

**New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Gospels and Acts**  
**A series on Repentance: part 4 (R. Wilkin)**

The books of the NT vary in the emphasis that they place on various doctrines. John's Gospel, for example, is evangelistic in emphasis (John 20:30-31). Galatians presents a defense of the Gospel in the face of the Judaizers, who were trying to pervert it. The Book of Revelation deals extensively with what is yet future. How do the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and Acts treat a specific doctrine--the doctrine of repentance?

1. Take a look at a concordance and count the number of times repentance (*metanoeo* and *metanoia*) is used by the Gospel authors.

Luke in his two-volume work, Luke-Acts, emphasizes repentance more than any other NT author. Nearly one half, or twenty-five of the fifty-eight uses of the primary NT terms for repentance (*metanoeo* and *metanoia*) occur in Luke-Acts. On the other hand, there is not even one use of either term in John's Gospel. This is especially surprising since John uses those terms twelve times in Revelation. Matthew and Mark use those terms eight and four times respectively.

Why this disparity--especially between Luke-Acts and John?

Scripture does not contradict itself. Different authors may have different emphases, but not disparate views, on a given doctrine.

2. As you study John, what is the condition for eternal salvation? Can this be substantiated with the other Gospel authors?

The four Gospels and Acts present a united front. There is but one condition of eternal salvation: faith in Christ alone. The following references from John's Gospel are clear on this point:

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

John 6:47: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life."

John 11:25: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."

John 20:31: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

The other Synoptic Gospels also present faith as the one and only condition. However, they do so less often and less forcefully than John's Gospel. Why? Because the Synoptics are written to people who were already believers. References to the Gospel in them are not central to their purposes. John's Gospel, however, is written primarily to unbelievers (John 20:30-31) and references to the Gospel are central to his purpose.

Tip: The hermeneutical principle called "the analogy of faith" suggests that we can best understand unclear passages of Scripture by allowing related clear passages to shed light on them. This principle suggests that one should understand the occasional references to the Gospel in the Synoptics in light of the Gospel of John and not vice versa. John's Gospel clearly says that the sole condition of salvation is faith in Christ. That will inform our understanding of any so-called problem passage in the Synoptics.

Some passages from the Synoptics clearly confirm that the sole condition of eternal salvation is faith in Christ:

Luke 8:12: "Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts; lest they should believe and be saved." The sole condition of salvation given by the Lord here is faith in Him alone. All who believe are saved.

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Acts 16:31: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." In direct answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?" Luke reports Paul's sole condition: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Other passages from the Synoptics and Acts, though less clear, conform to this understanding:

Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." The will of the Father, in relation to the Gospel, is that one believes in the Son whom He sent.

Matthew 18:3: "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." Little children are naturally trusting. The sole condition of salvation is childlike trust in Christ.

Mark 16:16: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned." (1) The Lord indicates that the sole condition for condemnation is unbelief. This is clearly parallel to the Lord's teachings as reported by John (compare, for example, John 3:18 and 8:24). Whether one views the reference to baptism as parenthetical (2) or the reference to salvation as broader than eternal salvation, (3) the sole condition of escaping eternal condemnation is given as faith in Christ.

John 5:24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."

John 6:28-29: "Therefore they said to Him, 'What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'"

Repentance in the Gospels and Acts 13.

3. There are basically three views of salvific repentance: **(A)** Turn from or be willing to turn from one's sins as a condition of eternal salvation, or **(B)** changing one's mind about Jesus Christ as a condition of eternal salvation, or **(C)** repentance (turning from one's sins) is not a condition of eternal salvation. Given your theological perspective on the condition for eternal salvation, examine whether these three views of salvific repentance is compatible with it.

**A. Turning from Sins as a Condition of Eternal Salvation:** A View **Inconsistent** with Faith as the Sole Condition of Salvation.

Some suggest that the Greek terms for faith have within their fields of meaning the concept of turning from sins. For example, in another paper on repentance and salvation presented at the 1989 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Dr. James Rosscup wrote:

"The Gospel of John always refers to 'believe,' never using the word for repenting. The Apostle John heard Jesus's [sic] command in Luke 24:47 to proclaim repentance to Jews and Gentiles. Assuming that John obeys his Lord, and also authors the Gospel that bears his name, his use of only 'believe' can have a reasonable solution. To him, believing draws into its attitude all that it means to repent, to change the attitude in a turn from the old life to Christ and the new life." (4)

Shortly thereafter he added:

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"Faith which includes repentance involves obedience. Faith is a dependence on Christ and also an appropriation of Christ's free gift. At the same time, faith also embraces repentance, repentance including a changed attitude that has commitment, direction, purpose, loyalty." (5)

This argument utilizes the analogy of faith in reverse. It involves reading a questionable understanding of Luke 24:47 into all of John's uses of belief. It infuses into the concept of faith ideas wholly foreign to it. This view is inconsistent with faith as the sole condition of eternal salvation. And, in spite of assertions claiming that it does not, this view violates the concept of salvation as a free gift. Salvation is not free if the recipient must change his lifestyle and pledge to serve God to obtain it.

Notice the frank admission of one holding this view who baldly asserts that to be saved one must *pay for it* by turning from his sins. Under the heading *What must I pay to be a Christian?*, Dr. James Montgomery Boice answers:

"I must pay the price of those sins I now cherish. I must give them up, every one. I cannot cling to a single sin and pretend at the same time I am following the Lord Jesus Christ." (6)

Rather than the Lord Jesus Christ alone buying our redemption, this view demands that the recipient pay part of the price himself. Something is found wanting in Christ's work on the Cross. This view is a return to Rome.

**B. Changing One's Mind as a Condition of Eternal Salvation: A View Consistent with Faith as the Sole Condition of Salvation.**

The view of Chafer, Ryrie, and this writer is that the "repentance" which is required for eternal salvation is a change of mind about Christ. (7) The Jews of Jesus' day knew and rejected Jesus' claims. The Apostles called on them to change their minds about Jesus Christ in light of the new evidence of His resurrection. This call for a change of mind about Christ is synonymous with the call to trust in Him.

This view is consistent with the position that faith is the sole condition of salvation. It harmonizes John's Gospel and the Synoptics by viewing saving repentance as equal to saving faith.

**C. Repentance is Not a Condition of Eternal Salvation: A View Consistent with Faith as the Sole Condition of Salvation.**

In his recent book *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*, Zane C. Hodges suggests a view of repentance which approaches this subject from a completely different perspective. (8) He asserts that repentance is rightly understood as turning to God from one's sins. However, he goes on to say that there are no passages in which repentance is required for eternal salvation. Rather, he argues that repentance is a condition of coming into harmonious fellowship with God.

One is eternally saved, according to this view, by faith alone in Christ alone. Repentance may, but need not, occur before faith and salvation. Thus this view clearly is consistent with the faith-only view of salvation.

### **D. Conclusion**

Two views are theologically possible: that repentance is a change of mind or that it is not a condition of eternal salvation.

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These views need not be taken as mutually exclusive. One can take some passages one way and some the other.

However, the view that repentance is turning from one's sins and that it is required for eternal salvation is theologically impossible. Such a view contradicts grace, faith, and the freeness of the Gospel.

#### Gospels-Acts Passages in Which Repentance Is a Change of Mind about Christ and a Condition of Salvation

##### A. Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:17-18

These five references form the heart of the recorded preaching of salvific repentance in the early church.

Of the five references to the Great Commission in the Gospels and Acts, only in Luke did Christ cite the preaching of repentance. In Luke 24:46-48 He said: "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things."

The disciples were told that they would promise the remission or forgiveness of sins to those who "repent." Not surprisingly, this is exactly what we find in the recorded evangelistic messages of the disciples (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31).

It is conceivable that the forgiveness of sins in question is a non-salvific, fellowship sort of forgiveness, as in 1 John 1:9. (9) However, there are several reasons why this is unlikely.

**First**, the majority of the uses of the term for remission or forgiveness (*aphesis*) refer to salvific forgiveness. "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for the remission of sins" (Matt 26:28). "Whoever believes in Him will receive the remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). "Through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified" (Acts 13:38). "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered" (Rom 4:7). "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Eph 1:7). "In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:14). "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb 9:22). "I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" (1 John 2:12). (10) This is especially evident when only the noun form is considered--the form used in Luke 24:47, Acts 2:38, and 5:31. There are no clear references to fellowship forgiveness using the noun. Yet it clearly often refers to salvific forgiveness.

**Second**, Jesus said in Luke 24:47 (and Acts 1:8) that the disciples would be witnesses concerning His death and resurrection. Witnessing to Christ's death and resurrection fits much better with the view that eternal salvation is in view.

**Third**, a comparison of Peter's preaching about the forgiveness of sins in Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, and 10:43 supports this conclusion as well.

In the first three passages Peter linked forgiveness with "repentance":

"Repent and let every one of you be baptized (11) in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

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"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:30-31)

In the last passage, however, Peter conditioned forgiveness upon believing in Jesus Christ:

"To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43).

It seems reasonable to conclude that Peter in each case was preaching about salvific forgiveness and that he was equating "repentance" (i.e., changing one's mind about Christ) with believing in Christ.

Peter's audience in Acts 2, 3, and 5 was Jewish. These were people who had rejected Christ and His claims. Now new evidence was in the resurrection. Peter was a witness to this dramatic new evidence. Peter called his unbelieving Jewish listeners to change their minds about Jesus Christ. To change their minds about Him was to believe in Him.

Talbert put it beautifully:

The evangelist thinks that after Jesus' resurrection His trial is reopened and fresh evidence is presented by the apostles to get the Jews to change their verdict. The new evidence is the event of Jesus' resurrection. The condemnation of Christ had been done in ignorance (Acts 3:17; 13:27), but in raising Jesus God showed the Jews they had made a mistake: they had crucified the Christ (Acts 2:36). Now, however, the Jews are given a chance to change their minds, to repent (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31). (12)

**Fourth**, Acts 11:18 is a commentary on Acts 10:43ff. and the conversion of Cornelius and his household. After Peter told believing Jews that Cornelius and his household had been baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, they said: "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

Two points are noteworthy. One, this "repentance" was to life. It is quite unlikely that physical life was meant. Cornelius already possessed physical life. Two, Peter never mentioned "repentance" to the Jewish brethren. Rather, he referred to believing (Acts 11:17). Thus the text explicitly equates "repentance" to life with believing for the remission of sins and eternal salvation.

In light of all this evidence, it can be asserted with reasonable certainty that Luke 24:47, Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, and 11:18 all refer to changing one's mind about Jesus Christ as a condition of eternal salvation.

#### **B. Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32**

Several passages in the Gospels and Acts use "repentance" as a virtual synonym for eternal salvation. Matthew 9:13, Mark 2:17, and Luke 5:32 are parallel accounts. I have selected Mark's account as representative.

In Mark 2:17 Jesus responded to scribes and Pharisees who were grumbling because Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He said: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

All are sinners. Jesus was not suggesting that some didn't need Him. Rather He was asserting the opposite. All who see their need are invited by Him to heed His call: "Repent" and be saved. "Repentance" is used here as a metonymy of cause for the effect. The cause is changing one's mind about Christ, believing in Him. The effect is eternal salvation.

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Thus Jesus was saying in effect: I have not come to call those who think that they are righteous, but those who recognize that they are sinners, to eternal salvation.

#### **Gospels-Acts Passages in Which Repentance is a Turning from Sins and Is Not a Condition of Salvation**

##### **A. Luke 17:3-4**

If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, "I repent," you shall forgive him.

Clearly this passage does not refer to eternal salvation. The forgiveness in view is man-to-man. It involves fellowship. The repentance in question is a change of mind about sinful behavior. In such a passage the English word repentance is a good translation.

##### **B. Acts 8:22**

Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.

Peter spoke these words to Simon Magus. The wickedness in question was Simon's attempt to buy the power to convey the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands (Acts 8:18-19). The English word simony, the buying or selling of positions in the church, is derived from Simon's act.

Luke left no doubt as to Simon's spiritual condition. In Acts 8:13 he explicitly indicates that Simon came to faith in Christ and testified to his faith by water baptism, just as many other Samaritans had (v 12). The forgiveness spoken of by Peter in v 22 thus refers to forgiveness of a believer--not to salvific forgiveness.

Peter commanded Simon to repent concerning (i.e., change his mind about) his wicked request so that he might obtain fellowship-forgiveness from God. Simon's physical life was probably on the line. The reader would not be surprised should the text go on to say that shortly thereafter Simon died and was carried away to be buried, (13) as was the case with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.

There may be other passages in the Gospels and Acts in which repentance is a condition for fellowship forgiveness and temporal salvation. However, other passages are not nearly as clear as the ones cited. It is to the more questionable passages that we now turn our attention.

#### **Gospels-Acts Passages Which Are Difficult to Categorize Regarding Their Use of Repentance**

##### **A. John the Baptist's Preaching of Repentance (Matt 3:2-15; Mark 1:4,15; Luke 3:3-20; 19:1-10; Acts 19:4)**

In the five years since I completed my dissertation on this subject, I have had second thoughts about my treatment of John the Baptist's preaching of repentance. I argued that John's preaching of repentance was a call to a change of mind about oneself and Jesus Christ in order to obtain eternal salvation. I am now much torn between that view and Hodges's view.

Hodges suggests that John the Baptist's call to repentance was a call for the nation to turn from its sins. (14) However, he also suggests that this reformation of life was not a condition of eternal salvation. Rather, Hodges suggests that John's baptism of repentance "was designed to prepare the nation for faith in the Coming One." (15) As self-righteous Jews recognized their sinfulness and turned back toward God, barriers to faith in Christ were removed.

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Here are some excerpts from or about John the Baptist's preaching of repentance as recorded in the Gospels and Acts (italics mine):

"Repent, *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*... Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, *confessing their sins*. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance'" (Matt 3:2, 5-8).

"John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins... Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying,... 'Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:4, 14-15).

"And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Luke 3:4).

"Then he [John the Baptist] said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" (Luke 3:7).

"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.' I did not know Him; but *that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water*'" (John 1:29-31).

[John said] "*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*" (John 3:36).

"Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John" (John 4:1).

"Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people *that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus*'" (Acts 19:4).

Several points can be observed from these passages.

**First**, the Apostle John presents John the Baptist as conditioning eternal salvation solely upon believing in Jesus Christ John 3:36).

**Second**, John the Baptist gave two reasons for "repenting." The nation was to repent: (1) since the kingdom was near (Matt 3:2) and (2) in order to obtain the remission of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:4).

Repenting in light of the nearness of the kingdom fits well with Hodges's view. It is a common OT theme that the nation was to turn from its sins to prepare itself for the kingdom. It is one thing to prepare oneself to meet the king. It is another to be a subject of the king. It is quite conceivable that among the many who were baptized by John there were some who had already come to faith in Christ.

On the other hand, repenting in order to obtain the remission of sins does not fit as well with Hodges's view. As shown above, that same expression is used elsewhere in the Gospels and Acts (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31) to refer to salvific forgiveness.

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**Third**, those being baptized by John were confessing their sins (Matt 3:5). This may have been a spontaneous response by people. Possibly John did not call for this as a condition of baptism. However, in light of his role as the forerunner who was to make straight the Messiah's paths (Luke 3:4) and his response to those who asked, "What shall we do?" (Luke 3:10), it seems more likely that John required the confession of sins before one could be baptized.

**Fourth**, it is very telling that the Lord Jesus baptized more people than John did and that He baptized "disciples" (John 4:1). (16) Jesus baptized those who had already committed to follow Him. Of course, some of those, Judas being a prime example, were unsaved (John 6:64). If all of the Lord's disciples were baptized by Him and some of them were unbelievers, He did not require people to believe in Him in order to undergo His baptism. Likely John did not require faith in Christ of those he baptized either. If not, then it is hard to conceive of John's call to repentance as a call to eternal salvation.

Jesus' baptism, while never called a baptism of repentance, seems to have been parallel to John's. John 4:1 mentions both baptisms without distinction as to purpose. Our Lord's first recorded exhortation in Matthew, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17) is identical to John's preaching of repentance as recorded in Matt 3:2.

**Fifth**, people undergoing John's baptism were fleeing from the wrath to come (Luke 3:7). While this may well refer to God's eternal wrath, it is at least equally possible that temporal wrath was meant. The Jewish Wars and the fall of Jerusalem with the resultant destruction of the temple in A.D. 66-70 could have been in view.

**Sixth**, after John was in prison Jesus said "Repent, and (*ka*) believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He might have meant "Repent, that is (ascensive use of *ka*), believe in the gospel." If so, He equated the two. It is just as likely, however, that Jesus was distinguishing between the two. He may have called for "repentance" as one act and believing the Gospel as another--the latter being the condition of eternal salvation and the former of fellowship and temporal salvation.

What conclusion can we draw from these observations regarding John's preaching of repentance?

One element in John's preaching keeps me from wholeheartedly embracing Hodges's view: that the forgiveness of sins is explicitly linked to John's preaching of repentance (e.g., Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). As already pointed out above, repentance for the forgiveness of sins commonly refers to salvific forgiveness.

I am torn between the two views. I am slightly inclined, however, in light of the many points in favor of a fellowship-temporal salvation view, to conclude that the forgiveness of sins mentioned looks to a forgiveness that results in temporal deliverance from God's wrath. Thus even nonbelievers who turn from their sins will find that God's judgment against their sin begins to subside. This seems to be the point of Rev 9:20-21 and 16:9-11. While entrance into the kingdom and positional forgiveness are conditioned solely upon faith in Christ--or changing one's mind about Him--temporal forgiveness and temporal salvation are conditioned upon obedience.

I feel that this is a topic which needs much additional attention. Hopefully someone from the Free Grace Salvation perspective will soon write a thesis, or better yet a dissertation, on John the Baptist's preaching of repentance.

#### **B. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)**

The prodigal son planned in his heart to do more than was necessary to gain reconciliation with his father. He did not need to pledge to be a servant and work for his father.



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On the other hand, such a pledge did not hinder his reconciliation, since the young man understood, or possibly came to understand when he met his father, that reconciliation was available just for the asking--by grace alone with no working or pledging to work.

In the first two parables of Luke 15, the Parables of the Lost Sheep and of the Lost Coin, the term for repentance, *metanoia*, is explicitly used. It is not, however, used in the third parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

When did the prodigal "repent" and what did his repentance consist of?

These questions cannot be answered dogmatically since the text does not explicitly say. It is possible that he "repented" when he met his father and found that he accepted him with open arms and would not let him finish his planned speech. Bailey argues that only when he met his father did he repent--that is, only then did he realize that reconciliation could not be earned--that it could only be accepted as a pure gift. (17) Alternately, he may have "repented," when he was in the far country and "came to his senses" (v 17).

The latter view allows for two possible understandings of the content of the prodigal's repentance in the far country. One view is that he repented when he decided that any role in his father's house would be better than his piggish existence outside of his house. The problem with this view is that the prodigal seemed to believe he could earn reconciliation by working. If this was the prodigal's "repentance," then that was not required for reconciliation. Indeed, this thinking would need to be corrected before he could be reconciled.

Another view is that the prodigal repented when he decided to turn from his sinful ways. Again, if one holds this view he would have to argue that this repentance was not a condition of reconciliation with the father. This is the position of Zane Hodges on the parable. (18)

The prodigal changed his mind in two senses at two different times. When in the far country he changed his mind about his lifestyle and decided to seek reconciliation with his father. When actually in his father's presence he realized that reconciliation was only available as a completely free gift. It could not be bought.

Which change of mind led to the prodigal's reconciliation with his father? Clearly the latter. The father would not let him buy his way into the household. The prodigal had to accept reconciliation as a free gift.

Which change of mind represented the prodigal's "repentance"? I am inclined to the view that his "repentance" was his recognition and acceptance of the free gift of reconciliation. It, of course, was built upon his recognition of his sinfulness and need of reconciliation. When the prodigal accepted his father's grace gift there was joy in heaven in a parallel fashion to the finding of the lost coin and the lost sheep in the first two parables. (19)

### Conclusion

There are only two views of salvific repentance which are consistent with the Gospel: the view that repentance is essentially synonymous with saving faith and the view that repentance is not a condition of eternal salvation at all.

It has been shown that in some passages one can understand repentance as a condition of eternal salvation and in others not. These views are not exclusive.

It is my view that the Gospels and Acts primarily use the terms *metanoia* and *metanoeo* essentially as synonyms for faith in Christ. The call to change one's mind about Christ, after the new evidence of the resurrection is brought forth (e.g., Acts 2:38), is parallel to calling one to place his or her faith in the Risen Christ in light of the proof of the resurrection (Acts 10:40-43).

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Nevertheless, it is clear in some passages (e.g., Luke 17:3-4) that those terms are used to refer to changes of mind about one's sinful behavior. In such cases what is at stake is fellowship, not eternal salvation.

The preaching of John the Baptist and the Parable of the Prodigal Son are very difficult to categorize. At this time I am inclined to view John the Baptist's call to repentance as a call to turn from one's sinful deeds. John's Gospel is clear that John the Baptist conditioned eternal salvation upon faith in Christ alone and not on turning from one's sins as well. It seems likely, though, that temporal and not eternal salvation is what the Synoptic authors are focusing upon in John the Baptist's preaching.

The Parable of the Prodigal seems to deal with eternal salvation--this best fits the motif of "joy in heaven in the presence of the angels" in the first two parables of Luke 15. The repentance, while not clearly identified, seems to be the prodigal's acceptance of the free gift of reconciliation.

The call to repentance is not uniform in the Gospels and Acts. In some cases it is a call to eternal salvation (e.g., Acts 2:38; 11:18). In other cases it is a call to temporal salvation (e.g., Acts 17:3-4). In some cases the change of mind called for is about Christ. In others it is about one's sinful ways.

When studying the concept of repentance in the Gospels and Acts and the rest of the NT, it is important to ask two questions: (1) Is temporal or eternal salvation in view? and (2) What is one being called to change his mind about--Christ, one's sinful ways, or something else?

We will explore these questions further in the next article in this series: "Repentance in the Epistles and Revelation."

#### References

1. Two early Greek manuscripts and one twelfth-century one omit the so-called longer ending of Mark's Gospel, including this verse. However, the vast majority of manuscripts (over one thousand), including some early ones, include it. In my opinion there is no doubt that this is canonical.
2. This view can be illustrated in this way: "Get on the bus (and take a seat) and you will get to the stadium." He who doesn't get on the bus won't get there. In this illustration taking a seat is a parenthetical thought. The sole condition for getting to the stadium is getting on the bus.
3. About half of the NT uses of the terms of salvation, *sozo* and *soteria*, refer to temporal salvation. If that is the case here, Jesus' point is this: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved from the wrath of God, eternal and temporal. He who does not believe will be eternally condemned." Faith is necessary to be saved eternally. Baptism, and the commitment which it signifies to begin the course of discipleship (Matt. 28: 19), is necessary to be saved temporally.
4. James E. Rosscup, "The Relation of Repentance to Salvation and the Christian Life" (unpublished paper), p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, 18.
6. James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Chicago Moody Press, 1986), 12-13.
7. See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press 1948), 3: 372-78; Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 91-100.
8. Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). See especially pp. 143-63.
9. See also, Matt 6: 12-15; Mark 11:26; Luke 11:4; 17:3-4; Acts 8:22; Jas 5:15.
10. See also Matt 12:31-32, Mark 3:29, 4:12, Luke 1:77, Acts 26:18, Heb 10:18.

## New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Gospels and Acts

### A series on Repentance: part 4 (page 11)

11. In Acts 3:19 and 5:31 Peter links the forgiveness of sins with "repentance" only--not with a repentance" plus baptism. This strongly suggests that the reference to baptism here is not a condition of forgiveness. It is most likely a parenthetical thought: "Repent (and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ) for the forgiveness of sins..." This is much as we might say, "Get on the bus (and take a seat) and you will arrive at the destination." Those who fail to sit down would still get to the destination, although they would displease the bus driver.  
For further discussion of this and other views of Acts 2:38 and baptism, see the article by Lanny Tanton in this issue of the Journal.
12. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 231.
13. For fuller details regarding Luke's account of the conversion of Simon Magus see James Inglis, "Simon Magus, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 2 (Spring 1989): 45-54.
14. Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 158-59.
15. Ibid.
16. The physical acts of baptizing were done by His disciples (John 4:2). However, since this was done under His direction, it could be spoken of as baptizing which Jesus did.
17. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 183 -84.
18. Hodges, *Absolutely Free!*, 153-54.
19. The problem with equating the prodigal's repentance with his change of mind regarding his lifestyle is that it is hard to see why that would necessarily lead to joy in heaven. He could have turned from his sinful ways and yet refused to accept reconciliation as a free gift. Many clean up their lives and think that by so doing they are earning reconciliation. It seems likely that the reference to joy in heaven (found in the first two parables of the triad) finds its resting place in the prodigal's acceptance of the free gift of reconciliation. And, based on the first two parables of Luke 15, joy is experienced in heaven at precisely the point at which repentance occurs.

## New Testament Repentance: Repentance in the Gospels and Acts

### A series on Repentance: part 4 (R. Wilkin)

The books of the NT vary in the emphasis that they place on various doctrines. John's Gospel, for example, is evangelistic in emphasis (John 20:30-31). Galatians presents a defense of the Gospel in the face of the Judaizers, who were trying to pervert it. The Book of Revelation deals extensively with what is yet future. How do the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and Acts treat a specific doctrine--the doctrine of repentance?

1. Take a look at a concordance and count the number of times repentance (*metanoeo* and *metanoia*) is used by the Gospel authors.

2. As you study John, what is the condition for eternal salvation? Can this be substantiated with the other Gospel authors?

3. There are basically three views of salvific repentance: **(A)** Turn from or be willing to turn from one's sins as a condition of eternal salvation, or **(B)** changing one's mind about Jesus Christ as a condition of eternal salvation, or **(C)** repentance (turning from one's sins) is not a condition of eternal salvation. Given your theological perspective on the condition for eternal salvation, examine whether these three views of salvific repentance is compatible with it.