

A Slippery Slope:

Repentance and Everlasting Life

By Bob Wilkin

INTRODUCTION

For years the view of repentance as advocated by Chafer, Ryrie, and many others dominated Free Grace understanding. Repentance was seen as a synonym for faith. You need to change your mind about the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, you need to believe in Him, in order to be born again.

In his book *Absolutely Free!*, Zane Hodges suggested a completely different understanding of repentance and everlasting life. He showed that repentance is turning from sins and that it is not a condition of everlasting life. Instead repentance is a condition for what he called *harmony with God*.

A third view of repentance and everlasting life has emerged in Free Grace circles over the past twenty years. I've seen it in several Free Grace books and I've heard it from a number of Free Grace leaders.

They do not give their view a name. I'll call it *the desire view*. In the desire view, in order to be born again one must not only believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, but one must also desire to repent of his sins and to live a new life. Repentance involves remorse over one's sins, a desire to turn from them, and to follow Christ.

One Free Grace author writes concerning the new birth and repentance, "there must be an acknowledgement of sin and a desire to be different." Another Free Grace writer similarly says, "repentance [is] an inner *change of heart*," "a *volitional* response," and "a change of mind, *attitude, and disposition* which implies and normally leads to an outward change in life and conduct" (emphasis added).

This new Free Grace view of repentance means that one must admit his sin, desire to turn from it, and follow Christ in a new way of life in order to be born again. This must be combined with faith in Christ, of course. But faith in Christ is viewed as insufficient apart from this desire to turn and follow.

In this article I'd like to explain why I think that view of repentance is wrong and why I believe it is inconsistent with the free gift of everlasting life.

Let's start with whether repentance is or is not a condition of everlasting life.

THE BIBLE SAYS THAT REPENTANCE IS NOT A CONDITION OF EVERLASTING LIFE

I vividly remember a GES board meeting in 1989. Zane Hodges was just about to release his fourth book, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*. He had a chapter on repentance that stirred up nearly everyone on the board. In that chapter he said that repentance is not a condition for everlasting life.

I recall one board member being in such strong disagreement that he indicated he would pull the appendix he had written for the book if that chapter on repentance stayed in. (The chapter stayed and he did pull the appendix. The appendix was later published by a

theological journal.) The majority of the board agreed that the chapter had to go. I did not feel that way, but I also was not yet convinced that Zane was right. At that time I still held the change of mind view.

It took nearly seven years, but I was won over to the idea that repentance is not a condition of everlasting life. I changed my mind about the change of mind view. I repented of my view on repentance. Maybe others in the Free Grace community need to repent of their view of repentance too.

The words *repent* and *repentance* do not occur even once in John's Gospel, the only evangelistic book in the Bible (John 20:30-31). Nor do they appear even once in Galatians, Paul's defense of his gospel of grace (Gal 1:6-9).

Even in books that mention repentance we never see an indication that one must repent to have everlasting life. Repentance is always linked with escaping or lessening temporal judgment, not with eternal destiny (e.g., Matt 12:41; Luke 13:3, 5; 15:11-32; 2 Pet 3:9; Rev 9:20-21; 16:9, 11).

The reason we speak of justification by faith *alone* and of regeneration by faith *alone* is because the sole condition of the new birth and justification is faith in Christ.

Repentance is not a condition of the new birth. In the NT, as we will discuss more fully after we discuss what repentance is, we see over and over again that the sole condition of regeneration is faith in Christ (cf. John 1:12; 3:16-18, 36; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:25-27; 20:30-31; Gal 2:15-16; 3:6-14; Eph 2:8-9; 1 Tim 1:16; Titus 3:5; 1 John 5:11-13).

THE BIBLE SAYS THAT REPENTANCE IS TURNING FROM SINS (NOT SIMPLY SORROW FOR SIN OR A DESIRE TO TURN FROM IT)

A careful search of the NT shows that repentance is more than an admission of guilt and a desire to turn from one's sins. What we find is that repentance is actually turning from sins.

Consider Matt 12:41. There the Lord says, "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here." We read of that repentance in Jonah 3:10: "Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it." They "turned from their evil way." That was and is repentance.

We see the same thing in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. The younger son asked for and received his inheritance while his father is still alive. He then left fellowship with his father and went to "the far country" and there he wasted his inheritance on "prodigal living." Later he "came to his senses," turned from his evil ways in the far country, and returned to his father. Repentance is turning from one's sins and coming back to fellowship with God.

The same is true in Rev 9:20-21: "But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts." See also Rev 16:9, 11.

Every single reference to repentance of men in the Bible refers to turning from one's sins. A *desire* to turn from one's sins is not yet repentance. One must follow up that desire by actually turning from one's sins.

In fact, it is possible not to desire to turn from one's sins, yet to turn from one's sins anyway. That seems to be the case with the Ninevites. They believed that God would destroy them in 40 days (Jonah 3:5). Thus they put on sackcloth and ashes and turned from their evil ways. They turned because of the promised destruction, not because they had some desire to get right with God.

If the Ninevites had a desire to turn from their wicked ways, but did not turn, then they would have been wiped out a little over a month later. Desire is not enough. Actual turning from sins is needed in order to repent.

THE BIBLE SAYS THAT THE SOLE CONDITION OF EVERLASTING LIFE IS FAITH IN CHRIST

Of course, the key is what the Bible says one must do to be born again. It says that the one and only condition of the new birth and of justification is faith in Christ. And it does not say that repentance is a necessary precursor to faith.

Ninety-nine times in John's Gospel the word *believe* (*pisteuō*) occurs. Tenney rightly called John's Gospel *the Gospel of Believe*. Repeatedly the Lord is quoted as saying that the one who believes in Him has everlasting life (e.g., John 3:16-18; 4:10-14; 5:24; 6:35, 37,

39-40, 47; 11:25-27). Never once does He say (in John or in any of the Gospels) that the one who repents has everlasting life or that the one who believes and repents has everlasting life.

In Galatians 3:6-14, Paul refers to faith and believing as the sole condition of justification no less than eight times (vv 6, 7, 8, 9 twice, 11, 12, 14).

How could what the Lord and His apostles said be accurate if the true condition of regeneration and justification is *repenting and believing*?

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

Understanding repentance makes a huge difference in evangelism and in assurance of everlasting life.

Let's say you evangelize someone and you find out that he is living in sin with someone who is not his spouse. Would you not feel that it was part of your duty as an evangelist to find out if he had remorse over his sin and if he had a desire to turn from it? You would if you believed that repentance is a condition of everlasting life.

In fact, if repentance was a condition, wouldn't you need to talk with him about more than his love life? Is he cheating on his taxes? Is he cheating in college? Does he lie to get ahead? Is he a thief? If he had to repent in order to have everlasting life, would not a person need to be willing to turn from *all* of his sins and not merely *some* of them?

Yet when the Lord spoke with such a woman in John 4, He did not ask her if she was sorry for her sin. Nor did He try to ascertain if she was willing to turn from it. Nor does John even tell us whether she later turned from it or not. The only issue the Lord raised is that she had to know the gift (everlasting life that cannot be lost) and the giver (the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah). Once she believed that Jesus gives everlasting life as a free gift to all who simply believe in Him (i.e., once she drank the living water), she was born again. There was no call to repent. There was no mention of repentance.

If you believe that a person must desire to turn from his sins and you find someone who professes to be sure he has everlasting life by faith in Christ apart from works, yet who also is living in unrepentant sin and is seemingly content living that way, what would you think about his eternal destiny? Would you not wonder? Would you not think, "Well, he professes to be sure he has everlasting life simply by faith in Christ. Yet he gives no indication of sorrow for his sin or a desire to repent. I wonder if he is a true believer. Maybe he is a false professor."

If repentance is necessary to be born again and you find an unrepentant person, you would seemingly be forced to entertain the possibility that the person is not a true believer.

If faith in Christ is not enough, then it's is not enough. Believing that Jesus died on the cross to take away the sins of the world is the ultimate proof that Jesus indeed guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him. Yet if believing the promise of life must be joined by a desire to reform one's life, the work of the evangelist is more than leading someone to faith in Christ. He must also guide him to repent of his sins.

And what about your own assurance of your own eternal destiny? Might you not wonder if you had sufficient sorrow for sins and enough desire to turn from them? How would you know that you actually repented? If you are like me, this would create doubts. When I came to faith in the fall of 1972 all I really wanted was everlasting life. I wanted to escape hell. I wasn't really concerned about turning from my sins or even following Christ. My concern was my eternal destiny. Does that mean I wasn't really born again in 1972?

Of course, our assurance is not based on what we did in the past. It is based on what we believe right now. Well, it is, unless assurance is tied to both faith and repentance. If repentance is a co-condition of everlasting life, then my assurance is based both on my current beliefs and my current desires. *Do I desire to follow Christ fully today* becomes an assurance question.

For perfectionists like me, this likely would lead to introspection and loss of assurance. I'd always wonder if I ever was truly sorry enough for my sins and ever really fully wanted to surrender to Christ.

That is why I think that the desire view of repentance is inconsistent. It is subjective, not objective. But the promise of everlasting life to the believer is objective. This view on repentance does not fit the Free Grace position.

It concerns me how those with this view evangelize. Possibly they do not bring up repentance at all. But in light of what they believe a person must do to be born again, they probably feel it is necessary to call people to repent of their sins and to desire to submit to the Lordship of Christ. If repentance is a desire to turn from one's sins and to follow Christ and if repentance is necessary to be born again, then it would seem that people would be required to preach repentance whenever they evangelize.

Of course, if repentance is necessary to be born again, then those of us who fail to preach repentance are sharing a message that can only result in regeneration for those who happen to be in a state of repentance toward God when we evangelize them. If we find people who are living in some willful sin and who do not have a desire to change and follow Christ, then our message would be ineffective because we left out a key requirement, a willingness to turn from one's sins and to follow Christ.

If leaders in the Free Grace movement are saying that one must be willing to turn from his sins to be born again, then it stands to reason that this view will begin to filter down the ranks to non-leaders as well.

CONCLUSION

During my years on the staff with Campus Crusade for Christ (1974-78) I held a view that is similar to the desire view. I did not tell people they needed to be willing to change to be born again. But *if asked by the person to whom I was witnessing*, I would say that he had to be willing to change *if God gave him new desires*. I would say that the new birth might have the impact that he would no longer want to get drunk, for example. But he need have no desire to change now. He simply should recognize that his desires might change.

I now believe even that weak view of repentance was seriously flawed. I was allowing the camel's nose in the tent. The desire view lets the camel in even more.

The view that a willingness to turn from one's sins and to follow Christ is required to be born again might seem like a reasonable view. But it is not what the Scriptures teach. Thus we need to abandon that view. Otherwise we risk getting on a slippery slope away from the grace position entirely.

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