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Is Repentance Part of the Gospel?

Edward Hindson

Liberty University, ehindson@liberty.edu

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Fundamentalism Today

by Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson

Is Repentance Part of the Gospel?

The invitation of the gospel calling upon the sinner to “believe” appears no less than 115 times in the New Testament without any mention of repentance. Therefore, some conclude that repentance is not essential to the gospel. Others believe that it was required only of the Jews. Still others argue that repentance is required only of Christians who are already saved.

What Does Repentance Involve?

There are two basic usages of the term *repent* (or *repentance*) in the Scripture. The Hebrew word *nacham* means to “be penitent” or “sorry” (“It repented the Lord that he had made man” Gen. 6:6). However, the word *shub* means “to turn back” (“Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols” Ezek. 14:6). This latter usage implies a definite change of direction. Likewise, the Greek of the New Testament has two such usages. *Metamelomai* means “to be concerned” or “sorry” (“Judas . . . repented himself” Matt. 27:3). On the other hand, the word *metanoeo* means “to have another mind” or “to change one’s mind” (“Repent ye therefore, and be converted” Acts 3:19). This latter usage is the focus of our concern in the doctrine of repentance. It is a change of mind that leads to a change of direction and evidences itself in changed action.

Is Repentance Necessary to Salvation?

The absence of a doctrinal statement in one part of the Scripture does not negate its emphasis in other parts. If there is substantial evidence of the requirement of repentance in the Scripture, then it does not matter whether it is mentioned in connection with *believe* 115 times. Obviously, it is assumed. Let’s examine the evidence.

The message of Jesus. Jesus preached repentance as a condition to salvation at least 19 times. In addition, He called the church to repent 7 times in the Book of Revelation! All three synoptic Gospels record His statement of His earthly ministry: “I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13; cf. Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32). The only way to escape repentance as necessary to salvation is to fall back on the erroneous idea that He preached this only to Jewish sinners.

Jesus’ initial preaching centered around the theme of repentance: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2, cf. 4:17). National repentance was the condition under which Israel was to receive the kingdom, which of course they rejected. In Luke 13:3 Jesus strongly announced, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” In the parable of the lost sheep Jesus declared, “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:7). Did He believe that sinners needed to repent in order to gain heaven? The answer is obvious. It is also true that believers can repent and often need to do so. Yet, their need for repentance in no way proves that the message of repentance is only for them.

The message of Peter and Paul. In Luke’s version of the Great Commission he records Jesus’ direction to His disciples “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

God asks no man to change his own life, for no man can.

Is the message of repentance for the Jews only? Obviously not. It is to be preached to all nations. Did the disciples obey this command?

Peter and Paul are the two major sources of New Testament preaching on repentance. In Acts 2:38 Peter urged the unconverted Jews and proselytes at the Feast of Pentecost to “repent and be baptized.” In his second sermon at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, he thundered, “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). Years later in 2 Peter 3:9 he wrote, “The Lord . . . is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” Again, it is clear in this context that if one does not repent, he will perish.

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Paul also both preached repentance and wrote about it. To the Greek "pagans" on Mars Hill in Athens he said, "God . . . now commandeth all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). As far as the text indicates, there were no Jews present. In Acts 20 Paul, having concluded his third missionary journey, was sailing home to Antioch and stopped off at Miletus on the coast of Asia Minor. There he sent a message to the elders of the beloved church at Ephesus to come for a final meeting with him. At that time he reviewed everything he felt was essential in reminding them of "all the counsel of God" (v.27).

In his farewell message Paul clearly states, "I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20:20-21). This message is quite clear that repentance was part of that essential counsel of God. Again, this passage reinforces that both Jews and Gentiles are to repent. It also states that repentance precedes faith (cf. Acts 3:19, 11:18; 2 Cor. 7:9-10, Luke 24:47; and 2 Tim. 2:25).

Even though the injunction to "believe" or exercise "faith" appears alone over 100 times, this fact does not prove that repentance is not necessary to salvation. Such an argument is based upon silence. Wherever one finds both faith and repentance together in the same passage, he will observe the same formula; repentance *always* precedes faith, understanding, or conversion.

Acts 20:21 refers to "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." This suggests that repentance involves a change of one's attitude toward God the Father. This change prepares one for the response of faith toward Christ. Note the case of the Philippian jailer, who had already fallen down under conviction and cried, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The jailer did not need to be told to repent, since he was already showing outward evidence of repentance. To him the message of the gospel was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). Yet, only one chapter later in Acts 17:30, Paul, now preaching to unrepentant intellectuals, said that God "now commandeth all men everywhere to repent." Why the change? These intellectuals could not genuinely believe in Christ until they first changed their basic attitude toward God and His Word.

Is this evidence from Acts merely "transitional"? There is only one real argument left to those who deny that repentance is to be preached to saved and unsaved alike. The "hyperdispensational" idea says everything in the Book of Acts is transitional from the Old Covenant, and therefore does not apply to us today.

While certain concepts in the Book of Acts represent a definitely "transitional stage" (for example, the speaking in tongues, miracles done by the apostles, attending synagogue Sabbath services, and keeping certain Jewish feasts), this does not relegate the entire book into the Old Testament era. One major fact needs to be remembered: the Book of Acts is the first chapter of church history. While the Epistles tell us what the church is, Acts tells us what it *did*.

However, the Book of Acts was actually written *after* many of the Epistles. While it contains a record of the early days of the church, it also continues up to the time of Paul's imprisonment at Rome. For example, when Paul stood before King Agrippa in Acts 26, most of his earthly life had already passed.

And yet, even at this late date he declared, "Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: but shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (vv.19-20).

Three times in his Epistles, Paul refers to repentance: Romans 2:4, 2 Corinthians 7:9-10, 2 Timothy 2:25 (the last letter he ever wrote). The excuse that the evidence from Acts is merely "transitional" is fallacious. In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul warmly

Man is saved on the basis of God's grace, through faith.

said, "Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance. . . . For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation" (vv.9-10). Man must repent and believe the gospel to be saved.

Is repentance a "work"? One of the major arguments of those who reject the doctrine of repentance as necessary to salvation is the contention that this makes repentance a "work." To which the obvious reply is that repentance is no more a "work" than is faith!

Remember that repentance (*metanoeo*) is a "change of mind" that leads to a change of action. Repentance, in the Scripture, clearly comes before "turning to God" in trust or faith. The "works" of repentance then follow the turn to God in faith. Thus:

REPENTANCE	FAITH
(mind changed toward God)	(total trusting to the finished work of Christ)
FRUIT	
(works giving evidence that the repentance and faith were genuine)	

We need to remember clearly that God asks no man to change his own life, for no man can. He does not ask man either to repent or to believe by means of his own ability. Faith, if it originated from some inherent quality within man, would be just as much a "work" as repentance. The Greek text of the Scripture makes it clear that we are saved on the *basis* of grace (not on the basis of our "having faith"). Man is saved on the basis of God's grace, but through the instrumental means of faith. Therefore, even faith is not a "work" since it, like repentance, is a gift of God.

Repentance Is a Vital Part of the Gospel

The message of repentance is a vital part of the gospel of salvation. While one need not repent of every single listed sin that he has ever committed, he must repent and confess that he is a sinner who has violated God's laws. Asking the unrepentant person to believe is like asking the uncommitted one to love. There is no true saving faith without repentance, just as there is no true repentance without saving faith. The two are virtually inseparable, yet vitally necessary, components of the gospel. □