

The Relationship Between Saving Faith And Repentance

There are many schools of thought among Bible teachers about the relationship between saving faith and repentance. I will explain three of these. The first of these is repentance is one included aspect of saving faith. The second is saving faith does not include repentance but is always accompanied by it from the moment of conversion as a *result* or *fruit*. The third is saving faith and repentance are not identical but *intersect* and *always accompany* each other at conversion and have post-conversion fruits.

The view that saving faith includes repentance argues that a “*faith*”, which did not incorporate a changed heart attitude to sin in general and to known sin, is a dead non-saving faith. The problems, however, with this view are:

1. There are aspects of the New Testament word for “*repentance*” – “*metanoia*” – which do not fit in with the meaning of the New Testament word for “*faith*” – “*pistis*”.
2. If the word “*repentance*” is defined as including “works befitting repentance” or “fruits of repentance” (something I do not believe), salvation is then not by God’s grace alone, but is a legalistic mixture of grace, faith and works.

The strength of the second view that repentance is only a fruit or result of saving faith is it seeks to preserve the New Testament teaching on our being saved by faith alone. This second view teaches that repentance is not an optional fruit or result of saving faith. Therefore, this view thankfully avoids the evils of easy believism also.

The view that repentance is only a fruit or consequence of saving faith uses Matthew 3:8 and Luke 3:8 which mention “*fruits worthy of repentance*” and Acts 26:20 which speaks of “*works befitting repentance*” as supposed evidence of its claims. But these verses are referring to the post-conversion fruits of the earlier repentance occurring of conversion, not to repentance being a fruit itself. This is just as conversion is not a fruit of faith, but there are fruits of conversion. Also note part of repentance involves having a changed heart attitude about unbelief and faith in God and in Jesus Christ. This does not fit in with the idea that repentance is only a fruit or result of faith.

True repentance occurs at the *point of conversion* when the person turns from unbelief to faith in God and in Jesus Christ. Such repentance is not some type of pre-conversion legalistic works programme but is a *momentary change* which has continual post-conversion results or fruit.

Repentance and faith are different, intersect and accompany each other

I believe the third view is the most Biblical. This view says repentance and faith are different in many ways but intersect in some ways and accompany each other at conversion.

Note the Bible does not differentiate all concepts about God and salvation into totally separate categories. For example, the concepts of God's love, mercy, grace, righteousness and holiness are not totally separate but overlap each other in some areas. Also, the concept of atonement is not the same as but overlaps the Biblical concepts of propitiation, redemption and ransom. The Biblical concept of justification overlaps the law-court aspects of God's forgiveness, but the emotional aspects of His forgiveness do not overlap justification but relate more to reconciliation. This is why it can be argued the words "conversion", "repentance" and "faith" do not mean the same but intersect and accompany each other at the same initial event of receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

When we cross-reference Acts 10:43 with a second account in Acts 11:18 and a third account in Acts 15:8-9 of the same event, we see the extremely close relationship between saving faith and repentance.

In Acts 10:43, Peter told the Gentiles they would receive remission of sins through *believing* in Jesus Christ. No mention of repentance is made here. But later when speaking of the same conversions of these Gentiles, Acts 11:18 records they *repented* at the point they received eternal life: **"...they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.'"** Note Acts 11:18 mentions nothing about faith.

Later in Acts 15:8-9, Peter described the same incident in terms of God purifying the Gentiles' hearts by *faith* and mentions nothing about repentance: **"So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."**

Observe the word for "*life*" in Acts 11:18 is "zoe" in the original Greek. In this verse, "*life*" refers to eternal life and not merely to experiencing harmonious fellowship in His Presence here on Earth. Note "zoe" is the same word used in Matthew 7:13-14, 18:9, John 1:4, 3:36, 5:26, 5:40, 11:25, 14:6, 2 Timothy 1:1, 1:10 and many other New Testament verses in relation to eternal life from God through Jesus Christ. Eternal life is imparted to us at the same moment we are converted through faith. John 3:36 states: **"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."**

Because Paul linked repentance to saving faith in his normal Gospel preaching recorded in Acts 20:21 and 26:14-20, this means when he wrote in his letters about saving faith, he was assuming his readers understood such faith was always accompanied by repentance at conversion.

In Acts 3:19, Peter told unsaved Jews to repent and be converted to Jesus Christ without mentioning having faith in Him. To Peter, faith, repentance and conversion work hand-in-hand. It is a form of meriting legalism trying to repent separate from having faith in God and Christ. But it is a false easy believism which suggests we can have faith in God and Christ without repentance and conversion.

Different perspectives of the same initial saving experience

The New Testament does not in one sentence say we are saved by faith, conversion and repentance. It simplifies the whole matter by saying we are saved by faith (see Ephesians 2:8). But I believe there is no person who has saving faith who has not been converted and repented. Conversion and repentance are two *different perspectives* of the same initial saving experience.

A person with saving faith has repented and been converted. A converted person has repented and commenced to have saving faith. A person who has repented in relation to salvation has been converted and has saving faith.

Commencing to have saving faith must be associated with a change of mind and will (repentance) about unbelief and faith in God and in Christ, sin in general, specific known sin and the Gospel. Also, saving faith must be linked to a turning (conversion) from unbelief and sin to faith in God and Jesus Christ.

The key is not whether conversion and repentance precede or follow the commencement of saving faith, but the fact that these are not optional extras. Those who say that repentance is an optional extra to saving faith are just as wrong as those who say conversion is an optional extra to saving faith.

For many months or even years, unbelievers can sincerely consider repenting, converting and beginning to have faith in God and Christ while under the drawing influence of the Holy Spirit. But just sincerely considering doing these things is not the same as doing them. Similarly, an unbeliever can even start going to church, praying, reading the Bible and doing other good works for months or years but still not actually repent, convert or begin to have faith in God and Jesus Christ.

FOCUS POINTS:

We cannot have saving faith without repenting.

We cannot repent properly without trusting faith.

Bible Study Questions

1. What is wrong with the view that saving faith includes repentance?
2. What is wrong with the view that repentance is only a fruit of saving faith?
3. What is Biblically the best view of the relationship between saving faith and repentance?