commended the Ephesian church for maintaining doctrinal purity in the face of false teachers in the Ephesian church. However, as Ladd points out, "Doctrinal purity and loyalty can never be a substitute for love."<sup>109</sup> The question in the verse before us is the identification of the warning which follows the Lord's command to repent. What did the Lord mean when He spoke of removing the church's lampstand if it did not repent? The removal of the lampstand is clearly figurative language. Does it refer to eternal damnation? Surely not. Nothing in the context supports this. Rather, what is in view is temporal in nature. If the church did not repent the Lord would remove the church's ability to bear witness for Him. That is, the church at Ephesus would die out, would cease to exist, if the current members did not change their ways.<sup>110</sup> The eternal salvation of the believers at Ephesus is not in view. That salvation they obtained once and for all when they placed their faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). What was in view was their temporal well being. The very existence of their church was at stake.

If a local church backslides today, it too will be in jeopardy of extinction. While eternal salvation is secure forever, local assemblies are not.

F. Revelation 9:20-21 But 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 walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts" (emphasis supplied).

These verses deal with the moral response of unbelievers during the Tribulation to the terrible events of the sixth trumpet judgment. Those who survived did not change their thinking about their sinful ways. That is, although the judgments were great and should have led people to abandon their transgressions, the people would not give up their sinful behavior.

These verses clearly imply that had a significant number of the surviving unbelievers repented of their wicked ways, the horrible judgments of the Tribulation might have been lessened.<sup>111</sup>

Temporal judgments are in view. Eternal damnation is not. The passage does not suggest that turning from sins will be a condition of eternal salvation in the Tribulation.<sup>112</sup>

## V. Conclusion

There are only three passages in the Epistles, and none in the Book of Revelation, which condition eternal salvation upon repentance. In those three passages repentance refers to a change of mind about Christ and the Gospel. Thus repentance in those contexts is used as a synonym for faith.

There are a number of passages in the Epistles and Revelation which condition temporal salvation from God's discipline or judgment upon repentance. In those passages repentance refers to a change of mind about one's sinful behavior. People, both believers and unbelievers, must turn from their sins in order to escape the negative consequences which sin brings. The passing pleasures of sin (Hebrews 11:25) are far outweighed by the pain which is its constant companion (Hebrews 12:3-11 ; James 1:15). This concludes the exegetical articles in this series on

repentance and salvation. In the next article, the last of the series, I will discuss the practical matter of how one can clearly preach and teach about repentance.

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92 See, for example, John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 22-23, James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 110-12, 166-67; Walter Chantry *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970) 67-77.

93 See, for example, Ray B. White, "Eternal Security" Insecure or The Heresy of "Once In Grace Always in Grace." (Zarephath, NJ: Pillar of Fire, 1939); C. J. McElligott, *The Crown of Life: A Study of Perseverance* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1963); Robert Shank, *Life in the Son*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1960, 1961) Guy Duty, *If Ye Continue* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship:1966); 1. Howard Marshall *Kept By The Power of God: A Study of Perseverance And Falling Away* (London: Epworth Press, 1969).

94 See for example, Charles C Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 47-49, 59-66, 135-44; Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids and Dallas: Zondervan Publishing House and Redencion Viva, 1989), 47-88; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 3 Soteriology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 347-93.

95 See for example, Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 5:1-21; Galatians 1:9; Ephesians 1:1; Ephesians 2:8-9; Php 1:1; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:5; Titus 1:4; Philemon 1:4-7; Hebrews 6:4-5; James 1:16-18; 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 2:25; 1 John 5:9-13; 2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1-3; Revelation 1:5; 2:1-3:22.

96 See Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 143-63.

97 See, for example, MacArthur, *The Gospel*, 162-63; James E. Rosscup, "The Relation of Repentance to Salvation and the Christian Life, Unpublished paper presented at the 1989 Annual Evangelical Theological society meetings held in San Diego, California, 47-49.

98 MacArthur, *The Gospel*, 163.

99 For documentation see a previous article by this writer: *New Testament Repentance Lexical Considerations*, JOTGES 2 (Autumn 1989):13-21.

100 See Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* 226.

101 See, for example, Harold J. Ockenga, *The Comfort of God: Preaching in Second Corinthians* (New York Fleming H. Revell, co., 1944), 203-206; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh T. & T. Clark, 1915), 221-22. N.B. Plummer appears to see eternal salvation in view but is not so clear as to make this conclusion inescapable.

102 See, for example, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 470-73; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1973), 331-32; Ockenga, *Second Corinthians*, 278.

103 See, for example, Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (N.p.: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1859, reprint ea., Grand Rapids Baker Book House, 1980), 297-98; R. v. G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale NT Series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing co., 1963), 185; H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1939), 276-79; David Lowery, *-2 Corinthians-* in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT edition, ed. by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 513-16, 584.

104 Marshall, *Kept by the Power*, 138.

105 Some time ago while doing research on this passage I found a note to this effect by a commentator. I have been unable, however, to relocate the reference to give him credit. *Mea culpa*.

106 See, for example, F. F. Bruce *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), i22-25 (esp. 125n); Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 115; Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), edited by W. Robertson Nicoll, 4:300; Robert Milligan, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1977), 225.

Kent takes the view that the falling away is only hypothetical, but that if it occurred, eternal condemnation would result. Milligan argues that regeneration and eternal life are forfeited if one apostatizes. However, he also argues that eternal security is true. He accomplishes this by suggesting that eternal security only applies to the elect. He believes that the non-elect sometimes are regenerated, only to lose their salvation later when they fall away. Thus the elect are eternally secure and the non-elect are not.

107 See, for example, Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews;" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT edition, 780-812.

108 E.g., Kent, *Hebrews*, 111-14; William R. Newell, *Hebrews Verse by Verse*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1947), 196-202; Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), 110-11.

109 George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 39.

110 Cf. Ladd, *Revelation*, 39-40; John F. Walvoord, "Revelation" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT edition, 934; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol. I (Edinburgh T. & T. Clark, 1920), 52 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Greenwood, SC The Attic Press, 1974), 75.

111 Cf. Ladd, Revelation, 138; Joseph A. Seiss, The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 221, Isbon T. Beckwith The Apocalypse of John (reprint edition, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 569, Henry Barclay Swete, Commentary on Revelation (reprint edition, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 126.

112 Indeed, many of the people in question will already be beyond hope of eternal salvation at this point since anyone who takes the mark of the beast will be sealed in a state of unbelief (Revelation 14:9-11). It is thus evident that during the Tribulation there will be a special work of the Holy Spirit forbidding believers from taking the mark--since to do so would mean loss of salvation. Either God will not allow believers to give in to such a temptation by giving them a special measure of grace, or He will simply take the life of any believer who would, if left to himself, take the mark.

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