

Repentance

Described

Repentance means having a change of heart and mind about sin, unbelief, God, faith, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and about whether we are willing to receive Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

Repentance is a change of the purposes and thoughts of our heart which as an expression of true faith in Jesus Christ results in an abandoning or forsaking of sin.

Repentance can be described as the total rejection of everything ungodly and wicked in our lives in the past and present and in relation to our future plans and purposes. This total rejection results in faith in God and Jesus Christ being the only remaining alternative.

The relevant Greek words

The word used in the original Greek New Testament for repentance is “metanoia”. “Meta” means “after”, *implying change*. “Noia” relates to the Greek word “nous” which means “mind”. So in a very basic sense, “metanoia” means “a change of mind” or “a changed mind”.

But it is wrong to regard “metanoia” or “repentance” as referring to only a change of intellectual concepts or ideas in the human mind. Goetzmann is correct when he states, “The predominantly intellectual understanding of metanoia as a change of mind plays very little part in the New Testament. Rather the decision by the *whole man to turn around* is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward turning nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas”.¹ In his “A Concise Lexicon to the Biblical Languages”, Jay Green defines “metanoia” as “a complete change of mind and heart away from sin and toward God”.²

Proof that the word “metanoia” means more than just a change of mind is the fact that the “noia” part of the word is derived from the Greek word “nous” which refers to both the *mind* and *will*. The word “nous” means “the *mind, intellect* as the side of life contrasted with physical existence, the higher mental part of the *natural* man which initiates his *thoughts* and *plans*”³ and “the moral consciousness as it concretely determines will...”⁴ Note the word “plans” in Bauer’s definition above relates to the will. Goetzmann defines “nous” as “the thought, the *will*”.⁵ Louw and Nida say “nous” means the “faculty of understanding, reasoning, thinking, and *deciding*”.⁶ A faculty is a God-given human ability.

Vine defines “nous” as including the “faculties of perception and understanding, and those of feeling, judging and determining”.⁷ Vine here refers to the mind, feelings and will.

¹ Colin Brown, page 358.

² Jay Green, page 83.

³ Bauer, page 544.

⁴ G. Kittel, “The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament”, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Volume 4, page 958.

⁵ Colin Brown, page 357.

⁶ Louw and Nida, pages 324-325.

⁷ Vine, page 408.

Bauer, Goetzmann and Louw and Nida do not include the feelings in their definitions of the “nous”. But they and Vine agree the “nous” includes both the mind and will.

Vine says, “metanoia” is “used of repentance from sin or evil, except in Hebrews 12:17... 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”.⁸ Bauer says “metanoia” means “a change of mind...repentance, turn about, conversion”.⁹ Goetzmann defines “metanoia” as “a change of mind, repentance, conversion”.¹⁰

Brown, Vine and Bauer above all show that one meaning of “metanoia” is *turning from sin to God* or conversion. This is an *implied* meaning of the word. But note in Greek, the word relates primarily to “change”. The three Greek New Testament words which literally mean turning from sin to God are “strepho”, “epistrepho” and “epistrophe”. These three are discussed in Chapter “Conversion”. A change of heart about sin, unbelief, God and Jesus Christ will produce a turning from sin to God in the same heart. Linguistically, “metanoia” crosses over the meaning of “strepho”, “epistrepho” and “epistrophe”, but the latter three do not mean exactly the same as “metanoia”

“Metanoia” occurs 23 times in the New Testament. The associated verb “metanoeo” meaning “repent” occurs 33 times in the New Testament. Bauer says “metanoeo” means “change one’s mind...repent, be converted”.¹¹ Goetzmann defines “metanoeo” as “change one’s mind, repent, be converted”.¹² Abbott-Smith¹³ and Vine¹⁴ say “metanoeo” means “to change one’s mind or purpose”. Our purpose relates to our will.

Louw and Nida say “metanoeo” means “to change one’s way of life as a result of a *complete change* of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness.”¹⁵ In Matthew 12:41 and Luke 11:32, Jesus uses “metanoeo” to refer to the Ninevites having changed heart attitudes to sin in Jonah’s time. But note in the original account of this in Jonah 3:1-10, Jonah uses the Hebrew word “shub” in verses 8 and 10, when referring to this. “Shub” means “turn from sin to God”.

Goetzmann says that the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the word “epistrepho” and not “metanoeo” to translate the Hebrew word “shub”. Remember “shub” means turning or returning to God from sins. Goetzmann then argues, “The New Testament does not follow the Septuagint’s usage but employs ‘metanoeo’ to express the force of ‘shub’, turn around”.¹⁶ Therefore, he believes “metanoeo” or “repent” means “turning to God from our sins”.

Another key Greek word

James 1:21 contains a command of God to turn continually from all our sins: ***“Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the***

⁸ Ibid, page 525.

⁹ Bauer, page 512.

¹⁰ Colin Brown, page 357.

¹¹ Bauer, page 512.

¹² Colin Brown, page 357.

¹³ Abbott-Smith, page 287.

¹⁴ Vine, page 525.

¹⁵ Louw and Nida, page 510.

¹⁶ Colin Brown, page 357.

implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” In Greek, the expression “*lay aside*” is a form of the word “*apothithemi*” which means “to cease doing what one is accustomed to doing”¹⁷ or “figuratively lay aside, rid oneself of”.¹⁸

“*Apothithemi*” is not the Greek word for “repent” or “turn”. But it means a very similar thing in relation to our sins. Forms of “*apothithemi*” are also used in Colossians 3:8: “***But now you must also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth***” and Hebrews 12:1: “***Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us***” and Romans 13:12 and Ephesians 4:22. In each of these verses, God commands believers to *stop* doing any type of known sin or wickedness.

Repentance explained

There is an enormous lack of understanding in many parts of the Church at present about what repentance means. This is a problem not only among liberal and tradition-bound Protestants and Catholics but also among many Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Charismatics. People do not need perfect doctrinal understanding of repentance in order to repent. But we all need at least some basic understanding of it. When witnessing to unsaved churchgoers and non-churchgoers, we need to be able to explain what repentance means in simple understandable language.

The type of repentance the New Testament links with salvation involves a change of heart attitudes to:

- both *unbelief* and *faith* in God and in Jesus Christ.
- *self* being our *master* or *Jesus* being our *Lord*.
- remaining *self-reliant* or becoming reliant on *God* and *Christ*.
- whether to *abandon* our *known sins* or not.

Note there is a difference between sin in general and specific known sins. Sin in general refers to unbelief, self-reliance, lawlessness and self-being our master.

In Acts 20:21, Paul stated what he preached to unconverted Jews and pagan Greeks: “***Testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.***” Here we see “*repentance*” relates to a *change of heart attitudes toward God*. A change of heart attitudes toward God refers to a change about unbelief in Him, trusting faith in Him and whether He is our Lord or not. In Acts 20:21, this change of heart attitudes toward God is linked to beginning to have faith in Jesus Christ.

Do not believe in the false dogma or assumption that historical books like Acts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Joshua, 1 Kings and so on cannot be used in the formulation of Christian doctrine. If this dogma was true, then we must make the ridiculous conclusion Genesis, which is a historical book, cannot be used in the formulation of Christian teaching

¹⁷ Louw and Nida, page 659.

¹⁸ Bauer, page 101.

about creation and the Fall. Historical Biblical books can be used in the formulation of teaching as long as our conclusions from these Books are not contrary to other Biblical Books.

In Mark 1:15, Jesus associates repenting with having *a changed attitude to the Gospel*. In Revelation 2:21, 9:20-21 and Romans 2:4 (in the context of Romans 1:29-2:4) we see repentance relates also to *a change of heart* by unbelievers *about known sin*.

Other keys about New Testament repentance

New Testament repentance is:

- *linked to Jesus' death and resurrection and the forgiveness of sin by God's grace* (see Luke 24:46-47)
- is one *God-motivated* means of receiving God's grace. Repentance is *not a means* of *meriting* or *deserving* God's grace and salvation. Salvation is a totally free gift (see Ephesians 2:8-9). Repentance is not a form of legalism. The early church father Tertullian taught an example of a legalistic attitude to repentance when he said "*by repentance God is appeased*".¹⁹ God's wrath is appeased only by Jesus' death, not by repentance.
- something God by His Spirit empowers people to do at the point of conversion and continue to do from then onwards. Acts 5:31, 11:18 and 2 Timothy 2:25 prove this. Acts 5:31 relates specifically to the people of Israel but reveals the general truth that repentance is God-given. Acts 11:18 says: "*...they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'*". Repentance is a result of God by His undeserved grace working on sinners prior to and at the point of conversion. No unconverted human is correctly seeking God (see Romans 3:10-12). So without God's gracious help, no human could repent in ways God approves. God the Holy Spirit is available every moment of every day to enable believers to have a change of heart attitude to every known sin in their lives. If believers have not had this change of heart attitude, they and not God are to blame.
- involves having a change of heart attitudes to the deepest sins lying at the root of all other sins. These core sins are *unbelief in God and Christ* and wanting to be *our own lord or master* instead of Christ. A person can have a changed heart attitude to individual sins like stealing and lying but remain unsaved. This is because they do not have a *change* of heart about unbelief in God and Christ and will not receive Christ as Lord.
- involves having a *change* of heart attitudes to *individual known sins* such as stealing, lying, murdering, getting drunk, not going to church regularly, not forgiving others, committing adultery and so on. In Acts 8:22, Peter told Simon to repent of *specific sins*. Acts 8:19-23 shows these sins were bitterness and the desire to buy the power of being able to impart the Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 12:21 refers to repenting of specific sins of uncleanness, fornication and lewdness. Revelation 2:21, 2:22, 9:20-21 and 16:11 all refer to repenting of specific sins. Revelation 9:20-21 says: "***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 hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.***"

¹⁹ J. Stevenson, "A New Eusebius", S.P.C.K., London, 1957, page 174.

- does not involve the unconverted or believers just having the mere intention of one day in the distant future having a changed heart attitude to some or all their known sins. True believers grow in holiness progressively as they grow in their union with Christ and as God reveals more and more of their *hidden* sins over the years and they repent of these. But this is very different from prospective new converts or believers putting off into the future having changed heart attitudes to any or all *known* sins. God's command to repent refers to *now*, not next year or some time after. If you think the Holy Spirit is saying, "Repent tomorrow!", you are resisting Him. Many like to hear about the now nature of salvation, receiving God's mercy, being justified and not being condemned (see 2 Corinthians 6:1-2, 1 Peter 2:10, Romans 5:9 and 8:1). But they hate the idea that repentance refers to now. Unbelievers should be told that *now* is the day of salvation (see 2 Corinthians 6:1-2). If they die tonight, tomorrow will be too late. Mostly the Holy Spirit convicts unbelievers over a period of time, but He does not tell them, "Repent tomorrow!"
- includes the *sincere intention* of *never committing* the known sin *again*. Some wrongly think repentance involves the following attitude: "Lord, I am so sorry I have done this evil thing. I will never ever commit this sin again...TONIGHT". This is not repentance, but hypocrisy. Some are less extreme than this. They do not intend to recommit the same sin tonight, but they definitely plan to recommit it on some occasions in future. As believers, we will sin with our tongues knowingly and unknowingly in future (see James 3:2). But when we repent of a sin we should have the real intention of never committing this same sin again. If, however, we fall into it again in future, we must go through the same process.
- does not involve just becoming religious in some way. Jeremiah 36:9 records Jehoiakim, King of Judah had all the people fast before God. But the rest of Jeremiah Chapter 36 shows the King had no intention of abandoning his evil ways.
- is *not exactly the same as faith* in God and Christ. Faith and repentance are especially closely linked but are not the same (see Mark 1:15 and Acts 20:21).
- something believers should do in the years after their conversion in relation to any sin they fall into and then become aware of (see 2 Corinthians 12:21, Revelation 2:5, 2:16, 2:22, 3:3 and 3:19). In the early Church, the writing called the Shepherd of Hermas taught the dreadful idea that God will not save believers who sin after having repented twice – once at conversion and the second time after conversion.²⁰

Repentance relates to the heart

As stated earlier, technically in Greek the word "metanoia" or "repentance" means "a change of mind" or "a changed mind". But the New Testament authors used the word in a broader sense of the *change* of the *purposes, intentions, attitudes* and *thoughts* of the person's heart. As shown in Chapter "Regeneration", the heart includes the human spirit, mind and will.

Repentance involves the human mind

Repentance is a drastic change of *mind* towards God, Jesus Christ, sin, self-reliance and about who is the absolute authority in our life. Repentance is not just the changing of a few

²⁰ Ibid, page 51.

thought patterns of only secondary importance, but is a *change* in the *central focus* of our minds. When a person is unsaved, he has a mind focussed on the things of sin, self and the flesh. But when he repents at conversion by the power of the Holy Spirit, his thoughts change their focus from sin and self to God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Repentance also has to do with the will

The human will is also involved in true sincere repentance that through faith receives God's grace in Jesus Christ. Through repentance, the human will *changes* its *central purposes, intentions* and *goals*. By God's grace and the Holy Spirit's power, the human will changes from being absorbed with sin and self and begins to focus itself on God and Jesus Christ. The *will surrenders* itself to Jesus Christ. It receives Jesus Christ as its Lord and Master instead of being its own lord as it had been previously in its unsaved condemned state. The will also receives Jesus Christ as undeserved Saviour at the same time.

Repentance involves the human spirit

Repentance is an activity of the human heart. As seen in 1 Peter 3:4, the heart includes the human spirit.

Repentance results in changes in the human emotions

One view about repentance at conversion suggests it includes a change in emotions about sin, specific known sins, God and Jesus Christ. Another view is repentance does not include these. Whatever the case, repentance does result in real though imperfect changes in our emotions *after conversion*. The two main changes in our emotions *resulting* from repentance are:

- Love for God.
- Hatred of sin in general and of our specific known sins. These emotions are two of the imperfect *fruits* or *consequences* of repentance.

Love for God and hatred of sin are not only emotions. They also occur in our thoughts, will and spirit. They will be discussed later in more detail in Chapter "Repentance and its fruits".

Bible Study Questions

1. Describe what repentance means.
2. What do the Greek words "metanoia" and "metanoeo" mean?
3. In the New Testament, what types of changed heart attitudes are involved when a person repents when initially receiving salvation?
4. Explain some other keys about New Testament repentance.

5. Are we saved by a perfect repentance or a real sincere repentance or an insincere repentance?
6. What are the two main emotions which are results of true repentance?

The Old Testament Hebrew word for repent

In the original Hebrew Old Testament, the word “repent” is “naham”. “Naham” refers to an *emotional response* of being *sorry* for the results of our past, present or possible future actions (see Genesis 6:6, Judges 2:18, 21:6, 21:15 and 1 Samuel 15:35) in relation to someone else or to a *change* or *mind* and *will* (see Psalm 110:4, Jeremiah 4:28, 18:8). It can also relate to a change of actions (see Exodus 32:14, Numbers 23:19, Jeremiah 18:8, 26:3, Ezekiel 24:14, Jonah 4:2) but it does not always do this.

Brown, Driver and Briggs define “naham” as, “be sorry, moved to pity or have compassion for others, be sorry...suffer grief or repent of one’s own doings.”²¹ Harris, Archer and Walke define “naham” as “be sorry, repent, regret. The origin of the root seems to reflect the idea of ‘breathing deeply’, hence the physical display one’s feelings, usually sorrow...”²²

The word “naham” is mainly used in the Old Testament in connection with God’s response to His own actions, thoughts or purposes. It is only used in Job 42:6, Jeremiah 8:6 and 31:19 in relation to humans responding to their sins. It is also used in Judges 21:6 and 15 in relation to people regretting actions which they did not necessarily regard as sins.

The Hebrew word “naham” is not an exact equivalent of the New Testament Greek word “metanoeo”. These two words have similarities but do not seem to be exact equals.

²¹ Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 637.

²² Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 570.