

Repent and Believe the Gospel

A. Moises Zumaeta

My remembrance of Dr. Bill Arp: My very first class with Dr. Arp was Greek Exegetical Methods, or as he would prefer to call it, “GEM.” GEM was a very suitable nickname for the class, because it described, not only the relevance of its content, but also the passion of the dispenser of the content. Like a precious and cherished jewel, so were the Holy Scriptures for Dr. William Arp. He had a passion for the text of Scripture, a passion for its thoughtful reading, precise interpretation, and bold proclamation. Such a passion for the living words of Scripture was the result of an even greater passion—the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am inclined to think that Dr. Arp nicknamed the class GEM as a result of the vivid, penetrating, and life-giving words of our Lord, who said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matt 13:45-46). Dr. Arp was that merchant who found the precious GEM of the kingdom of heaven—the gospel of salvation—in the pages of Scripture. Transformed by this GEM, he made it his life ambition to help others find, behold, and treasure the precious GEM. I am one of the fortunate ones whom Dr. Arp helped in this quest, and for that I will be eternally thankful. Dr. Arp is no longer with us. He is with his greatest treasure, his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. His legacy will continue to be felt for many years through the lives of those he impacted.

The debate between what is called “the free grace salvation view” and the “lordship salvation view” has been in the evangelical radar for quite a few years. This debate deals mainly with the doctrine of conversion, and it is the result of the different ways in which the terms “repentance”

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and "faith" are understood and interpreted in relationship to a person's response to the gospel. How should we understand these terms? "Must a person who seeks salvation repent or turn away from every known sin in his life?"² or "Does insistence upon repentance involve the penitent in a form of works-righteousness?"³ How about faith? "Is faith primarily intellectual assent to revealed truths, trust in a person, or a certain mode of existence?"⁴

In this article these questions will be discussed in light of what the Scripture teaches about them.⁵ The meaning of these words (repent and believe) will be defined as they are used in Scripture in relationship to the doctrine of salvation; and a theological assessment of the relationship these two words have when it comes to conversion will be provided. Practical consequences, in the ministry of preaching, that could result from a proper understanding (or a lack thereof) of this doctrine will also be considered.

Defining the Terms

Repentance

Many scholars have defined the word *μετάνοια* (repentance) as only a "change of mind." This definition is usually extracted from the etymology of the word. It is explained that since *μετα* means "after" and *νοέω* "to think" the meaning of the word should be "after-thought" or a "change of mind." Charles Ryrie, for example, defines this word in this manner. He argues, as he talks about Peter's sermon in Acts 2, that when Peter challenged his audience to "repent," he was asking them to change their

² Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 235.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ I do not pretend to solve the debate in a short paper such as this, especially when one considers that very able and conservative scholars are divided on the topic. I am well aware that both camps have good strong arguments, and each one of them is trying to be faithful to the precious Word of God.

minds "about Jesus of Nazareth."⁶ What Ryrie means with this is that, in repentance, they had to change whatever they thought about Jesus and "that repentance saves."⁷ Though it is true that "repentance" means a change of mind, that is not everything it means every time it is used, especially in the Judeo-Christian literature. In fact, one of the definitions provided in BDAG is "turning about, conversion as a turning away."⁸

Words must be defined in light of the context in which they are used not just in the components of their etymology. D. A. Carson in his little book *Exegetical Fallacies* quotes an example from Dr. Louw, using the word ὑπέρτης, which illustrates the dangers of defining a word in this way. He writes, "As Louw remarks, to derive the meaning of ὑπέρτης from ὑπό and ἐρέτης is no more intrinsically realistic than deriving the meaning of 'butterfly' from 'butter' and 'fly' or the meaning of 'pineapple' from 'pine' and 'apple.'"⁹ As silly as this example sounds, the truth it conveys is undeniable. We do not communicate on the basis of etymology.

If μετάνοια does not only mean "change of mind" what else does it mean? This author will answer this question by examining a few passages in the gospels in light of their own contexts.¹⁰ Μετάνοια appears 22 times in the NT, the first time occurring in Matthew 3:8 where John the Baptist is preaching at the Jordan River. Many Pharisees and Sadducees were aware that the people of Israel regarded John as a true prophet of God (Matt 21:26) and probably some of them also recognized this fact. When some Pharisees and Sadducees saw John baptizing, they came to him to perform the ritual. John, somehow identifying their hypocrisy, told them that their baptism was not

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What it Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 86.

⁷ Ibid. Original emphasis

⁸ BDAG, 640.

⁹ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 29-30.

¹⁰ Due to the vastness of the Scriptural data, and the briefness of this paper, I will be selective in my treatment of the verses that contain the words. I will study only a few biblical examples where these words are used in the context of the doctrine of salvation.

going to free them from the coming wrath. They had "to produce fruit that proved their repentance." In light of the context of Matthew, John is clearly teaching that repentance is, first of all, necessary for salvation ("deliverance from coming wrath") and, secondly, it entails a change of action. It must involve a changed life.

True repentance is not a matter of words and ritual, but of a real changed life. The imagery of bearing fruit will also be deployed in Jesus' teaching (7:16-20; 12:33-37; 13:8, 22-23) until it reaches its climax in the condemnation of Jerusalem as the tenants who have failed to deliver the produce of God's vineyard (21:43), a situation which has been vividly illustrated by the destruction of the fruitless fig tree outside Jerusalem (21:18-19).¹¹

In fact, another commentator notes that this verse is key in the development of Matthew's crucial themes, especially that of godly righteousness. He writes,

Verse 8 provides the key to one of Matthew's crucial themes--righteousness by good deeds. But Matthew does not contradict Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. Rather, true faith or repentance will produce a life-style and behavior that demonstrate the reality of a changed heart.¹²

The next verse I would like to consider is Mark 1:4. In this text the gospel writer tells us that John was preaching a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." No Markan scholar I have come across denies that John's calling to repentance was a calling to salvation. That the eternal destiny of John's audience is in view is evident by verse 8 where he says, "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Although the identity of the "one more powerful" that comes after John is not revealed, the baptism he is going to

¹¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 111.

¹² Craig Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 78.

perform is described as a baptism “with the Holy Spirit.” Describing the Messiah’s baptism in this fashion is of great importance because John is not merely describing a future Christian water ritual, but the giving of the salvation and restoration the Messiah was going to accomplish. The mention of the Holy Spirit would undoubtedly elicit in the mind of John’s audience the prophetic promise of deliverance Yahweh was going to accomplish when he “pours out” his Spirit on his people (Isa 3:15; 44:3; 63:10-14; Ezek 39:29; Joel 2:28).¹³

Certainly some might argue that though John is calling people to repent, this does not mean that he is challenging them to change their lives. However, to say this completely misses the point of the passage. William Lane, commenting on this verse, notes, “The biblical concept of repentance, however, is deeply rooted in the wilderness tradition. In the earliest stratum of OT prophecy, the summons to ‘turn’ basically connotes a return to the original relationship with the Lord.”¹⁴ James Edwards points out, “Repentance was the message of the Baptizer reduced to a word. It entailed, according to Mark’s brief report in v. 4, a turning away from sin, and also, according to Matt 3:8 and Luke 3:8, a sign or ‘fruit,’ perhaps water baptism, but more likely *moral transformation*.”¹⁵

Another clear example is found in Acts 20:21, where the apostle makes it clear that the message he preached to both Jews and Greeks was that “they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.” It is important to stress that the apostle qualifies repentance as a turning to God. This

¹³ The contrast between water and Holy Spirit is also important because if John were simply contrasting two different modes of the ritual (John’s water baptism and Christian water baptism) he would have not contrasted water versus Holy Spirit. In the gospel of John when the Lord speaks of water and Spirit (3:5) he is clearly differentiating natural birth with the spiritual second birth (v, 7), which is the sovereign work of the Spirit of God who “blows wherever it pleases” (v. 8).

¹⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 49.

¹⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 31; emphasis added.

clearly describes a change in one's course of life. This is not a mere intellectual change in regards to who God is, but a change in sinful practice because of a right understanding of who God is. Certainly, the apostle himself demonstrates this in his address to the people of Lystra. Paul expected that they, as they believed the gospel, would turn from the worthless idols "to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them" (Acts 14:15). Paul expects that anyone who responds to the gospel, must also literally abandon the sinful practice of idolatry, and be devoted solely to the worship of the one and true God. And this is not only true of the sin of idolatry, but of every sinful pattern in our unregenerate lives. In repentance we are called not only to change our mind about God, but to change our ways from everything that displeases him (Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 7:9–10; 12:21; 2 Tim 2:25–26).

These are only a few examples in which the word "repentance" is used in relationship to salvation. There are many other examples in which the Lord and his apostles also challenged their hearers to repent and believe the gospel, and every time they did this, the nuance of repentance included not only a change of mind but also a change of purpose, action, and direction (Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:18).

Therefore, in light of the biblical evidence, though repentance at times means a change of mind, when it comes to the doctrine of conversion it also involves a change of life. As Bruce Demarest notes,

Metanoia, however, is "not just a change of inward disposition but a complete turn-about of one's life, with all that such a re-direction implies of the need for God's help on the one side and of ethical conduct on man's side.... The Baptist's message (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3) suggests that his baptism was linked with impending judgment and the need for forgiveness of sins.... Thus John's baptism was a sign of prior repentance and a transformed life."¹⁶

¹⁶ Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, 252.

Faith

According to Hebrews 11:1, "faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see." In other words, in light of this text a basic definition of faith is the "assurance or confidence in some stated or implied truth,"¹⁷ whether it is a proposition or a person. It is important to note at this point that Hebrews 11:1 does not give us a full definition of what saving faith is because it does not define the object of our salvation. Though Hebrews 11 does not define the object of our salvation, 1 John 5:10 does. From this text, readers learn that the person who believes in the Son of God, has the "witness" in himself and the "witness" is the conviction that if a person has Christ, he has all that he needs for salvation (vv. 11-12).

Saving faith then includes the knowledge of Christ's personhood and saving work, it also includes the embracement of this truth; that is, a person in order to be saved not only needs to acknowledge Christ's deity, humanity and substitutionary work, he needs to assent with it. Putting it a different way, a person needs to embrace the truth of the gospel. As Demarest once again notes, "For Paul, to become a Christian one must assent from the heart to the realities of Jesus' atoning death (1 Cor 15:3; 1 Thess 4:14), resurrection (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 15:4, 17; 1 Thess 4:14), and divine lordship (Rom 10:9)."¹⁸

Knowledge and assent is not everything saving faith entails. A faith that saves must also include "wholehearted *trust* and *commitment* to Christ evidenced by obedience and good works."¹⁹ J. B. Hixson, who rejects this aspect of saving faith, argues that to attach obedience to saving faith is illogical and unsustainable. He says:

Logically a person believes what he believes whether or not he ever acts on that belief. Faith is faith. It is to trust (i.e., believe, have faith) with assurance and certainty that something is true. To suggest that faith is not real unless it produces consistent

¹⁷ J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong* (Maitland, FL: Xulon, 2008), 105.

¹⁸ Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, 260.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

behavior is to make the very existence of faith (i.e., the actuality of faith) indiscernible until time and distance have transpired.²⁰

The problem with Hixson's thesis is that he is seeing the "result" or "fruit" of real faith as only mere human performance. He fails to understand that both faith and its fruits are gifts of God and fundamental parts of the whole gift of salvation. Ephesians 2:8-10 says that believers have been created "for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them." In Romans 1:5 Paul tells readers that he was chosen to be an apostle in order "to bring about the obedience of faith." In this context Paul is clearly talking about his mission as an apostle to bring the gospel to the Gentile community. Paul understands obedience as an important element of faith as it relates to the Gospel. Douglas Moo, in his outstanding commentary on Romans, comments on this verse:

Paul saw his task as calling men and women to submission to the lordship of Christ (cf. vv. 4b and 7b), a submission that began with conversion but which was to continue in a deepening, lifelong commitment. This obedience to Christ as Lord is always closely related to faith, both as an initial decisive step to faith and as a continuing "faith" relationship with Christ.²¹

True faith, and thus real trust that leads to salvation is always accompanied by obedience. If a father tells his child not to put his finger in the socket, it does not matter how much the child believes and trusts in him, he will not "be saved" from getting shocked unless he obeys his father's command. Scripture is clear that a mere intellectual acknowledgment and assenting of Christ's personhood and work is not enough for true saving faith to be present. Obedience is an important element of faith that saves.

This truth is clearly taught in James 2:14-17. In this passage our Lord's brother acknowledges that there is a kind of faith

²⁰ Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 135.

²¹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 52.

that does not save, because it is without works and therefore a dead faith. James starts this text by asking the following question: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can this kind of faith save him?” In other words, what James is saying is that if a person professes that he or she believes in Christ and his word, but their life does not show their obedience to him, what good is this kind of faith? Can this faith save him? The obvious answer to these questions, which is implied, is ‘No good at all’ and in fact, it is so bad, that it cannot save him.

For James both faith and deeds go together, and they are both gifts from God. If a person claims to have faith but there are no fruits, James tells us that faith does not save for “even the demons believe and tremble with fear.”

Hixson rejects this interpretation, as is evident by the following statement: “James is not contrasting faith that leads to heaven with faith that does not lead to heaven in this passage. He is contrasting vibrant healthy faith of believers with useless, ineffective faith.”²² The problem with Hixson’s conclusion is that the reference to salvation in relationship to faith is clear in verse 14. James asks a rhetorical question that requires a negative answer. Obviously, a faith without works does not save. Hixson argues that the fact that James refers to his audience as brothers shows that salvation is not in view; however, he fails to point out that James is using the conjunction *ἐάν* along with the indefinite and impersonal pronoun *τις* to provide a hypothetical situation.²³ Moreover, the fact that salvation is in view in this text is found in the

²² Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 124.

²³ It is also important to consider that the book of James seems to be a collection of sermons that our Lord’s brother preached to his church in Jerusalem. Thus, it should not be a problem that James addresses everyone in his audience as brothers, even if among them there are unbelievers (See, Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 39; Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 32.

reference to judgment just made in the verse before, and the mention of Abraham's justification in verse 21.

Relationship Between Repentance and Faith

So far we have argued that both repentance and faith are important elements of the one event labeled "conversion." It is true that sometimes when the gospel is proclaimed the summons in some passages is to repent (Acts 2:38), while in others it is to believe (Acts 16:31). There is no doubt, nonetheless, and most scholars will agree with this statement, that in light of Jesus's preaching (Mark 1:14-15), both elements are basic components of the one unique event of conversion.²⁴ As Sinclair Ferguson notes, "Here repentance and faith belong together. They denote two aspects in conversion that are equally essential to it. Thus, either term implies the presence of the other because each reality (repentance or faith) is the sine qua non of the other."²⁵ In fact, repentance, when speaking about conversion, cannot exist without faith, nor faith without repentance.

This definition of repentance of course does not mean that every person who believes the gospel will experience, in equal dose, the sense of repentance and trust. Reality and experiences show that every person responds differently to the gospel. Depending on the way the message is presented and the different needs a person might have at that specific moment, some people may experience a stronger sense of guilt and sorrow because of their sin, while others may experience a greater sense of awe and admiration of Christ because of his love and amazing grace. Regardless of the experience a person may have, both elements, repentance and faith, must be present for conversion to take place. As Ferguson notes,

²⁴ I believe that both Ryrie and Hixson would agree with this statement although, as already mentioned their definition of repentance will differ from what I am proposing here.

²⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, "Faith and Repentance," *Table Talk Magazine*, June 1, 2013, accessed December 14, 2013, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/faith-and-repentance/>.

In any particular individual, at the level of consciousness, a sense of either repentance or trust may predominate. What is unified theologically may be diverse psychologically. Thus, an individual deeply convicted of the guilt and bondage of sin may experience turning from it (repentance) as the dominant note in his or her conversion. Others (whose experience of conviction deepens after their conversion) may have a dominant sense of the wonder of Christ's love, with less agony of soul at the psychological level. Here the individual is more conscious of trusting in Christ than of repentance from sin.²⁶

Regardless of the psychological sense the person has at the time of conversion, whether that person perceives a greater degree of guilt and hatred for sin, or a greater degree of joy and admiration for Christ, the theological reality is that, within the one event of conversion, both repentance and faith are present.

Implications for the Ministry

The concern and true zeal that some theologians, such as Hixson and Ryrie, have to protect the gospel from any type of human work that could be attached to it, has led them to suggest that in conversion, both repentance and faith, do not necessarily mean the abandonment of sin, but rather the recognition of the glory of Christ.²⁷ As well intentioned as this proposal may be, its implications could be spiritually disastrous, since it could lead many to a sort of antinomism,²⁸ and even worse, to a false assurance of salvation.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ It is necessary to emphasize that these scholars do not deny the importance of godliness in the believer's life. Certainly they believe and teach that every believer should strive to grow in holiness for the glory of God. Instead, what they suggest is that, when it comes to salvation, the calling to conversion does not require the sinner to abandon sin because they perceive this as a human work.

²⁸ Antinomism comes from the Greek words *ἀντί* (without) and *νόμος* (law), and in its simplest form it teaches that God does not demand believers to obey his moral laws.

To misunderstand the nature of repentance and faith in salvation could have dire consequences on the listener and could also dilute the impact and faithfulness of the gospel message presented by the preacher. As far as the listener is concerned, although it is very important that he recognizes the glory and the beauty of Christ, this recognition is no more than hypocritical if it is not accompanied by a thirst to put sin to death. Loving and appreciating the work and glory of Christ must never be divorced from a constant renunciation of sin. To do so may indicate an existence completely disconnected from the Savior, and thus, a future away from his presence (John 15). Every person who hears the gospel should embrace the glory of Christ and at the same time should put sin to death. Let us take seriously the exhortation of the great Puritan preacher John Owen:

Bring your lust to the gospel, not for relief, but for farther conviction of its guilt; look on Him whom you hast pierced, and be in bitterness. Say to your soul, "What have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the Son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace? Do I thus requite the Lord? ... Entertain your conscience daily with this treaty. See if it can stand before this aggravation of its guilt. If this make it not sink in some measure and melt, I fear your case is dangerous.²⁹

As far as the preacher is concerned, it is very important that he understands that repentance is a fundamental component of God's great gift of salvation. To view repentance as a human work through which a person approaches God confuses the teaching of Scripture because it ignores the fact that both repentance and faith are undeserved gifts from God (Acts 11:18; Rom 2:4; Eph 2: 8; 2 Tim 2:25). Once the preacher understands this truth, he should follow our Lord's example (as well as the apostles') to communicate the gospel, emphasizing both sides of the coin. In other words, the preacher should urge his audience to both repent and believe the gospel. To ignore

either component will constitute a diluted message, or even worse, a false gospel.

Finally, we must understand that Scripture "calls men and women not only to an initial conversion to Christ that enrolls them among the justified, but to a continual conversion that makes them more like Jesus Christ in word and deed."²⁹ This means that throughout the entire Christian life there should be a continual need for repentance and confession (1 John 1:8-9; James 5:16), which should translate in an abandonment of the old man, along with his old and fallen vices (Col 2:11; 3: 5, 8-10). There should also be a continual need to apply the faith that already belongs to believers by daily trusting in the Lord, constantly depending on, and being energized by his power (2 Cor 5: 7).

²⁹ Demarest, *Cross And Salvation*, 271.