
Repentance: Attitude or Action?

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Abstract: There is a dichotomy of meaning in the principal Greek and Hebrew verbs that are commonly translated to the English word, repentance. The words represent a central and fundamental theme in the New Testament that is first defined, illustrated, and demonstrated in the Old Testament. With the doctrine of repentance established through the teachings of Moses and the Prophets, it then becomes the foundation for the ministry of John the Baptist and ultimately, of Jesus, the Christ. A basic doctrine of the Christian faith teaches that God, through his love and grace is faithful to forgive those who repent of their sins, turning to Him as Lord and Savior. Consequently, a clear understanding of repentance followed by appropriate action is a necessary component of the salvation process. It can be the difference between eternal life and death.

In man's search for righteousness he has sought, through a variety of ways, to become worthy of a saving relationship with a Perfect and Holy God, only to fall short in all such attempts.¹ God, in reaching across the infinite gap of sin's condemnation, provided the way such that man, only by coming to faith in Jesus Christ, can be saved. God's command to us is clear as Jesus instructs, "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."² Jesus then follows, in typical customary

¹ Romans 3:23.

² Luke 13:3.

form, repeats this statement giving it particularly strong emphasis.³ Repentance is not optional. It is necessary that one exhibits the correct form of repentance in order to receive forgiveness and justification through God's grace. Consequently, an understanding of the definition, nature, and application of repentance is vital for both the evangelist and the new convert seeking salvation.

As important as this command is, much confusion and misinterpretation of the concept of repentance is evident when any search of the literature is accomplished. Also, similar inconsistencies are found when the doctrines of different Christian denominational communities are compared. A variety of doctrinal stands have been taken that define and describe a multiple of applications of repentance applied both to man and to God. For example, consider a few of the first applications of the word "repent" as we encounter it in the Bible: "And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people".⁴ This verse stimulates considerable discussion when compared to another scripture that states, "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent." It doesn't take a great amount of logical analysis to see a conflict between these two uses of such an important concept. The resolution of this conflict lies hidden in the original languages used to describe these acts.

One can better understand the real meaning of *repentance* when a study of the etymology of the word is accomplished. Like many words in the Bible, the English word "repent" is used to represent a translation of more than one original word, particularly as applied in the King James version of the Bible. Those original words have quite disparate meanings that are implicitly missing in the simpler English forms. For example, in the Old Testament the two Hebrew verbs most commonly translated "repent" may be transliterated as *shuw*

³ Luke 13:5.

⁴ Exodus 32:14.

(or *shuwb*) and *nacham*. The word *nacham* literally means to sigh or breathe strongly, and by implication to be sorry, to pity, or to express profound regret or grief. This is the word used when God is described as exhibiting an attitude of repentance. “God’s repentance is an Old Testament description of God’s reaction to human situations. The Bible uses the phrase in the sense of God’s being moved with great concern, His being grieved because of people’s sin.”⁵ The word appears 110 times in the Old Testament and is used to refer to an attitude or an emotion expressed by both God and man. In Genesis 6:6, the same Hebrew word is translated “grieved,” expressing God’s response to the abundant sin of man. In Genesis 24:67 and Genesis 27:42 the word is used to refer to Isaac’s feeling of consolation. One primary characteristic of this word is clear: *nacham* is an attitude.

The use of the word *nacham* that is often translated “repent” contrasts sharply with another similarly applied Hebrew word, *shuv*. The word *shuv* appears 1339 times in the Old Testament. We find the word first used in Genesis 3:19 when it refers to Adam’s *returning* to the dust upon his death. In Genesis 8:3 it refers to the water *receding* from the earth following the flood. *Shuv* literally means to return to the starting point. It consistently implies the act of turning around. One primary characteristic of this word is clear: *shuv* is an action, and that action is to turn around.

This dichotomy of definition presents us with a profound theological question. In order to “enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” is the sinner to demonstrate a correct attitude, or is the sinner to respond with a correct action, turning around and going in a different direction? A comparison of the use of the words in reference to God reveals that God expresses feelings of grief and consolation (*nacham*), but does not turn around or reverse Himself (*shuv*). This is consistent with

⁵ Briscoe, D. et. al. (1996). *Adult Life and Work Lesson Annual*. Nashville, TN: Convention Press.

God's accepted attribute of immutability, a doctrine that would be significantly shaken if God's repentance were an act of changing direction. When these words are applied to the relationship between man and God, the use of the words are consistent. The word *shuv* is used to describe the act of turning away from sin and returning to God. The concept is repeated several times in the book of Second Chronicles, chapters six and seven, culminating with the well known verse, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn (*shuv*) from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.⁶ God declares that it is necessary for people to turn from their wicked ways. A feeling of grief (*nachem*) is not enough. We must also turn (*shuv*) to Him, abandoning and forsaking the sin that caused the grief.

We find the same dichotomy of meaning applied to the word *repent* when it is used in the New Testament. The two Greek verbs that are used throughout the New Testament to describe the act of repentance are transliterated *metanoeo* and *metamellomai*.⁷ Like their Old Testament Hebrew counterparts, these two words also refer to an attitude and an action. *Metamellomai* refers to "an emotional attitude towards sin. The sinner has a different attitude, a different feeling towards sin,"⁸ The word is used six times in five verses of the New Testament, and though it is often translated as the English word *repent*, it always is always used to describe the changing of the mind toward an issue, or a form of remorse. It is never used in the context of a step towards salvation.⁹ On the other hand, *metanoeo* refers to a "reverse or change of

⁶ 2 Chronicles 7:14.

⁷ Michel, O. (1967). Change of Heart, Remorse, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. p 626-629.)

⁸ Kelley, Page H. (1982, Fall). The Repentance of God. *Biblical Illustrator*. 9(1). p 12.

⁹ Matthew 21:29, 21:32, 27:3; 2 Corinthians 7:8; Hebrews 7:1.

mind or heart in regard to sin.¹⁰ The sinner resolves to forsake his sin and return to God.¹¹ There are no less than 34 examples in the New Testament that illustrate this.

A good comparison of the application of these words is found in the book of Second Corinthians:

But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow (*lupeo*), your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever. Even if I caused you sorrow (*lupeo*) by my letter, I do not regret (*metamellomai*) it. Though I did regret (*metamellomai*) it--I see that my letter hurt (*lupeo*) you, but only for a little while -- yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry (*lupeo*), but because your sorrow (*lupeo*) led you to repentance (*metanoia*). For you became sorrowful (*lupeo*) as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow (*lupeo*) brings repentance (*metanoia*) that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow (*lupeo*) brings death (2 Corinthians 7:6-11, NIV.)

The repeated use of the Greek word *lupeo*, in these verses describes a sorrow that can be inspired by either an indictment for transgression (a worldly sorrow), or by a conviction that one is out of God's will (a Godly sorrow.) Though it is reasonable that sorrow must precede repentance, sorrow itself, even when accompanied by regret (*metamellomai*) does not have the power to save.

If one's theology is based upon the English translations only, a compromised and confusing doctrine can result. Repentance then takes on a definition that emphasizes the sorrow followed

¹⁰ Acts 3:19, 20:21; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 are examples.

¹¹ Ibid. Kelley, Page H. (1982, Fall). p 12.

by Godly works, rather than the one necessary Godly work: turning from the sin to a forgiving God. Clement of Rome, one of the earlier apostolic fathers, described the sequence of repentance as (1) contrition for sin, (2) confession, (3) amendment, and (4) penitential works.¹² This led to a practice of works-based repentance whereby the penitent sinner would be “voluntarily” subjected to a punishment (penance) that was “meet for repentance,” (Matthew 3:8.) Such a punishment might be anything from repeated recitation of prayers to menial service activities for the church or community. Note that the rosary, a chain of beads strung on a cloth cord, was and is still commonly used as a counting tool to determine that a prayer was repeated a correct number of times. One would not want to do more penance than was prescribed by the church. During some periods of history, such penance sometimes included physical abuse and torture. Penance-based contrition tends to place the emphasis of repentance on the practice of penance for absolution of sin rather than on the life changing response to sin that Jesus describes when he says, “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent (*metanoia*), ye shall all likewise perish”.¹³ Because of penance-based contrition, “men have lost their moral perspective in both the Protestant and Catholic communions. Sin has become more a matter of actions than of attitude,”¹⁴ John Calvin reacted strongly to refute this dogma:

In the first place, the definition they have given of repentance clearly shows that they never understood what it was; for they catch at some passages in the writings of the fathers, which by no means express the nature of repentance; as ‘that to repent is to weep for sins previously committed, and not to commit sins to be wept for.’ Again: ‘that

¹² Chamberlain, W.D. (1943). *The Meaning of Repentance*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press. p 21.

¹³ Luke 13:3.

¹⁴ Chamberlain, W.D. (193). p 22.

it is to lament evils that are past, and not to commit new ones to be lamented.’ Again: ‘that it is a kind of mournful vengeance, punishing in ourselves what we bewail having committed.’ Again: ‘that it is a sorrow of heart and bitterness of soul on account of the evils which a man has committed, or to which he has consented,’”¹⁵

Penance is not repentance. Penance is an effort by man to atone for his sins. Biblical doctrine, when consistent with the original writings, indicates that only Jesus’ vicarious death on the cross can provide such atonement. No work we can do will ever be good enough to make us righteous.¹⁶ Also, God’s Word does not include a requirement that man must first seek to make up for a sin committed against Himself or against another. The Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible, used to establish Catholic dogma replaces “repent” with “do penance.”

There is no excuse for such a paraphrase. It (the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible) is not a translation. It is the substituting of a Romish dogma for the plain command of God. John the Baptist did not cry, ‘Do penance, for the kingdom of God is at hand.’ Our Lord Jesus did not say, ‘Do penance and believe the gospel,’ and, ‘Except ye do penance ye shall all likewise perish.’ The Apostle Peter did not tell the anxious multitude at Pentecost to ‘Do penance and be converted.’ St. Paul did not announce to the men at Athens that ‘God commandedeth all men everywhere to do penance’ in view of the coming judgment day. No respectable Greek scholar would ever think of so translating the original in these and many other

¹⁵ Calvin, John (1936). *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. III, IV. I.

¹⁶ Matthew 5:20.

instances.¹⁷

Consider a recent viewpoint on penance expressed by John Calquhoun who writes, “The fruits of true repentance, then, are in general, the good works which every evangelical penitent endeavors, through grace, diligently to perform.¹⁸ Again, we find a doctrine that teaches that we, by our good works, can atone for our sins. The doctrine of penance-based contrition still survives despite the works of the reformers that were motivated by a new-found general availability of reliable copies of the scriptures. Luther, Zwingli, Wesley, Calvin, and others understood the original Hebrew and Greek terms and began educating the Christian community in the life-changing result that true repentance brings.

A doctrine of repentance that is based upon the original Hebrew and Greek forms produces a response that clearly involves the turning away from sin towards God. Throughout the Old Testament God calls on man to repent, to turn from their ways of wickedness and turn back to Him. The call for repentance starts in the New Testament with the ministry of John the Baptist.

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. ... Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: ... I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.¹⁹

A direct connection between the prophets and the

¹⁷ Ironside, H.A. (1937). *Except Ye Repent*. New York: American Tract Society. Page 13.

¹⁸ Calquhoun, John. (1965). *Repentance*. London, England: Billings and Sons.

¹⁹ Matthew 3:1-2, 8, 11, KJV.

New Testament is found in John the Baptist. Appearing in the wilderness, he, like they, issued the call to his own generation for this radical kind of turning. He baptized those who by confessing their sins responded to his invitation.²⁰ Likewise, he expected that those who had made this commitment would demonstrate by their actions the change which they had made in their hearts.²¹ He differed, though, from the prophets in that his message of repentance was intricately bound up with his expectation of the imminent coming of the Messiah.^{22 23}

Jesus began his ministry with the same call that John the Baptist had been preaching: “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”²⁴

The Messiah came also preaching a message of repentance (Mark 1:15). Stressing that all men needed to repent (Luke 13:1-5), Jesus summoned his followers to *turn* and become like children (Matt. 18:3). He defined His ministry in terms of calling sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). Moreover, He illustrated His understanding of repentance in the parable of the prodigal who *returned* to the father (Luke 15:11-32). Like John, he insisted that the life that was changed was obvious by the “fruit” that it bore (Luke 6:20-45).²⁵

In these instances, as in hundreds of other instances of Jesus

²⁰ Mark 1:4-5.

²¹ Luke 3:10-14.

²² Kiethley, Naymond. (1991). *Holman Bible Dictionary*. CD-ROM. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

²³ Luke 3:15-17; Acts 19:4)

²⁴ Matthew 4:17.

²⁵ Ibid. Kiethley, Naymond. (1991).

and the apostle's calls for repentance, the Greek word *metanoeo* is used. Again, this word always refers to turning around whether translated as "repent" or "turn" or "return" or any other number of ways. Without exception, the word refers to the act of doing an "about face," forsaking the sin that is taking us away from God and turning to Him in obedience.

Let's consider some of the opinions of writers who approach the subject of repentance from its etymological roots. Jay Adams, a respected teacher of Christian counseling, identifies sin as the source of many of the problems he encounters as a counselor. He seeks to assist people in the resolution of their problems by showing his clients their sin, and addressing their need to repent. He teaches that repentance is a change of mind that results in a visible change in life. Though motivated by a change in attitude, it always requires an action, a change in direction.

"Repentance differs from mere sorrow over the past. Sorrow may accompany true repentance but never must be identified with it. Esau was sorry over the ultimate consequences of his sin, but not truly repentant.²⁶ On the other hand, sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret.²⁷ In true repentance the Holy Spirit always effects change. Paul described this when he said that he preached to the gentiles in the hope that they "should repent and turn to God performing deeds appropriate to the repentance."²⁸

Repentance is both a turning from and a turning to - a continual realignment of one's entire way of thinking about sin and God. The result is a knowledge of the forgiveness of sin and a constant awareness of a walk with God.²⁹ It is not

²⁶ Hebrews 12:16-17.

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 7:10.

²⁸ Acts 26:20.

²⁹ Coleman, Robert O. (1986, Summer). Repentance in the Old Testament.

sufficient to express remorse or tremble under the weight of guilt. The demons do this and tremble!³⁰ It is not sufficient to do penance. Though regularly practiced in our society, there is no scriptural basis for atonement through works. Only by turning away from our sin and turning, in faith, to a forgiving God can we be saved. Once we have come to a saving knowledge of Christ, the Lord, we still find that repentance is a necessary part of our daily lives. When we do acts that are not in God's will, we can still seek forgiveness through confession and repentance, acknowledging Jesus as Lord as we are inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is exciting to know that when God made his covenant with Abraham he promised to be faithful to it.³¹ By sealing the suzerain covenant through the rite of the division of the animals, God told Abraham, "If I break the covenant with you, may I not be God anymore." God's promise was valid regardless of Abraham's ability to keep his part. God's covenant with us is likewise secure, as illustrated by the Apostle Paul when he states, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day,"³² May we, as God's elect, preach the gospel to all nations, calling all people to repentance, and in doing so, making disciples according to Jesus' command.³³

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³⁰ James 2:19.

³¹ Genesis 15:9-17.

³² 2 Timothy 2:12.

³³ Matthew 28:19-20.

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