

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SIN

PART 35

KEY TERMS: REPENTANCE, PART 4

A major problem in the modern understanding of the concept of repentance is due to the use of the word in the Gospels. John the Baptist specifically preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If being sorry for sins and turning from them isn't part of the gospel, what does this mean as preached by John when he preached it?

Mark 1:4 ⁴John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance [μετάνοια] for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 3:3 ³And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance [μετάνοια] for the forgiveness of sins;

The problem inherent in properly understanding these two verses is a problem of understanding dispensational distinctions. The theologians who have authored the lexicons are all replacement theologians. They believe that not only was Jesus offering the Kingdom at His First Advent, He actually brought the Messianic Kingdom into existence at that time and the church has therefore assumed the Messianic expectations and promises that were originally belonging to the Jewish nation. Their theology is that God is done with the Jews and He is operating strictly in and through the Church and that is thought to be a permanent situation. The presupposition used to interpret the Gospels is that they are Church age truth from beginning to end. They are not. Until the Israelites rejected their Messiah and His Kingdom offer, the dispensation of Law was still present. Once He was rejected, the Lord began the transition from the dispensation of Law to the dispensation of grace by preparing His disciples to build the Church but that did not actually begin until Pentecost and after His ascension.

Replacing Israel with the church in the Gospels completely prevents properly understanding exactly what is going on here with John the Baptist. Following is an example of a lexicon that improperly assigns a dispensation of grace understanding of justification to these verses. By that I mean this expositor is taking post-Pentecost truth and inserting it into pre-Pentecost situations in the Gospels. It is also worth noting that he is using conversion, meaning saving faith, as a synonym for repentance. "Conversion is the core of the message of John, who proclaims the imminence of judgment and demands a turning to God as God is turning to us. The summons acquires new urgency inasmuch as it stands in the light of eschatological revelation. This is a once-for-all conversion, an inner change, that is required even of the righteous and must find

expression in acts of love. A baptism of conversion signifies that God is at work to change our nature for the new aeon. God himself grants conversion as both gift and task; it is for us to let it be given and to authenticate it as the divine basis of a new being" [Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged in one volume, p. 642]. This dictionary is trying to shoehorn God's plan for Israel into the church and it just doesn't fit. Making conversion a synonym for repentance also confuses the issue; conversion in the sense that it places a believer into the body of Christ is not the concern of John the Baptist. Belief in the King and His Kingdom required a change of mind from believing in the legalistic Judaism of the scribes and the Pharisees. John's concern was to proclaim the Messiah and His Kingdom and to prepare the people for it. That's what He was doing. He was not preaching a post-Pentecost type of justification salvation message; he had no knowledge of such a thing. It is one thing to derive applications for the church today from these Scriptures; it is quite another thing to change their original meaning in order to import post-Pentecost, dispensation of grace truth into them. The dispensation of Law had not yet given way to the dispensation of grace. The most we can say is this time period began the transition from Law to grace. Later in the Gospels, the Lord began preparing His disciples for the work of establishing the church, but that was after the Kingdom offer was rejected by the Jewish leaders.

"The message of John the Baptist was 'repent,' that is, changing your thinking from trusting your merit before God [which was what Judaism as a religious system had become in place of the true intent of the Mosaic Law and the intent of the covenantal relationship of the nation between themselves and God] to trusting the Messiah for the remission of sins [which was a national fellowship issue], be baptized as a [sic] indication of the remission of sins and bring forth external fruit fitting your internal change of thinking" [G. Michael Cocoris, *Repentance: The Most Misunderstood Word in the Bible*, p. 28]. "Repentance for the Jews in the context of John's preaching cannot be divested of covenantal implications. Therefore, it is ill-advised to give similar emphasis to John's preaching of repentance to Israel during the transition period between law and grace to the offer of salvation for all people after this period" [Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, p. 71]. A. T. Roberson approvingly quotes Broadus on John the Baptist's use of *μετάνοια*. "Broadus used to say that this is the worst translation in the New Testament. The trouble is that the English word 'repent' means 'to be sorry again' from the Latin *repenitet*. John did not call on the people to be sorry, but to change (think afterwards) their mental attitudes and conduct. The [Latin] Vulgate has it 'do penance' and Wycliff has followed that. The Old Syriac has it better: 'Turn ye.'...This is John's great word and it has been hopelessly mistranslated. The tragedy of it is that we have no one English word that reproduces exactly the meaning and atmosphere of the Greek word...." [A. T. Roberston, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, p. 1:24].

If replacement theology leads to an incorrect understanding of the context of these verses, and it does, then what is the correct interpretation? At this point in the Gospels, the church is not in existence. Justification salvation in relation to the body of Christ is not the issue. The issue is the preparation of a generation of Israelites to surpass the righteousness of the religious leaders which would bring about national acceptance of the Messianic King which would in turn bring in the Messianic Kingdom. There must be a generation of Jewish people who exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees before the Kingdom will come. John is calling the people to be restored to fellowship with God by returning to the original intent of the covenants and of the Mosaic Law as opposed to living under the hypocritical, corrupt, and false system of the religious leaders.

Matthew 5:20 ²⁰“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

One expositor correctly explains Mark 1:4 this way: “...John was calling Israel to repent in order to restore fellowship with God and receive the kingdom. While repentance does not grant eternal life, it prepares their hearts to receive the Messiah. The evidence of repentance was expressed by water baptism. The genitive *metanoias* could function as a genitive of source, that is, ‘a baptism arising out of repentance,’ or of description, ‘a baptism characterized by repentance’” [Barry Mershon, Jr., “Mark” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, p. 1:142]. Luke 3:3 can be explained in a similar way. “...The nation of Israel needed to reestablish its fellowship with God. The public act of water baptism pictured a renewed allegiance to God and a confession of past waywardness. This act of repentance resulted in forgiveness of sins, which refers to cleansing and restored fellowship. *Repentance* and the symbolic *baptism* did not confer eternal life or justification—only belief in Jesus can grant this...However, in a similar manner in which 2 Chronicles 7 called the nation (composed of believers and non-believers) to repentance as a condition for fellowship with God on a *national* scale, John likewise did this in preparation for the appearance of Jesus, the awaited Messiah” [Alberto S. Valdes, “Luke” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, p. 1:237].

It wasn't just John the Baptist who called upon the people to repent. Jesus also told people to repent because the Kingdom was at hand and this is also misinterpreted leading to confusion about repentance.

Matthew 4:17 ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, [μετανοέω] for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Jesus was calling on the people to change their mind about the Jewish religious system as it had evolved over the years and to return to the true intent of the covenant relationship with God and to the Mosaic Law. He did not say anything about repenting of sins in order to experience justification salvation; that is not the point of what the Bible has recorded here. Yet, that is exactly the meaning many theologians read into verses like this. Here is an example of this misguided thinking. "When Jesus preached, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 4:17), those who heard him understood the message. With their rich heritage in Old Testament and rabbinical teaching [wasn't rabbinical teaching part of the problem they were to change their mind about?], his hearers would not have been confused about the meaning of repentance. They knew he was calling for far more than simply a change of mind or a new perspective on who he was. Repentance to them meant a complete surrender of their will and an inevitable change of behavior—a new way of life, not just a different opinion. They realized he was calling them to admit their sin and turn from it, to be converted, to turn around, to forsake their sin and selfishness and follow him instead" [John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 181]. It seems that this is reading an awful lot of theological presupposition into what Jesus was calling on the people to do. He is completely relating this to justification salvation and that is not the issue here.

What is the biblical way to understand the doctrine of repentance as it pertains to Soteriology? It is correct to understand that inherent to the idea of a lost person coming to faith in Christ is a change of mind. "Repentance means a genuine change of mind that affects the life in some way....This saving repentance has to involve a change of mind about Jesus Christ so that whatever a person thought of Him before, he changes his mind and trusts Him to be his Savior. That is the only kind or content of repentance that saves. However, saving repentance may be preceded by a repentance concerning sin (which activates an individual's sense of need for forgiveness) or a repentance toward God (which alerts him to the fact that he has offended a holy God and therefore needs a way to appease Him). This aspect of repentance is still not saving unless it is accompanied by faith in Christ" [Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 389-390].

Larry Moyer presented his view of the role of repentance in justification salvation. "In [justification] salvation contexts, repentance either implies faith or is associated with faith. Therefore, when used in a soteriological context, repentance means to change one's mind about whatever is keeping one from trusting Christ and trust Him as the only means of [justification] salvation. Some may have to change their minds about their very concept of God. That is, they have to realize that He is indeed God and Christ is indeed His Son. Others may have to realize that their works cannot save them. Still others may have to change their minds about the seriousness of particular sins, admitting to God that they are indeed sins. But once an individual has changed his or

her mind about whatever is keeping them from trusting Christ and trusts Him for salvation, both faith and repentance have taken place" [Larry Moyer, quoted by Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation*, p. 131].

Ryrie and Moyer are quite correct in their assessment of the nature of repentance that it is part of the salvation experience. A lost person certainly has to change his mind about who he is in relation to God. He has to change his mind about who God is and who Christ is and about Christ's death on the cross. He has to change his mind about sin and how he is separated from God because of it. Each person may need to have a change of mind about various aspects of what it means to come to faith. The argument I'm making is that repentance is simply a part of the justification salvation process that is intrinsic to the decision making thinking and evaluation of the gospel that leads to eternal life. Repentance is not, however, being sorry for personal sins and promising to refrain from committing future personal sins. It is not an additional step to be taken in order to be granted eternal life; repentance is simply part of the process of changing one's mind about believing in Christ Jesus. Certainly, sorrow over the state of one's sinful life can lead to faith when the gospel is heard and the Holy Spirit is convicting the unsaved person, but it isn't sorrow that is a condition for the new birth; it is faith. It isn't a promise to refrain from committing personal sins in the future that is a condition for the new birth; it is faith. It isn't human effort, good works, or good intentions that are conditions for the new birth; it is faith. This faith is properly placed only in the person and work of Christ Jesus. Yet, all these things and more have been assigned to the concept of μετανοέω and made a part of the process that results in the new birth.

I am going to present the testimony of a man who grew up a devout Roman Catholic and was studying for the priesthood when he came to realize that he was not a saved person. He changed his mind about a specific aspect of his belief system and was born again. "I can testify firsthand that as a devout Roman Catholic prior to salvation, had I been asked if I believed Jesus was the Christ in the sense of Him being God-incarnate who died on the cross and rose from the dead, I would have affirmed all of these truths. Yet, had I been asked if I knew that I had eternal life guaranteed by Christ, I would have said, 'Absolutely not'! I believed in the fact of His death on Calvary as an historical event, but not the provision of eternal life issuing from His cross-work. I had a deficient view of Christ's death. I did not truly view His death as substitutionary or satisfactory on my behalf since I trusted that my good works were necessary to atone for my sins rather than the work of Christ. The fact that Christ guaranteed eternal life to anyone who believed in Him made absolutely no sense to me as long as I had to earn my salvation. However, once I understood that in order to be eternally saved I had to transfer my faith from myself and my works to Christ and His work, then and only then did Christ's guarantee of eternal life become comprehensible" [Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ: A Biblical Response to the Crossless Gospel Regarding the Contents of Saving*

Faith, pp. 595-596]. This is a perfect picture of what repentance looks like. What did this man change his mind (repent) about? He had to change his mind concerning the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross on his behalf. He had to change his mind about the doctrine he had received that said he had to work for his salvation in addition to what Christ provided on the cross. He had to change his mind about the appropriate object of faith that alone could save him. His faith had to move from being rooted in his good works to faith in the person of the God-man and in the finished work of Christ on the cross. That change of thinking is properly recognized to be repentance and this is a picture of true biblical repentance. There is nothing in this testimony about being sorry for personal sins committed and there is nothing in it about turning from sin. He had to change his mind about the very basis of the new birth which is complete faith in Jesus and the work He did on the cross. The irony is that Protestants are Protestants today because they are participating in the historical separation of the Reformers from the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation by faith plus works yet they have been busy adding works back into justification salvation through their definition of repentance.

The Scriptures dealing with the subject of justification salvation never demand repentance as a separate act from believing in, trusting in, or placing faith in the person and work of Christ Jesus. The Gospel of John, often called the gospel of belief, never mentions the words "repent" or "repentance." The great treatise on justification salvation in Romans 4 and 5 never mentions the words. In fact, the only use of the word in Romans is in 2:4 and there it is used as a synonym for faith and that is the case in some other Scriptures as well. Paul's defense of the gospel of grace in his epistle to the Galatians never mentions the words. Repentance is a necessary part of believing the gospel message because a spiritually dead, unsaved person must change his mind about some issues in order to come to faith. What is not required for justification salvation is to be sorry for personal sins committed and to promise not to commit personal sins in the future. What is not required for justification salvation is to do things beyond simply believing. If being sorry for your sins and turning from committing sins was a part of justification salvation, John and Paul would have included that information in the gospel as necessary precursors for or as necessary elements of the new birth. They never included those things in their gospel messages.

Chafer makes the claim the Bible is "incomplete and misleading if repentance must be accorded a place separate from, and independent of, believing" [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, p. 3:376]. The very act of turning from unbelief to faith in Christ is an act of repentance, a change of mind. It is a fatal gospel error that unfortunately began very early in church history in which sorrow for personal sins and turning from committing personal sins became requirements for justification salvation.

We have examined how this faulty understanding of repentance has affected the very definition of the words in the lexicons and commentaries. We've noted how theologians such as MacArthur have allowed this faulty definition to impact the gospel as they present it. Unfortunately, the vast majority of pastors, evangelists, and theologians have this faulty understanding of repentance. It is difficult to pick up a book or a commentary that doesn't perpetuate this errant doctrine. In the final analysis, the problem is the result of the abandonment of literal hermeneutics and the imposition of theological presuppositions onto the text.

Once literal hermeneutics are abandoned, it is easy to substitute human reasoning in the form of theological presuppositions for biblical truth. A startling example is provided by a former missionary who, presumably, was responsible for presenting a true gospel to people in order to bring them to faith. "Since the call to repentance is an absolute necessity in the proclamation of the gospel, we need to have a right understanding of the nature of repentance and its manifestations in genuine conversion. The following are eight essential characteristics of true biblical repentance: change of mind, sorrow for sin, personal acknowledgment and confession of sin, turning away from sin, renunciation of self-righteousness or good works, turning to God, practical obedience, [and] continuing and deepening work of repentance" [Paul Washer, *The Gospel Call & True Conversion*, p. 5]. Collectively, all these things in one way or another are not part of the gospel and because some of them are difficult to impossible for any unbeliever to do or even understand, this evangelist immediately hedges on these requirements. "It is imperative for us to understand that these characteristics of genuine repentance will not necessarily appear in their fullest or most mature form at the moment of conversion but will continue to grow and deepen throughout the believer's life. It would be terribly misleading and destructive to suggest that true conversion requires that a person should attain a depth of repentance and faith..." [Paul Washer, *The Gospel Call & True Repentance*, p. 5]. So which is it? Are these things an absolute necessity to know, understand, and do in order to experience a true conversion or not? How much of each requirement is necessary for true conversion? It is worth noting there is nothing in this man's absolutely necessary list concerning belief. Once literal hermeneutics are abandoned inconsistencies enter that cannot be reconciled. Theologians such as this man simply present these things as truth and the inconsistencies and contradictions are ignored in order to maintain the theology. That's why this man can say in one sentence all these things are "absolutely necessary" in order to repent and be saved and in the very next sentence minimize what he just said by downplaying the imperative, dogmatic nature of what he just said. This is a common hedge these theologians employ. On the one hand, they make extremely dogmatic statements that require human effort and/or works to be saved, but they know that violates the biblical gospel of grace which is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone so they immediately fudge what they just said were nonnegotiable elements of the gospel and

make them sound as though they aren't quite so "absolutely necessary" as first claimed.

What I'm suggesting here is that the imposition of theology into the definition of repent and repentance has led to the widespread propagation of a false gospel of faith plus works and human effort and this has been a problem that developed not long after the apostle John died and passed from the scene. It is still a problem today.

Let's examine a Scripture from one of the Gospels that uses the word "repent" to understand how the faulty definition of those words leads to erroneous interpretations and then to know what the proper interpretation should be.

Mark 1:15 ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent [μετανοέω] and believe in the gospel [εὐαγγέλιον]."

These are the words of Christ. He is offering Himself to the nation as their long awaited Messianic King. The Church is not an issue at this time. The good news the Lord is referring to here is not the good news of eternal life but the good news that the Messianic King has arrived; He called it the gospel of God in verse 14. Many manuscripts have "the gospel of the kingdom of God" and that is almost certainly the meaning but it is also an insertion into the text that was almost certainly not in the original. It is illegitimate to use this verse as the saving message in the current dispensation of grace. All of the theologians who have replaced Israel with the church and who have imported the incorrect theological meaning of repent, which is to be sorry for your sins and to turn from committing personal sins, use this verse as part of a gospel presentation in this age. When Jesus spoke these words, this dispensation had yet to begin; the dispensation of Law was still present. Verse 14 says that Jesus came preaching the good news of God. What would that have been to those Jewish people at the time? It would have been the realization of the King and His Kingdom the prophets had long ago predicted would come. They would not have been thinking of these things in terms of the cross work of Christ; that hadn't happened yet and the church had yet to begin. That wasn't their frame of reference and we violate literal, contextual hermeneutics to make it their focus. Since the meaning of "repent" and "gospel" have taken on theological meanings beyond the confines of the Greek language, what happens when we replace those words in this verse with the more literal lexical meanings?

Mark 1:15 ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the [Messianic] kingdom of God is at hand; [change your mind] [μετανοέω] and believe in the [good news (of God)] [εὐαγγέλιον]."

By jettisoning the theologically loaded understanding people have today of the words “repent” and “gospel” and replacing them with the more literal lexical definitions, the meaning, in the original context, becomes clearer. Once we’ve done that, then we have to investigate that context in order to determine what the mind must be changed about and what the nature of the good news that must be believed means. By doing that, literal hermeneutics eliminates the imposition of theological presuppositions. For example, most theologians always assume that the “gospel” means the content of the good news that is to be believed in this age for the granting of eternal life [see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2^d ed., pp. 947-951, 1069-1076]. But in this case, Jesus specifically identifies the good news as “the gospel of God” meaning the proclamation of the Messianic Kingdom of God and not the good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah. That revelation would come later and the audience Jesus was preaching to in Galilee would not have had this understanding at all. By replacing “repent” with “change your mind,” inserting the theological imposition of sorrow for personal sins and a change of behavior is precluded, literal hermeneutics are preserved, and the meaning of the verse is made clear.

Here is how one commentator understands Mark 1:15. “Jesus came... preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. The unique aspect of His message was that ‘the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.’ An historic day had dawned on Israel with the promised Messiah announcing the kingdom. This was ‘good news’ to a nation whose hopes relied on the veracity of the OT prophets concerning the literal appearance of the kingdom of God....*the gospel of the kingdom of God* is not the message of John 3:16 or Eph. 2:8-9. And in order for the kingdom to come for Israel, national repentance had to occur. Repentance, while always having a change of mind aspect to it, concerns a decision to turn from one’s sins (cf. Mark 1:3-5) [this is a restoration to fellowship aspect of repenting for the forgiveness of sins]....Jesus, like His forerunner, is calling the nation to turn from their sins and to believe the good news that He is the Messiah who is offering that generation the long-awaited kingdom” [Barry Mershon, Jr., “Mark” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, p. 1:143-144].

Compare this interpretation with a replacement theologian’s interpretation who also imports the incorrect definition of “repent” and who fails to acknowledge dispensational distinctions. “The two phrases, ‘the time is fulfilled’ and ‘the kingdom of God is close at hand’ are parallel and coreferential, with both referring to this new age of salvation. The kingdom is shorthand for God’s eschatological salvation, which is even now breaking into human history through Jesus’ words and actions....The appropriate response to this kingdom announcement is to ‘repent and believe in the good news.’ Repentance means turning away from sin...” [Mark L. Strauss, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Mark*, pp. 80-82]. Is this interpretation of this verse even remotely correct? No, it’s not. This verse is not referring to post-Pentecost

justification salvation. This commentator does not believe the Kingdom refers to a literal 1,000 year reign of the Messianic King ruler from the Davidic throne in Jerusalem. He believes Jesus, at His First Advent, was beginning the eternal Kingdom of God and it is now "already but not yet." This is the typical understanding held by replacement theologians and it forces them to arrive at an incorrect interpretation of verses such as this one. Strauss wrote, "In light of this data, the kingdom of God in Mark must be seen as both a present reality and a future hope. It is 'already' and 'not yet.' People 'enter' the kingdom by repenting and submitting to the kingdom" [p. 82]. It seems much better and more biblically accurate to understand that people enter the Kingdom of God, in the sense of an overall rule of God from beginning to end, by believing in the person and work of Christ Jesus rather than by turning away from committing personal sins.