

Doctrine of Repentance

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“There will come a day when men will preach salvation without regeneration, Heaven without Hell and faith without repentance.” General Booth

How important is repentance to salvation? What is real repentance, and what relationship does repentance have to faith? The purpose of this paper is to answer these and other questions concerning repentance. The doctrine of repentance will be discussed in four aspects. 1. The Necessity of Repentance, 2. The Nature of Repentance, 3. The Neglect of Repentance, 4. Some Nonsense about Repentance.

Necessity of Repentance

Is repentance a requirement for salvation? Is it a necessary ingredient in the marvelous doctrine of soteriology? The answer is a resounding yes! True Gospel is a command to repent. True repentance is an essential condition in the glorious Gospel. Repentance and faith can never be separated.” Many Bible scholars and preachers through the centuries have declared the importance of repentance. In “All the Doctrines of the Bible,” Herbert Lockyer writes, “Repentance is God’s command to all men and everywhere.” Theological writer and educator Ed Dobson declares, “Repentance is a vital part of the Gospel of Salvation. There is no saving faith without repentance and the two are inseparable.” Ungers Bible Dictionary states, “Repentance is necessary to true salvation.” It is important to note that repentance is an essential ingredient, but not the only ingredient in real salvation. Faith is just as essential an ingredient to conversion. Evangelist Billy Sunday preached, “All men must repent. God has no favorites.” George Whitefield preached, “The soul that does not repent and turn to the Lord shall die in its sins.” H.A. Ironside is plain when he states, “Nor were any sinners ever saved by grace until they repented.” Dr. R.G. Lee declared emphatically, “No one can be saved unless they repent.”

But all these quotations are from fallible human being. What does the infallible Word of God say? John the Baptist says in Matthew 3:1-2, “*Repent ye for the kingdom of God is at hand.*” Matthew also reminds us, “*From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” Matthew 4:17. Mark and Luke both record Christ’s words on repentance, “*Repent ye, and believe the gospel.*” “*Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*” Mark 1:15, Luke 13:3, 5. When Jesus was leaving the disciples to go back to Heaven he declared, “*and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations*” Luke 24:47. On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter carried out this command when he preached, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*” Acts 2:38. Later in Acts 3:19 he demanded, “*Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.*” Even in his last epistle, Peter carried on the theme, “*not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*” II Peter 3:9. The Apostle Paul was vigilant in his preaching of repentance. In Acts 17:30 he told the crowd on Mars Hill, “*but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.*” Paul also made it plain that this message of repentance was not just for a group of people or just one dispensation. In Acts 20:21, he was “*testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Again in Acts 26:20 Paul told King Agrippa that he had been preaching everywhere “*that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.*” The necessity of repentance was declared by Jesus and the Apostles. It was the

message preached on the day of Pentecost and the announcement carried around the world by the disciples. There should be no doubt about its prominence in Scripture or its proclamation in the gospel message. But just what is repentance?

The Nature of Repentance

If repentance is necessary for salvation then by necessity the essence of repentance must be defined and understood. I believe that it is a change of mind about one's sins that will lead to a change in actions. In Vine's Expository Dictionary, W.E. Vine says the verb form of repentance is *metanoeo*, meaning to perceive afterwards (meta, after, implying change; noeo to perceive; nous, the mind). Hence signifies to change one's mind or purposes, always in the New Testament the subject chiefly has reference to repentance from sin and this change of mind involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God. In his work entitled, *Systematic Theology*, A.H. Strong defines repentance as, "that voluntary change in the mind of the sinner in which he turns from sins. Being essentially a change of mind, it involves a change of view, change of purposes. It is an inward turning from sin and disposition to seek pardon and cleansing." In the *Studies in the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, repentance is said to mean "to change one's mind or purpose. This includes not only the act of changing one's attitude towards and opinion of sin, but also that of forsaking it. The result is that sorrow, contrition and turning away from it will also follow." So repentance is a change of the mind, will and emotions concerning sin, self and the Saviour. It is a change of attitude that results in a change of action. It includes both a sorrow for sin and a turning to God from sin. It is a willingness to forsake sin and come to Christ. Let it be clearly understood that repentance is not reformation. Reformation is man's effort to change his own life. Only God can save and change a man's life. Salvation is God's work, not men. No human effort will ever save any sinner. The Bible is clear on the fact that just as surely as faith is God's gift, so repentance is God's gift. After the conversion of Cornelius and his household, some of the converted circumcised Jews contended with Peter. However after hearing of God's work in the lives of the Gentiles, the critics were convinced and said, "*Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life*" Acts 11:18. Paul admonished Timothy to instruct those who opposed him with meekness, saying "*if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth*" II Timothy 2:24. Salvation is all of God and therefore all of grace. Faith and repentance are both essential in salvation. In Mark 1:15 Jesus commanded, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.*" He did not say repent or believe, but repent and believe. Faith is God's gift (Ephesians 2:8-9) and repentance is God's gift (Acts 5:31). To turn to God is no more a work than to trust in God. Both are initiated by God. Neither faith nor repentance are praiseworthy works of man but aspects of God glorious grace. Further it must be understood that repentance is neither a separate work from faith nor a preparatory work for faith. For centuries, Bible scholars and preachers have discussed which comes first, repentance or faith. It seems most logical to state that genuine faith includes genuine repentance and that genuine repentance includes genuine faith. In his message entitled "The Royal Saviour," C.H. Spurgeon asserted, "We cannot be saved without repentance. No remission of sin can be given without repentance. The two things are joined together by God as they are in our text. They cannot be separated." Repentance and faith can never be separated. John R. Rice was right when he said that repentance and faith are "different parts of the same step." Is repentance necessary for salvation? Yes! Is repentance a separate or preparatory work for faith? No! Does repentance include a turning to God from sin? Yes! Is repentance just feeling sorry for my sins? No! The simple evangelist D.L. Moody preached: "There is a good deal of trouble among people about what repentance really is. If you ask people what it is, they will tell you "It is feeling sorry" If you ask

a man if he repents, he will tell you, Oh yes, I generally feel sorry for my sins! That is not repentance. It is something more than feeling sorry. Repentance is turning right about, and forsaking sin. I wanted to speak Sunday about the verse in Isaiah which says, "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts!" That is what it is. If a man doesn't turn from his sin, he won't be accepted of God" and if righteousness doesn't produce a turning about--turning from bad to good --it isn't true righteousness." It is contrary to the nature of God to forgive a man who is still in rebellion against Him. If there is no repentance there is no forgiveness.

The Neglect of Repentance

If the doctrine of repentance was prominent in the preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, Peter, and Paul, why is it strangely absent from much evangelistic preaching today? If the subject of repentance is mentioned often in the Word of God, why is it rarely mentioned in the average gospel tract today? If Jesus sent his disciples out to preach the gospel (Mark 16:15), and explained that "*repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations*" (Luke 24:47), why is it rarely taught as a part of most gospel presentations? The old time evangelist and pastors may have the answer. Billy Sunday asserted "Anyone who preaches repentance is bound to stir up the serpents of opposition." I believe there is no group of men that are more persecuted than the few Preachers who insist on repentance and confession of sin and the old time religion. There are liberal Christians who cry repentance down calling it "Legalism" doctrine, but the Bible is full of this basic doctrine. On occasion after I have preached there have been people to accuse me of borderline Lordship salvation. I believe when a man truly receives Jesus Christ as Saviour, he also receives Him for as much as he understands Him to be Lord at that moment. As the convert grows and surrenders to Christ, practically Jesus becomes more Lord to him. The new convert through sanctification, understands and surrenders to His Lordship as he grows spiritually. Some well-meaning Theologians and Preachers feel that to emphasize repentance is somehow to bring works into salvation. In their sincere desire to protect the doctrine of grace, they have ignored the doctrine of repentance. The two doctrines are not in contradiction, but in complete cooperation when rightly understood.

Some Nonsense about Repentance

It should be understood that a sinner does not change his conduct in order to be saved that would be reformation. He does change his mind about his conduct and is willing for God to change him. A few months ago I heard a preacher give an illustration. He was preaching in a camp and two young ladies were much burdened about their souls and wanted to be saved. Unfortunately they had been taught that no one could be saved without repentance, which included confessing all their sins. The pastor of the group verified that they had been taught this by another pastor. How preposterous and dangerous to teach such nonsense. Christ does not command us to confess all of our sins to be saved. In the first place, no person can remember all his sins. Second, when the publican was justified in Luke 18, he did not confess all his sins, he confessed that he was a sinner, "*God be merciful to me a sinner*" Luke 18:12. Yet another may say, "I don't remember what I prayed when I got saved. I'm not sure I said I repent. I'm not sure I understood it all." There is no set pattern prayer that a sinner must pray to be saved recorded in the Bible. A look at the thief on the cross in Luke 23 shows his repentant heart. The other thief railed on Jesus, but this thief received Christ. Study closely his fear of God (vs 40), his confession of sin (vs 41), and his acknowledgement of Jesus as sinless, God, and King (vs 42-

43). Never does the word repent appear, but repentance and faith are clearly seen in his desperate appeal to the Lord Jesus. In Hebrews 6:1 declares repentance to be one of the foundational truths. Notice that repentance and conversion include a turning from and a turning to. Is God only saving a man to take him to Heaven? No! In salvation man is changed positionally immediately so that he can be changed practically progressively and will be changed perfectly ultimately. Though perfection is not possible this side of Heaven, progression in the Christian life should be occurring daily. The goal of Christ in saving a man is not just to keep him out of Hell or to take him to Heaven, but change him to Christlikeness.

But someone may question, "Doesn't this emphasis on the doctrine of repentance eclipse the doctrine of grace? No, it actually enhances it. Salvation is all of God and therefore all of grace. Grace, God's unmerited favor, produces faith in the life of the sinner, but the sinner's faith in the finished work of Christ procures God's grace. So, too, God's grace produces repentance in the sinner's life so that the repentant sinner can receive God's gift of eternal life. Is a great commentary on genuine grace. *"For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lust, we should live soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world"* Titus 2:11-12. Genuine grace not only delivers a man from Hell, but disciples him for Heaven. Repentance and faith, rightly preached, actually magnify not minimize the doctrine of grace.

Repentance and faith are different aspects of the same step. Man does not change his own life to be saved, but God changes his life when he is saved. Repentance is both commanded by God and given by God. Real repentance not only brings the joy of salvation to the sinner, but rejoicing in Heaven itself (Luke 15:7, 10). Let not any professed fundamental preacher be guilty of William Booth's prophecy and *"preach salvation with regeneration, Heaven without Hell, and faith without repentance."*