

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 34

KEY TERMS: REPENTANCE, PART 3

When the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin by early Christians, a fundamental error was made that has perpetuated to this day a faulty understanding of repentance. "The Latin Fathers made their understanding of repentance clear by their Latin translations of the Greek terms *metanoëo* (repent) and *metanoia* (repentance): *poenitentiam agite* ("to do [acts of] penance" and *poenitentia* ("[acts of] penance"). And this [incorrect] translation was preserved in Jerome's Vulgate. So by the time of Augustine, penance for post-baptismal sins was the *modus operandi* for reinstatement to the Church. The acts of penance varied according to the nature of the sin and the temperament of the Father Confessor. The acts included fasting, prayers, weeping, begging, abstinence (for those married), shaving one's head, prostration, and the like. And penance could last a few days or many years....Repentance was primarily pre-baptismal in the post-apostolic fathers until infant baptism became the practice. As such, it [repentance] was viewed as a work of man which helped him gain his salvation [this is clearly a faith plus works understanding of justification]. Though not clearly defined [it is still not clearly defined], it certainly included some sort of contrition for sin and a renouncing of same, specifically at the point of water baptism. By the time of Augustine, infant baptism was the norm. Post-baptismal repentance became the focus since regeneration took place and justification *began* at water baptism. This repentance became practically synonymous with not only contrition and confession, but also doing acts of penance. This understanding of repentance prevailed right through the Dark Ages and the Renaissance until the Reformers" [David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, rev. ed., p. 125]. This Latin link of penance to and with repentance has ramifications that persist to this day.

The church historian Philip Schaff documented the role baptismal regeneration played in the doctrine of the early church and he identified the connection it had with the common, but faulty, definition of repentance. "This ordinance [water baptism] was regarded in the ancient church as the sacrament of the new birth or regeneration, and as the solemn rite of initiation into the Christian Church, admitting to all her benefits and committing to all her obligations. It was supposed to be preceded, in the case of adults, by instruction on the part of the church, and by repentance and faith (*i. e.* conversion) on the part of the candidate, and to complete and seal the spiritual process of regeneration, the old man being buried, and the new man arising from the watery grave. Its effect consists in the forgiveness of sins and the communication of the

Holy Spirit. Justin [Martyr] calls baptism 'the water-bath for the forgiveness of sins and regeneration,' and 'the bath of conversion and the knowledge of God.'...Tertullian describes its effect thus: 'When the soul comes to faith, and becomes transformed through regeneration by water and power from above, it discovers, after the veil of the old corruption is taken away, its whole light. It is received into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; and the soul, which unites itself to the Holy Spirit, is followed by the body.' He [Tertullian] already leans towards the notion of a magical operation of the baptismal water. Yet the subjective condition of repentance and faith was universally applied. Baptism was not only an act of God, but at the same time the most solemn surrender of man to God, a vow for life and death, to live henceforth only to Christ and his people. The keeping of the vow was the condition of continuance in the church; the breaking of it must be followed either by repentance or excommunication....The effect of baptism, however, was thought to extend only to sins committed before receiving it...But then the question arose, how the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism could be obtained? This is the starting point of the Roman doctrine of the sacrament of *penance*. Tertullian and Cyprian were the first to suggest that satisfaction must be made for such sins by self-imposed penitential exercises and good works, such as prayers and almsgiving" [Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Anti-Nicene Christianity A.D. 100-325*, vol. 2, pp. 2:253-254].

Schaff notes that the idea of repentance was subjective. In other words, no biblical standards were used to determine the extent and sincerity of a person's repentance; it was subject to the determination of the church leaders and the other church members each of whom probably had different ideas about what repentance should look like in the lives of the prospective "Christian." That is still a problem in today's church; pastors and theologians are still imposing their thoughts and desires into the doctrine of repentance so that no one can be sure what it really means. All that is really known is that a Christian must look and act like a Christian however that is defined from denomination to denomination and from person to person. The end result is always faith plus human effort and works. Obviously, the connection between penance and repentances was firmly established early on in church history. After studying this history, and as a personal observation of mine, it strikes me that going beyond faith in Christ Jesus made becoming a Christian a difficult and even a daunting process in the years prior to Constantine declaring Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Once that happened, everyone was able to come into the church whether they were believers or not; they just added Jesus to their stable of pagan gods. It appears that today's Protestant churches have reverted back to making Christianity seem to be a difficult, even seemingly almost impossible, task for the average unbelieving person. Becoming a believer shouldn't be made to look difficult; living the life of a disciple is another issue. Demanding Christian discipleship/sanctification issues to be part of justification salvation must scare a lot of people away from faith.

Baptismal regeneration was the result of a faulty interpretation of John 3:5-6. It was decided that the Lord was requiring water baptism for regeneration which was also then linked to a works based definition of repentance and finally to penance. If baptismal regeneration is not biblical truth, and it is not, then the links with repentance and penance are also broken. That is indeed the case. But the truth of that fact has failed to penetrate the theology concerning the doctrine of repentance in this dispensation, and I would suggest this connection between penance and repentance continues to at least some extent to this day in both Protestant and Roman Catholic theological systems. Even though acts of penance aren't generally required today in Protestantism, being penitent still incorrectly influences the definition of repentance in Protestant theology and penance is still deeply embedded in Roman Catholic theology.

The Roman Catholic Church still equates repentance with penance which is one of the seven sacraments observed by the RCC. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* under the heading of "Interior Penance," paragraph 1431 states, "Interior repentance [notice that penance and repentance are equated in this section and are apparently considered equivalent terms having equivalent definitions] is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers call *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart)." Paragraph 1450 records that "penance requires...the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction." Paragraph 1451 defines contrition as "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again." According to this definition, there is an awful lot of things a person must do in order to be saved. It is noteworthy that there is not one mention of the requirement to believe the good news in order to be saved. This Roman Catholic definition of repentance is really no different than the definition we have seen much of Protestant theology assign to it.

The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, which is a Reformed or Covenant theological reference work, has seemingly adopted this Latin/Roman Catholic definition wholesale. It defines "penitence (Lat. *Paenitere*, 'to repent') The condition of being contrite, sorrowful, and remorseful for sins one has committed." However, this definition relies on the Latin language and not on the Koine Greek and the meaning is not the same. This is not how biblical theology is meant to be developed. "The Roman Catholic view of repentance is that it consists of contrition, confession, and performing acts of penance" [followed by priestly absolution]. [G. Michael Cocoris, *Repentance:*

The Most Misunderstood Word in the Bible, p. 11]. This meaning, which began early in church history, has continued on in Protestant theology to the present time and it dominates the theological landscape concerning the definition of repentance. It is readily apparent just how much this Latin concept of penitence has influenced the modern definition of repentance held by most Protestant theologians. When you compare the requirements for repentance the early church placed on people with the doctrines taught today by many Protestant theologians, you will recognize the differences to be negligible.

After consulting the lexicons in order to determine the meaning of “repentance,” we have discovered that the Protestant definitions have not changed much from the view of the early church fathers and have not strayed far from the Roman Catholic Church understanding of this doctrine. They do leave out the overt acts of penance the RCC requires, but they maintain the idea that sorrow over sin and confession of sin coupled with a turning away from the commission of personal sins and a change of lifestyle is a requirement for justification salvation. That hasn't changed.

Here is a contemporary Protestant example of how repentance is frequently defined in practice. In this case, the context is the parable of the prodigal son. “It is noteworthy that what ultimately brought him [speaking of the prodigal son] to his senses was sorrow over his predicament. The sorrow itself was not repentance but it led to deep repentance. He began with a sense of his own need. Then he admitted he had done wrong. Looking even beyond his offended human father to the heavenly Father whose law he had broken, he freely acknowledged his own guilt before God. He determined to ask forgiveness and take the consequences. Planning his repentance carefully, he rehearsed what he would say when he got home. He would confess that he had sinned against God and against his father, and he would ask his father to appoint him a place with the hired servants. Here is a perfect illustration of repentant faith. Observe the young man's unqualified compliance, his abject humility, and his unequivocal willingness to do whatever his father asked. The prodigal who began by demanding an early inheritance was now willing to serve his father as a bond-servant. He was making a complete turnaround. His demeanor was one of unconditional surrender—a complete resignation of self and absolute submission to his father. Having resolved to go to his father, he then acted on his decision. Unlike some who say they will do something but never do, the prodigal son got up and returned to his father. His repentance was a complete and total reversal. He had become poor in spirit. He was mourning over his sin. His arrogance had given way to meekness and humility. He was a different young man from the one who originally left home” [John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 161]. Is justification salvation really the point of this parable as MacArthur identifies it? Wasn't the prodigal already a son of the father? Isn't this about fellowship and restoration within the familial relationship?

The fact is believers can depart from sanctified living and engage in lengthy periods of carnality and thereby fail to spiritually progress but that doesn't mean they never experienced justification salvation in the first place.

2 Peter 1:8–11 ⁸For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. ¹⁰Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; ¹¹for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

“Is it possible for a genuine believer ('brethren') to be barren, unfruitful, shortsighted, and even forget that he was cleansed from his old sins? God's Word says, Yes! While the Christian in prolonged carnality cannot lose the eternal security of his salvation, he may lose the personal assurance of it by losing spiritual perspective. According to Jesus' parable in Luke 15, this is exactly what happened to the prodigal son living in the pigpen of the world. When he returned home to the Father he said, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and before you, and *I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants*' (vv. 18-19). The fact is that he was never worthy of being a son in the first place! Believers who live in extended carnality often lose sight of God's grace and the basis for their acceptance and assurance” [Dennis M. Rokser, “Can You Know for Sure You Are Saved Forever?” in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Free Grace Theology*, p. 312].

Dillow also reaches the conclusion that this parable presents sanctification truth. “The father's actions are a model for all of us. In returning to God, particularly after a long separation from Him, repentant Christians are likely to experience a deep sense of unworthiness. They may feel that they have disgraced the Christian name and they may be all too aware of bringing disrepute to God their heavenly Father. Such Christians need to be reassured of the full and gracious acceptance God extends to them when they return. Their forgiveness is complete, and they need not feel as if they are forever second-class Christians, as if they now serve God as mere hired servants. Instead, they should be encouraged to enjoy all the privileges of sonship, symbolized by the robe, the ring, and the sandals. But as is transparent from the story, though the prodigal returns to the full experience of sonship, he does not get back the possessions he has foolishly squandered. Restoration for the straying Christian is real, but the loss of time, potential, and opportunity is equally real. The portion of any Christian's life that is spent away from God as well as the rewards that might have been earned during that time are permanently lost” [Joseph Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, pp. 713-714].

The prodigal son did indeed repent of his behavior. He changed his mind about his behavior prior to his departure from the family. He changed his mind about actually leaving the family. He changed his mind about how he ought to be living his life and where he ought to be living it. He changed his mind about his father and their familial fellowship. The doctrine described by the word μετανοέω is very evident in this parable even though the word is never used. The change of mind he underwent was the basis for and part of the return to his father. Repentance was part of the process of restoring fellowship with his father. It wasn't a standalone issue; it was simply the change of mind that led to the resolution of the situation. The issues involved in this parable are sanctification issues; MacArthur's failure to understand that has led him to assign human effort and works to justification.

MacArthur went on to include a chapter in this book entitled "The Call to Repentance." Since his theology represents the majority of thinking on the doctrine of repentance, I will present a variety of quotes from that chapter in order to establish a framework of contemporary, albeit erroneous, thought on the subject. After correctly defining μετάνοια as a change of mind, he goes on to add more meaning to the word that is not inherently part of the original meaning. As I previously noted, almost every modern lexicon to which I have access makes this same error which is the insertion of theological meaning that linguistically is not in the definition of the word. Theological presuppositions have trumped the meaning. "As *metanoia* is used in the New Testament, it *always* speaks of a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin. In the sense Jesus used it, repentance calls for a repudiation of the old life and a turning to God for salvation" [p. 178]. "Note three elements of repentance: a turning to God; a turning from evil; and the intent to serve God. No change of mind can be called true repentance if it does not include all three elements. The simple but all too often overlooked fact is that a true change of mind will necessarily result in a change of behavior" [p. 179]. This last sentence is of paramount importance in understanding Lordship salvation. People who claim to be believers but who do not behave in the appropriate manner, whatever that is and it varies from person to person depending on what their individual thinking on the matter is, are considered to remain in unbelief. That is a primary tenet of the Lordship salvation mindset. "Repentance is not merely shame or sorrow for sin, although genuine repentance always involves an element of remorse. It is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead" [p. 179]. In this quote, the elements of sorrow for sin and the absolute resolution to refrain from not only committing personal sins but of the deliberate pursuit of righteousness are presented. "Repentance is not simply a mental activity; genuine repentance involves the intellect, emotions, and will" [p. 179]. "...repentance involves a change of direction, a transformation of the will. Far from being only a change of mind, it constitutes a willingness—more accurately, a determination—to abandon stubborn disobedience and surrender to the will of Christ.

As such, genuine repentance will inevitably result in a change of behavior. The behavior change is not itself repentance, but it is the fruit repentance will certainly bear. Where there is no observable difference in conduct, there can be no confidence that repentance has taken place" [p. 180]. It is interesting to note that these men use adjectives like "true" or "genuine" to describe what they believe to be the repentance of a person who has placed their faith in Christ Jesus. Anyone who fails to exhibit what they believe to be "true" or "genuine" repentance will be deemed to be remaining in unbelief. This is quite a load to put on an unbelieving person who has been completely separated from God, enmeshed in the world system and its attendant sins, and ignorant of spiritual matters. We aren't supposed to be making this difficult for people. Just give them the good news and let God work on them to convict and convince them of their need.

A number of theological presuppositions have been inserted into the doctrine of repentance as evidenced by these quotes. He claims that *μετάνοια* "always" means turning from sin. The meaning of the Hebrew word *שוב* is imported into the New Testament meaning of repentance by saying that it is a turn to God and a turn away from sin. We will see that this word as it is used in connection with the Israelites is not equivalent to the justification salvation of unbelievers in this dispensation. The intent to serve God becomes part of repentance and therefore part of the gospel. He assumes that a change of mind must include a change of behavior; that is strictly a biblically unsupported theological presupposition. Repentance must have an element of remorse in order to truly be considered biblical repentance. That is an improper understanding of *תשובה* imported into the New Testament. Repentance then becomes not just a change of mind but a decision to forsake unrighteousness and to pursue righteousness. Repentance becomes more than simply a change of mind; it involves the emotions and the will as well. Those things may well be present but that doesn't make them part of the definition in the first place. Repentance is a transformation of the will and it must be reflected in the appropriate changes in behavior. But the truth is, none of these things can be considered part of repentance, at least not in terms of the Greek language. These are theological impositions onto the text and many of them are more properly regarded as sanctification issues for believers rather than justification requirements for unbelievers.

CONTRASTS AND COMPARISONS IN JOHN 3:1-21

John 3:5-6 was used by the early church fathers to justify baptismal regeneration and many theologians still interpret this verse to refer to water baptism. However, Jesus is simply contrasting physical birth with spiritual birth. This is in keeping with all the contrasts that are presented in these verses. He is presenting the truths of salvation and eternal life by making a series of contrasts. He is contrasting heavenly things with earthly things;

the physical with the spiritual; Light with darkness; good with evil, perishing with eternal life, and so on. He also presented a couple of comparisons to enhance the comprehension of spiritual truth. The water the Lord referred to in these verses is the water of every person's physical birth. Only people who respond to the Light become saved and are granted eternal life. Everyone enters space and time as the result of a physical birth; only those who believe are born a second time of the Spirit.

Verse 5: water [physical birth] contrasted with the Spirit [spiritual birth].

Verse 6: flesh [physical birth] contrasted with the Spirit [spiritual birth].

Water, referring to the process of physical human birth, results in flesh which by itself cannot qualify anyone to enter the Kingdom of God. A spiritual birth is the prerequisite for entrance into the Kingdom and that is predicated only on belief. That's the comparison being made here. This pericope presents a whole series of such contrasts to illustrate the need for this spiritual birth. The Lord is contrasting spiritual matters with the things of the flesh and of the earth.

Verse 8: wind compared to the Spirit.

Verse 12: earthly things contrasted with heavenly things.

Verse 13: ascended into heaven contrasted with descended from heaven.

Verse 14: the serpent lifted up compared to the Son of Man lifted up.

Verse 16: believers = eternal life contrasted with unbelievers = perish.

Verse 17: judge the world contrasted with save the world.

Verse 18: believers = not judged contrasted with unbelievers = judged already.

Verse 19: Light contrasted with darkness.

Verses 20-21 evil = does not come to light contrasted with truth = comes to Light.

hates light contrasted with loves light.

evil deeds contrasted with [good] deeds.

[evil] deeds exposed contrasted with [good] deeds manifest.

This whole pericope is characterized by a series of ten verses containing contrasts and two verses with comparisons. There is no exegetical reason to suppose this series was not present in vv. 5-6. If water refers to water baptism, then this conflicts with all the following contrasts between that which is heavenly and that which is of the earth. The idea that Christian water baptism was the meaning is a doctrine imported into this Scripture. The church was not yet in existence and baptism was not yet established as a church ordinance. This is a massive failure to understand dispensational distinctions. The theology that developed around the concept of baptismal regeneration was then connected to the concepts of penance and repentance both of which centered on human effort and works. These concepts are still with us today.

Further, it is an unbiblical notion to maintain that water baptism has any role to play in regeneration. Regeneration is predicated only on belief and it occurs at the very moment a person places their faith in Christ Jesus.