

THE IMPORTANCE OF REPENTANCE

What place should repentance have in your presentation of the gospel? Is repentance the same thing as belief? Or is it something distinct from it? Is it important to emphasize repentance, or should we never mention it in this age of grace? What does repentance really mean, anyway? These are some of the questions the soulwinner must face (and answer) regarding the subject of repentance.

There can be little doubt that all men, from Adam on, have had to repent in order to have a right relationship with God. The importance of this is brought home when we realize men of every Biblical age preached it. John the Baptist preached it (Mark 1:15); the Apostle John proclaimed its necessity (Rev. 2:5); Paul preached repentance wherever he went (Acts 17:30; 20:21); and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself strongly emphasized that men who refused to repent would perish (Luke 13:3, 5). So, you see, repentance is necessary for salvation.

THE MISUSE OF THE WORD

The question is, "What does the Bible MEAN by 'repent,' and how should it be presented to the lost?" The important thing is NOT what repentance has COME to mean down through the centuries since Christ's time, but rather-and this is of utmost importance-what the word did mean WHEN IT WAS SPOKEN by Christ, Paul, Peter, and others in Biblical times.

If you look up "repent" or "repentance" in a modern dictionary you will read definitions like the following: "regret; to feel sorry for sin and seek forgiveness; to turn from sin." Based on these definitions, preachers have been going about earnestly trying to get men to quit their sinning, or at least to work up a genuine sorrow for sin. But is this the divinely appointed task of Christians to get men to change their ways?

No! This kind of preaching often leads to a form of self-righteousness and self-reformation-not to salvation. Does a sinner have to turn from or give up his sins to be saved? COULD he do this? Did you? Have you yet given up all sinning? "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8).

It is sadly apparent that our modern-day misuse of the word "repent" has done a great deal of harm and has confused multitudes. Because of the wrong use of the word "repent" men have gotten the idea that a Christian is one who doesn't smoke, drink, curse, go to dances or movies, or do anything that is wrong or immoral.

This negativism has blinded people to the fact that a Christian is "one of Christ's"-one who, through faith, has received Christ as his Saviour. Once a person has Christ and His power in his life, THEN his behavior often changes. But this change is the RESULT of being a child of God; it is not the CAUSE.

Being good is not the way to become a child of God. Remember Ephesians 2: 8, 9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

Because preachers have allowed themselves to propagate this error in the teaching of repentance, our churches are full of "good," self-righteous, moral people who are certain they are "Christians," yet when they are asked if they are going to heaven, the best answer they can give is, "I hope so."

They do not have the assurance that comes from knowing Christ as their Saviour. Instead, they are plagued by the uncertainty that comes from trying to be good enough by their own efforts to gain heaven.

All too often this idea that "I must be good to gain God's favor" comes from Bible-believing men who preach that one must either "turn from sin or burn in hell." How sad and tragic it is that so much damage can be caused by the misuse of one word.

THE CORRECT MEANING OF "REPENT"

The word in the New Testament usually translated “repent” is the Greek word “metanoeo,” and the word translated “repentance” is “metanoia.” Both of these Greek words have the same basic meaning: “to change your mind; reconsider; or, to think differently.”

Granted, if a person changes his mind (repents) toward certain sins in his life, he may become very sorrowful and may even stop those particular outward sins, but the sorrow and the ceasing from certain sins would be the RESULT of repenting, not repentance itself.

When God tells an unsaved man to repent, He means for that man to change his mind about how to reach God and accept GOD'S way of salvation. The person must CHANGE HIS MIND from any idea of religion he may have to save him, and trust Christ's payment for everything he has done wrong.

PASSAGES ON REPENTANCE EXPLAINED

Luke 13:1-5, “There were present at that season some that told Him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent (change your mind) ye shall all likewise perish (i.e., like these Galileans did). Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent (change your mind), ye shall all likewise perish.”

Try to get the picture. Christ in this passage was talking to good people who believed the old tradition that people suffered only because of their sins. So they logically concluded that those in Galilee and at the Tower of Siloam who died such horrible deaths must have been great sinners.

Christ contradicts what they “suppose” (v. 2) and “think” (v. 4) and tells these self-righteous people that they need to change their minds and see themselves as sinners, too. Christ is not saying “Turn from your sin,” but that they should recognize that they are sinners, or they will perish in their own self-righteousness.

Even if one doesn't know Greek, it is obvious from the passage itself that the meaning of “repent” here cannot be “sorrow for,” or “turning from, sin.” These people obviously needed, above all else, to think differently-in this case, to think differently about themselves, about others, and about God.

Acts 17:30, “And the times of this ignorance God winked at (or, overlooked); but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.”

To understand what God means here by “repent” only requires one to read the last part of verse 29 of the same chapter, “we ought not TO THINK that the Godhead is like unto . . . silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.” Instead, what ought these philosophers of Mars' Hill to think? They needed to CHANGE THEIR MINDS and see that God is quite different from stone!. He is judge (v. 31), and He is alive (w. 31, 32). Again, from the context, the true meaning of “repent” is clear.

Acts 20:20, 21, “And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Notice that the Bible states here that we are to proclaim repentance TOWARD GOD. There is nothing here about turning from sin. Paul is giving his last words to these beloved Ephesian elders whom he had led to Christ. They had formerly been heathen idol worshipers (Acts 19) and very immoral. However, Paul's preaching to them was that they needed to change their thinking about God.

Think what an impact on these sinful heathen the truth of Romans 5:8 would have had: “But God commendeth (displayed) His love toward us, in that, WHILE WE WERE YET SINNERS, Christ died for us.”

Remember, the word “gospel” means “good news.” Do you think it would have been good news to them if Paul had said, “While we were trying to give up our sins, God tried to love us a little bit,” or, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for our past sins, and now if we stop all our present sins and never commit any sins in the future, God will love us”?

No! These sinners needed to know that the God of the universe loved them even as they were. They needed the assurance that God was not requiring of them the impossible -that they stop sinning-but simply that they would trust Christ and His payment for their sins and thus receive salvation.

Later Scripture makes it clear that God certainly did work in their lives to bring about changes, but this took place only AFTER they were already saved (Eph. 2:10).

Acts 2:38, “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the GIFT of the Holy Ghost.”

Chapter Nine covers the part of this verse dealing with baptism. Here we will concentrate on the part of the verse having to do with repentance. One of the first rules to follow in understanding any Bible verse is to consider the context. In the second chapter of Acts we discover that these Jewish unbelievers thought the disciples were drunk (vv. 13, 15) and that Jesus was only a man whom they crucified (vv. 23, 36). Peter lets them know that the disciples were not drunk but in God's will (vv. 15-17), that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) sent by God, and that even though men crucified Him, God raised Him from the dead (vv. 24, 32, 36).

These Jewish men, having been set straight on these matters, were “pricked in their heart (Greek, 'thoughts') and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (v. 37)

Peter's immediate answer was, “Repent . . . every one of you ... for the remission of sins....” In the frenzy of the day that Jesus stood before Pilate the mob had cried, “Crucify Him, crucify Him.” Then they saw Him only as a man and a troublemaker. Now Peter tells them they must repent (think differently) toward this One and realize that He is “both Lord and Christ” (v. 36), and that salvation comes only through Him (vv. 21, 38, 41). This, again, is Biblical repentance.

USING “REPENTANCE” IN WITNESSING

If you are going to use the word “repent” or “repentance” in your witnessing, you should always explain what it really means. You can perhaps teach the meaning of repentance through your personal testimony, explaining that you used to think God hated sin so much that He hated you as well, and not until you heard the gospel did you understand that God loves you and wants you to go to heaven. (If this IS part of your testimony.) Then, after understanding the gospel, you began to think differently about God. This way you could have the person understand the plan of salvation . . . he could repent . . . and you would never have to worry about whether or not you confused him by the word “repent.”

The important thing in witnessing is to lead the lost person from wherever he is spiritually to having faith in Christ as his Saviour. You should try to do this as smoothly and naturally as possible. Using first or third person illustrations in your conversation is an excellent way of achieving the desired results, and particularly in giving a proper, Scriptural explanation of repentance.

That great giant of the faith Dr. William L. Pettingill put it well in his book, Bible Questions Answered. Under Repentance and Salvation, page 215, he answers the following question: “What place has repentance in salvation? Should we tell people to repent of their sins to be saved?”

“The Gospel of John is the Holy Spirit's Gospel tract, written that men might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing they might have life through His Name (20: 31) . And it does not mention the word 'repentance.' But that is only because repentance is a necessary part of saving faith. Strictly speaking, the word repentance means a 'change of mind.' It is by no means the same thing as sorrow (II Cor. 7:10). Since it is not possible for an unbeliever to become a believer without changing his mind, it is therefore unnecessary to say anything about it. The only thing for a man to do in order to be

saved is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ: and to believe on Him is the same thing as receiving Him (John 1:11-13).”

Any teaching that demands a change of conduct toward either God or man for salvation is to add works or human effort to faith, and this contradicts all Scripture and is an accursed message (Gal. 1:8, 9; Deut. 27:18). Study the book of Galatians.

Remember, the closer a counterfeit comes to the truth, the more people it will fool. Don't be fooled. Yes, a Christian should make every effort to discipline his life, to lay aside every weight and the sins which so easily beset him, but this has to do with SERVICE, which can come only AFTER salvation. Salvation is always a gift; it is nothing we do ourselves.

Let's make salvation as clear as we possibly can. If something might possibly confuse someone, let's find some other way of expressing the truth so that it will be crystal clear instead of confusing.

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8).

“But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the SIMPLICITY that is in Christ” (II Cor. 11:3).