

Chapter 7

Repentance

Introduction

Go to a church at random on Sunday morning and ask ten people what a person must do to be born again. Eight of them will say that you must repent of your sins. They may attach repentance to faith in Jesus, or to inviting Him into your life, or to receiving Him as your Lord and Savior, or to committing your life to Him. But well over half of all churchgoers will say that you must repent of your sins to be saved.

Ask those same people what it means to repent of your sins and most will say that it means that you must turn from your sins. Jesus saves us *from our sins*, they will say, not *in our sins*.

Some of these people, those from a Reformed background, will likely point out that repentance is not a human work. They will say it is a work of God in our lives. But most of these people haven't given much thought to whether turning from sins is a work or not. They just know that you must repent in order to be born again.

My personal experience was that I was taught and believed that one must repent of all his sins and follow Christ until the time came when God gave him his chance to give his life to Christ and be born again. However, that never gave me assurance of my eternal destiny. Was I *sincere enough*? Did I turn from *all* my sins? Was I following Christ *faithfully enough*? Was that day when I felt something *really* my chance? Did I *really* give my life to Christ?

Then in my senior year in college I was challenged. A friend, John Carlson, asked me if I was sure my view of the gospel was correct. He talked me into going to a Campus Crusade meeting. That led me to meeting with staff member Warren Wilke. He kept hammering away at Eph 2:8-9, which, of course, does not mention repentance. Warren stressed that if we simply believe in Jesus, then by God's grace we are saved once and forever and that this salvation was not of works lest anyone should boast.

Thus when I came to faith, I thought that the sole condition of eternal salvation was faith in Christ, not faith and repentance. However, I soon

found that was not the normal position in Campus Crusade (or later at Dallas Theological Seminary, either).

What Is Repentance?

For the person who believes in justification by faith alone, this question is, in a sense, *the* question. If repentance in the New Testament, for example, is turning from sins, then it cannot be a condition for justification before God, since the sole condition of that justification is faith in Christ and turning from sins is not the same as believing in Jesus. (An atheist can turn from his sins. So can a person from any religion or philosophy.)

When I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the subject of repentance, I had to deal with this question. I came at it backwards, however. Instead of looking to see what the words *metanoēō* and *metanoia* mean in the New Testament, I assumed that they meant *a change of mind* and then I set about to prove it.

I held to what is called the change-of-mind view because it was the only view that I was aware of, or that I could conceive of, that would both affirm justification by faith alone and also handle texts that seemed to clearly show that repentance is a condition of eternal life. That I did not think carefully enough about other options led me to miss the clear teaching of Scripture.

Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament repentance is turning from sins. It is never a change of mind about oneself (recognizing one is a sinner) or a change of mind about Christ (recognizing He alone is the Savior).

I cannot in a short book go through every passage proving my point. However, below I cover the eleven passages which are most often cited as teaching that repentance is a condition of everlasting life. None of them actually do teach that repentance is a condition of spending eternity with the Lord.

However, in this portion of this chapter my goal is simply to show what Biblical repentance is. For that let's turn to Jesus' teaching about the repentance of the Ninevites under the preaching of Jonah. Jesus used Old Testament repentance to teach what New Testament repentance is.

Jesus said, "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" (Matt 12:41, emphasis added). The Lord is referring to Jonah 3:5. There we read, "So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth,

from the greatest to the least of them.” Verse 10 concludes the chapter saying, “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.”

Clearly the Ninevites repented when *they turned from their evil way*. Their repentance was not a change of mind about themselves and God. They believed God when through Jonah He said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4).

What then was the repentance that Jesus was rebuking that generation of Jews for not doing? They, too, were not turning from their sins.

That same understanding fits every single New Testament use. During the Tribulation the unbelieving world “[will] not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols... And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts” (Rev 9:20-21; see also Rev 16:9, 11).

Repentance is turning from one’s sins in order to escape temporal judgment. The issue in repentance is not who is born again and who is not. The issue is who is walking in open rebellion against God and who is not. The consequence of turning from one’s sins is not the gaining of eternal life, but the improvement of and extension of one’s life here on earth, whether for the believer or unbeliever.

Repentance and Regeneration in the Old Testament

The Old Testament never links repentance and salvation from eternal condemnation. Of course, the Old Testament rarely if ever even uses the term *salvation* to refer to the new birth, so the fact that the Old Testament doesn’t link repentance and regeneration is no surprise.

Ezekiel 18 is a key chapter devoted to the Old Testament concept of repentance. There the prophet, speaking for God, says that “if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die” (Ezek 18:21). However, if the wicked man does not turn from his wicked ways, then he will die. Physical life and physical death are in view. Ezekiel 18 ends with these powerful words that could be said at any twelve-step meeting: “For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord GOD. ‘Therefore turn and live!’” (Ezek 18:32).

In the Old Testament repentance is the medicine the nation of Israel needed in order to escape ongoing pain and suffering due to her

sins. The Pentateuch, as well as Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, and 1-2 Chronicles, teaches this over and over again.

Since I've written in more detail elsewhere on repentance in the Old Testament, I urge the interested reader to check out my online journal articles on the subject.¹ We now turn to see what the New Testament says about the linkage between repentance and regeneration.

Repentance and Regeneration in the New Testament

The New Testament never conditions regeneration upon repentance. I realize that statement is in direct opposition to what most church people believe. However, we should not base our view of what God says on what the majority says. We should base it on our own personal study of the Word of God. We are each accountable to God for our own understanding of His Word. We are not allowed to pass that responsibility on to some church or denomination or pastor or priest. God holds each of us accountable for our own study of the Bible.

How do I know that the New Testament never indicates that repentance is a condition of regeneration? There are two ways I know this with certainty.

First, there are many crystal clear passages in the Gospel of John in which the Lord Jesus Christ, the authority on regeneration, says that the sole condition of the new birth/everlasting life is believing in Him (e.g., John 3:14-18; 4:1-14; 5:24; 6:35-40, 47; 11:25-27; 20:30-31). For example, Jesus said, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47).

You may think, yes, but doesn't the Lord somewhere in John say that unless you repent you will perish? Actually, no. Those are words of Jesus found in Luke 13:3, 5. That is explained below (and in Chapter 4). But in John's Gospel, the words *repent* (*metanoēō*) and *repentance* (*metanoia*) do not occur even once. That is quite telling.

Here is a syllogism that makes the point that repentance is not a condition of regeneration:

Major premise: The Gospel of John tells us what we must do
to be born again (John 20:30-31).

¹ Go to www.faithalone.org and click on Journals & Newsletters. Then go down and select *Our Semi-annual Journal*. Now go down to the search box and type in *repentance*. You will find one article by me from 1998 and six articles from 1988 through 1991. The one on repentance in the Old Testament is from Spring 1989 and was part two in a six-part series.

Minor premise: The Gospel of John never once mentions repentance.

Conclusion: The Gospel of John teaches that repentance is not a condition of the new birth.

Some might say that is an argument from silence. I agree with Zane Hodges who famously said that this is an argument *about silence*.²

Imagine a book about the leading generals of the Allied forces in WWII. Let's say it never mentioned General George Patton. If so, it would be clear that the author did not consider Patton to have been one of the leading generals in the Second World War. No other conclusion would be possible. That would be a legitimate argument about silence.

Similarly, the fact that John knew about repentance (witness his twelve uses of the term in the Book of Revelation) and likely was a disciple of John the Baptist—who preached repentance—before he became a disciple of Jesus (cf. John 1:35-42), yet didn't even mention repentance in his evangelistic book, is proof he did not consider it to be a condition of everlasting life.

Second, there is not a single verse anywhere in the New Testament that says that one who repents has everlasting life or even that one must repent in order to have life everlasting. Not one.

From 1983 to 1985 I wrote my doctoral dissertation on this very subject. The title of my dissertation is "Repentance as a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament." In my dissertation I argued—wrongly, I now realize—that there are eleven passages that indicate that repentance is a condition of eternal life. I later came to see that none of those actually say that repentance is a condition of the new birth.

Let's examine those eleven passages now.

Eleven New Testament Passages That Only Seem to Teach That Repentance Is a Condition for the New Birth

Matthew 3:2. John the Baptist was famous for proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" I once read that as though he were saying, *repent so that you can be born again.*

That is obviously not what he said or meant. The fact that the King of the coming kingdom was on the scene meant that the nation should repent in order for Him to establish His earthly reign. The issue here

²See Zane C. Hodges, "Arguments from Silence, And All of That: Repentance Reconsidered," *Grace in Focus* (May-June 1998): 1, 4.

is not individual regeneration. The issue is national deliverance from Gentile bondage. In order for the kingdom to come to that generation of Jews, the nation had to repent at the preaching of John and the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist did not say that the kingdom would have come if the nation had merely repented. He said that the nation should repent since the kingdom of God was at hand. In reality John also called for faith in the Messiah as a second condition for the kingdom to come for that generation (cf. John 1:7; Acts 19:4). In order for the Lord Jesus to give the kingdom to that first century generation of Jews, the nation had to both repent of her sins and believe in Him. In fact, those two conditions must still be met. During the Tribulation, they will be. At the end of the Tribulation every surviving Jew on earth will have repented and believed in the Lord Jesus (cf. Rom 11:26).

Matthew 4:17. Jesus began His ministry with exactly the same message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He too called for national repentance, and, of course, faith, in order for the kingdom to come (e.g., Matt 23:37).

Mark 1:14-15. Mark says that “Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”

At first blush it might appear that the Lord is saying that to be born again one must both repent and believe in Him. However, a careful examination shows that is not at all what He means.

First, notice that He was preaching “the gospel of the kingdom of God.” *The gospel of the kingdom* occurs only in the Synoptic Gospels and always refers to the good news that the kingdom has drawn near. That is why it is called “the gospel [or good news] of the kingdom of God.”

Second, the Lord was not speaking about the new birth here. This text is nothing like John 3:16, for example. In light of the good news of the kingdom being offered to that generation, they were being called to repentance and faith *so that the kingdom might come*, not so that individual Jews might be born again. Jesus was offering that generation the kingdom.

Third, Jesus does not say, “repent, and believe *in Me*.” Instead, He says, “repent, and believe *in the gospel*.” While many automatically assume that *gospel* means the saving message, that is not the case here or in any New Testament uses of the expression *the gospel of the kingdom*. Here the words *the gospel* in verse 15 refer to “the gospel of the kingdom” in verse 14. (See Chapter 9 for more details about the expression *the gospel*.)

Thus Jesus is calling for national repentance and national faith that the kingdom is at hand (which would, of course, include the fact that Jesus is the King/Messiah).

Of course, if an individual Jew did believe “the gospel of the kingdom,” then he should believe as well that Jesus is the Messiah who guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him (e.g., John 11:25-27). Of course a person might believe the gospel of the kingdom and not yet have understood the Old Testament teaching on justification by faith alone (e.g., Gen 15:6) or have heard the Lord Jesus say that all who believe in Him have everlasting life. However, once a person who believed that Jesus was the King of Israel, the Messiah, heard Him say that all who believe in Him have everlasting life (e.g., John 5:24), he certainly should believe Him, even if he had up to that point believed in the works salvation taught by the rabbis of the day.

It should have been obvious to me when I was working on my dissertation that the message, “Repent, and believe in the gospel,” is not the message of life. That I tried to make it into that (I argued Jesus meant, “Change your mind; that is, believe the gospel”) shows that I was not allowing the Scriptures to speak, but was instead imposing my Free Grace theology on the text. While Free Grace theology is true, not every text is evangelistic. Not every text explains what one must do to be born again.

Luke 13:3-5. What did Jesus mean when He said, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish”? This text is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4. As a recap, the context is clear that physical death is in view, both with the people “whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1) and with the eighteen people “on whom the tower in Siloam fell” (Luke 13:4). They died *physically*. Whether they were born again is not discussed. Some might have been. All might have been. None might have been. That isn’t the point. The point is that they all died physically.

Jesus was saying that unless that generation of Jews repented, they would all likewise perish, that is, die, at the hands of Rome. Of course, that is what happened in the Jewish War of AD 66-70 in which Jerusalem was destroyed and over a million Jews were killed.

Remember Nineveh? Though God didn’t tell Jonah to preach repentance, the people did repent and were spared. God could have said, “Repent or you will all perish.” They did repent, so they did not perish.

The Jews of the first century did not repent; hence, they perished in the Jewish War.

Luke 16:19-31. The Lord told a story about a rich man and a poor man who died. The rich man went to torment in Hades, whereas the poor man went to the good part of Hades where Abraham was.

The Lord reports a dialogue between the rich man and Abraham. In the course of the discussion the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to visit his brothers. Abraham says, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” Then the rich man responds, “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”

The rich man did not say, “If one goes to them from the dead, *they will believe.*” He spoke of repentance. So what does that tell us?

Here I was led astray by the comments of an unregenerate man who is in Hades. That the man was an unbeliever should have given me pause before I interpreted him to be proclaiming the Free Grace message.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is probably not a parable. There is not a single parable in which the Lord gives an actual name of a person. Here we have the actual name of one of the characters, Lazarus.

The rich man looks across a great gulf and sees Lazarus right next to Abraham. What ensues is a fascinating conversation between the rich man and Abraham.

What is clear is that Abraham grasps the Free Grace message. It is not clear that the rich man does.

The rich man wants Abraham to send someone back from the dead so that his brothers might repent. The rich man seems to think that the way to avoid his tormented fate is to repent. Yet Abraham keeps steering the rich man back to the truth that the issue is belief in Jesus, or persuasion about Him, not repentance: “They have Moses and the prophets; *let them hear them...*If they do not *hear Moses and the prophets*, neither will they *be persuaded* though one rise from the dead” (vv 29, 31, emphasis added). While Abraham does not explicitly say the name of Jesus, it is clear that Abraham means that the issue is what Moses and the prophets wrote about the Messiah, the Lord Jesus (cf. John 1:45).

The rich man says, “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (v 30). His statement does not follow from what Abraham had said.

It is possible that the rich man believes that if his brothers repented, then they would also come to faith in Jesus. But if so, why didn’t he say that? It is more likely that the rich man still doesn’t understand the saving message. Abraham is moving him to grasp the real reason why he is in torment.

Of course, even if the rich man got it, he would remain in torment. As the Lord Jesus taught, “*whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die*” (John 11:26, emphasis added). Once a person dies, he is unable to escape his fate even if he eventually comes to believe the message of life (cf. Heb 9:27).

The Lord Jesus was not teaching in Luke 16:30 that repentance is a condition of eternal life.

Luke 24:47. This is Luke’s version of the Great Commission. The Lord says, “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*” (Luke 24:47, emphasis added). As should be obvious to anyone reading the Great Commission in Matthew (Matt 28:18-20), the Great Commission was primarily a charge to make disciples, not to evangelize.

If the Lucan account of the Great Commission is viewed narrowly as evangelistic, then one will likely conclude that repentance is a condition for everlasting life. However, that is not what the Lord says, nor is it what He means.

What the repentant person gets, according to the Lord in Luke 24:47, is not everlasting life, but “remission of sins.” While many people equate these two, they are not at all the same. For example, as 1 John 1:9 shows, regenerate people need ongoing forgiveness.

If we compare this passage with Acts 2:38, discussed next, then there is reason to believe that the Lord wanted the disciples, “beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47), to call Jews and Gentiles to repent that they might have fellowship forgiveness.

This is part of a discipleship message, not an evangelistic one. This verse in no way contradicts John 3:16. They are not talking about the same subjects.

Acts 2:38. “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” In Peter’s great sermon on the Day of Pentecost, he preached Jesus. He preached that the Lord Jesus is Israel’s long-awaited Messiah. But he responded to the question, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37) with a call to repent and be baptized. Why did Peter say that? Why didn’t he call his audience to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 16:31)?

After giving the compelling evidence of Jesus’ bodily resurrection, of which Peter and his brethren were eyewitnesses (Acts 2:32), Peter then

said, "Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

At this point Luke says, "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" That is far from a hostile response. That is not an unbelieving response. They were grieved at what they had done. The reason for their grief is obvious: they realized they indeed had a part in killing *the Messiah*. They had believed what Peter said. That is clear.

While Luke's report of Peter's sermon does not mention everlasting life, it is certainly possible that in what surely was a lengthy sermon Peter mentioned the promise of life. In any case, Peter's audience would have been very familiar with Jesus' claim not only to be the Messiah, but also to give eternal life to all who believe in Him (cf. John 20:31). Thus once they believed what Peter said, they also believed the promise of life and they knew they had eternal life. What they did not know was how they could escape the guilt of having killed the Messiah.

Note they do not ask what the Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do *to be saved*?" (emphasis added). Their concern is a fellowship concern, not an eternal life concern. They ask, "What shall we do?" (v 27). The implied conclusion to their question is, "What shall we do *to escape the guilt of having killed the Messiah*?"

The answer is that they should do two things, repent and be baptized. As in Luke 24:47, repentance is linked with the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is linked with the reception of the Holy Spirit.

Wait a minute, some will say. If they had not yet received the Spirit, then they were not yet regenerate.

A person might think that, but he would be wrong as the Book of Acts makes clear. In Acts 8, for example, Philip leads a group of Samaritans to faith in Christ. They are born again and baptized. Only later did Peter and John come and lay hands on them and they at that point received the Holy Spirit. In the early Church the reception of the Spirit often followed the new birth.

The Apostle Paul himself is another example in the Book of Acts. He was born again on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4-9; Gal 1:11-12). Three days after his new birth he received the Spirit when Ananias laid hands on him (Acts 9:17). (He also was required to submit to baptism before he was forgiven, as Acts 22:16 shows.)

Even Jesus' own disciples did not receive the Spirit until nearly four years after they were born again. They came to faith at the start of Jesus' three and a half year ministry (cf. John 2:11). Yet they did not

receive the Spirit until Pentecost after Jesus rose from the dead (Acts 1:8; 2:1-21).

Acts 2:38 is not teaching that repentance and baptism are conditions of *everlasting life*. It is teaching that for the new Jewish believers who had personally participated in the death of Jesus, they must repent and be baptized to have fellowship forgiveness and to receive the indwelling Holy Spirit.³

Acts 11:18. After hearing Peter's report about Cornelius and his household coming to faith, Jewish believers with him said, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." What is *repentance to life*?

In my dissertation I assumed the expression referred to repentance to *everlasting life* because Peter was clearly saying that these Gentiles were born again and had received the Spirit and hence he was in no position to refuse to baptize them. However, while that is what Peter was saying, that doesn't mean that that is what his Jewish companions were saying. These Jewish believers might have been saying that God has granted to Gentiles that they might turn from their sins and have *fullness of life*, including equal footing in the church, that is, life every bit as full as Jewish believers.

Zane Hodges argues for that second possibility:

It was thus evident that the Gentiles had entered into the same "life experience" that believing Jews enjoyed, that is, they were fully blessed by the God with whom they were now obviously in harmony. We might say, "They entered into the Christian life."⁴

Hodges viewed the statement of Peter's friends as meaning that God had granted Gentile believers every bit the same life as Jewish believers. They would not be second-class members of the Church. They too would have the Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.

A third possibility is that these men were saying that turning from sins *leads to* everlasting life. If they meant this they would not be

³For more detailed explanation of this passage, see Lanny Thomas Tanton, "The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study of Acts 2:38," and "The Gospel and Water Baptism: A Study of Acts 22:16" in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 1990 and Spring 1991): 27-52 and 23-40, respectively. These articles are available online at <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/index.html>.

⁴Zane C. Hodges, *Harmony with God: A Fresh Look at Repentance* (Redencion Viva: Dallas, TX, 2001), 118. In an earlier 1998 newsletter article, cited above (fn 2), Hodges said, "No text in the NT (not even Acts 11:18) makes any *direct connection* between repentance and *eternal life*. No text does that. Not one" (emphasis his).

saying that it is a condition of eternal life. They would simply mean that repentant Gentiles are people to whom God would bring the message of eternal life so that they could simply believe in Jesus and be born again. In favor of this view is that Cornelius is evidently a man who has repented at some point in the past. His alms and prayers ascended to God (Acts 10:4, 31). Acts 10:35 may support this interpretation as well. Against this view, however, is the fact that repentance is not mentioned at all in Acts 10:1–11:17. While it is apparent that repentance occurred at some point in the past, it is not mentioned even once.

If this third view is correct, it would mean that repentance makes faith more likely, not that repentance is a condition of everlasting life or that all who repent come to faith.

Of course, as Hodges points out, if the first view accurately reflects what these men meant, then these Jewish believers were in major error.⁵ Even the Old Testament is clear that Gentiles could know God and be guaranteed a place in the coming kingdom, as Paul shows by means of Old Testament quotations in Rom 15:8-13. And the Lord was clear that this message is for all, even to the ends of the earth (Matt 28:18-20). This interpretation is highly unlikely since 1) Peter does not correct them, 2) Luke does not correct them with some sort of editorial comment, and 3) there is no indication in the text that these Jewish brethren are in some way defective in their understanding of the saving message.

Zane Hodges argued for the second option, the equal life view. I believe he is correct, though the third view is possible as well. In any case, there is no reason here to see these Jewish brethren as contradicting the message of John 3:16 (or the later findings of the Jerusalem Council [Acts 15:1-29]). Surely if they had done so, Peter would have soundly corrected them (cf. Acts 15:7-11).

Acts 19:4. “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.’” In my dissertation I argued that Paul was saying that the “baptism of repentance” of John the Baptist was designed to call an individual “to first give up self-righteous attitudes and recognize his sinfulness and need of forgiveness.”⁶ I argued that Paul saw this as a prerequisite to believing in Jesus for eternal life, which was clearly the ultimate aim of John the Baptist’s ministry.

⁵ Hodges, *Harmony with God*, 117-19.

⁶ Robert N. Wilkin, “Repentance As a Condition for Salvation in the New Testament,” Doctoral Dissertation (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985), 88.

The problem with this view is that it has no support in the text. Even in my dissertation I said that in this verse “insufficient information is given here to answer this question [i.e., what is the role of repentance in regeneration] fully.”⁷

Since Paul was the champion of justification by faith alone, my interpretation of this verse was quite odd. In addition, Paul doesn’t mention repentance even once in his defense of justification by faith alone, the Book of Galatians. It only occurs once in Romans, and then not in the justification section. (See below for a discussion of that verse.) As James D. G. Dunn has noted, “Repentance...is a category strikingly absent in Paul.”⁸

The most natural way to read this verse is that John’s baptism of repentance was part of a ministry whose aim was to get people to believe in Jesus for eternal life. It was not that one had to submit to John’s baptism as a precursor to come to faith in Christ. The woman at the well came to faith in Jesus yet she never submitted to John’s Baptism. So did Nicodemus, and there is no evidence he was baptized by John the Baptist.

People who were baptized by John were more likely to listen to him when he called for them to believe in Jesus Christ (cf. John 1:7; 5:33-47; see also Luke 20:1-8).

Therefore, this verse is not at all saying that one must repent to be born again.

Romans 2:4. Here Paul addresses the legalist (or moralist, see below), the person who thinks he is free from God’s wrath because he is such a righteous person. Paul says to this wrath-deserving individual, “Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?”

The comments by Zane Hodges on Rom 2:4 are very helpful:

The moralist is trapped in a catch-22! Since he condemns the sin around him and justifies the wrath inflicted on it, how can he himself hope to **escape God’s judgment**? After all, Paul’s list of vices (1:24-32, especially vv 28-32) includes the failures of the moralist himself. If he justifies, explicitly or implicitly, God’s judgment on others, should he not anticipate God’s judgment on himself?

⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, “The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 43 (April 1992): 7.

What is his problem, Paul asks? Just because judgment has not reached *him* as yet, does he in fact **despise** this delay in experiencing consequences as unworthy of his respect? Rather, does not this display of God's **kindness and tolerance and longsuffering** reveal God's desire that the moralist himself should come **to repentance**? Doesn't he realize that God's kind behavior toward him is His way of **drawing** the moralist [= **you**] **to repentance**? (The verb rendered *is drawing* [*agei*] could also be translated "is leading," in the sense of "showing you your proper path"!) How sad it is when man is so self-righteously proud that God's kindly patience to him is regarded as unworthy of his attention or response. By persisting in his sins, even the moralist endangers his own well-being.

The idea of repentance here, of course, refers to the need the moralist has to turn away from his own sins to avoid the "wrath" that God exercises against such things (1:18). It has nothing to do with Paul's doctrine of justification. Indeed this reference to repentance is the only one in the entire book of Romans! Moo (*Romans*, pp. 134-35) writes: "Repentance plays a surprisingly small part in Paul's teaching, considering its importance in contemporary Judaism." But Paul cannot be correctly understood when he is read, as many do today, as though he reflected the thinking of "contemporary Judaism." On the contrary, his gospel came directly "through the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12).⁹

The issue here is temporal wrath, not eternal condemnation. God's delay in punishing our sins should not be seen as a sign that we are pleasing God. Rather, His kindness and patience should lead us to repent of our sins.

2 *Peter* 3:9. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." This single verse kept me from changing my view on repentance and salvation for several years. I had come around on the verses mentioned above. But this one still seemed as though it clearly and unequivocally taught that one had to repent to escape eternal condemnation. If so, then this verse is a show-stopper for the idea that repentance is not a condition of everlasting life.

⁹Hodges, *Commentary on Romans*, s.v. Rom 1:16-17. This has not been published yet. We expect publication in mid to late 2012.

In the mid-nineties, around ten years after I completed my dissertation, I was reading in 2 Peter 3. I came to verse 9 and thought, “I wonder how Peter uses the word *perish* elsewhere in his two epistles.” Why hadn’t I asked that question while writing my dissertation? It is such an obvious question.

I pulled my Greek concordance off the shelf and found out something quite enlightening and embarrassing. The *only other use* of the verb *perish* (*apollumi*) is in 2 Pet 3:6, just three verses prior. I had just read verses 1-9. When I asked the question about verse 9, I had forgotten or failed to notice that the same word appears in verse 6.

As I thought about verse 6, I had one of those flash of insight moments. Here is how my thinking went:

Verse 6 says that the world that existed at the time of Noah “perished, being flooded with water.”

Clearly *the perishing* mentioned in verse 6 is not eternal condemnation. Peter is speaking of physical death, not eternal condemnation in verse 6.

If the perishing in verse 6 is *physical* death, then isn’t it highly possible that it also refers to *physical* death in verse 9, just three verses later?

If verse 9 refers to physical death as well, then the point Peter is making is not about heaven and hell, but about life and death.

That verse 9 is talking about the deadly consequences of not repenting as compared with the life-extending benefits of repenting is supported by the repentance of the Ninevites as recorded in Jonah 3 (cf. Matt 12:41). Clearly God didn’t wish for the Ninevites to perish, but for all of them to come to repentance. They did repent and thus Jonah’s prophecy of death in forty days was averted.

If 2 Pet 3:9 is not an evangelistic verse, then the biggest support for the idea that repentance is a condition of eternal life disappears.

I called up my friend and mentor, Zane Hodges, and shared my insights into 2 Pet 3:9. “Do you think I could be on to something here?” Zane replied that this way of handling the verse made perfect sense, not only in light of verse 6, but also in light of verses 10-13, which refers to the future *physical* destruction of the current heavens and earth by fiery judgment. Zane went on to point out that Peter’s point is that the reason God delays the Second Coming is that billions will die in the Tribulation and He doesn’t want that. He doesn’t want any to die

prematurely. Since repentance is the cure for premature death, as long as the sins of mankind are not filled up, the Tribulation will not come. Repentance forestalls the Tribulation.

Frankly when I look at 2 Pet 3:9 now, I have a hard time even seeing what led me to think it was talking about eternal condemnation. Once everything fell in place, the correct interpretation just sort of emerged. Just as when a jigsaw puzzle piece clicks in place, so this interpretation fit perfectly with all the details of the entire context, before and after.

Repentance and Confession of Sins

As a friend pointed out to me, the words *repent* and *repentance* are not found in First John. Thus, he suggested, would this not mean that repentance is not a condition of fellowship with God, if that indeed is the subject of First John?

He was exactly right. The condition for fellowship with God in First John is confession of our sins, not repentance (1 John 1:9).

However, confession occurs as we “walk in the light” (1 John 1:7). That is, confession occurs when we are living under the teaching and instruction of the Word of God. When God’s Word points out sins in our lives, we are to confess them, not deny them.

First John is written to mature believers who are already in fellowship with God (cf. 2:12-14, 20, 27). For the believer who is already in fellowship with God, the way to maintain that fellowship is confession of sins, not repentance.

Luke 15 shows that repentance is the condition *for the prodigal believer* to get back in fellowship with God. But if one is not a prodigal believer, then the issue is confession.

I remember talking with Zane Hodges about this. He said something like this,

You know, I think a person could go for years or even decades in fellowship with God without ever needing to repent. As long as a person walks in the light of God’s Word and confesses his sins, he remains in fellowship. Only when he goes to the spiritual far country would he need to repent.

Now I know that people can get confused. They wonder, *Is confession just a game? Don’t I need to want not to do the sin again when I confess?*

One man in his forties told me that when he was a teenager he misunderstood confession. He went out one Saturday night and got drunk with a bunch of his high school friends. Well, he confessed his sin the next morning and went to church.

The next week he kept thinking how it would be fun to go out drinking with his friends again. By Saturday he decided to do it again. Once again on Sunday morning he confessed.

The following week he decided that he would go out drinking and getting drunk every weekend, but that he would only be out of fellowship with God during his Saturday night binge. He thought that “confession” on Sunday morning made his prodigal lifestyle acceptable.

What he didn’t understand at the time, but suspected, is that he was not walking in the light. He knew what he was doing was wrong, yet he not only kept doing it, but actually made plans to do it each week. It was something he looked forward to.

The week after his first time getting drunk, he should have thought,

You know, that was fun, but I was also out of control. I feel guilty for much of what I said and did. If I do that again, then I will start a habit. And I could start doing worse things. I could even become an alcoholic. But even if I don’t, I will be running with the wrong crowd, doing the wrong things, and displeasing God. And if my parents knew, they would not be pleased either. Lord, I confess that I’d like to do it again. But I want to nip this in the bud. Please help me to stop this sinful behavior right now. I know that getting drunk is sin. Please keep me from ever getting drunk again. I want to be a man after your own heart.

Then the young man should have followed up his prayer by making different plans for Saturday night, plans that didn’t involve being around booze and getting drunk.

After he got deeper and deeper into that lifestyle, he began to miss church on Sunday mornings. Eventually he *was* the prodigal son of Luke 15. He needed to repent, because his confessions each Sunday had become a ritual with no substance. Since he had stopped walking in the light, he needed to repent in order to get back in the light.

Therefore, as odd as it sounds, repentance should not be a regular part of the life of a believer. Confession is what we should be doing regularly. As long as we are in fellowship with God, the issue for us is confessing our sins as God makes them known to us. As long as we do, then God forgives us for the sins we confess (fellowship forgiveness) and cleanses us from all unrighteousness, which includes all of the sins of which we are unaware.

Maybe an illustration will help. A man and woman have been married for ten years. Let’s say these are two very well-adjusted and mature believers. So in those ten years they have never been separated. At no

time did the husband or wife move out. But there were times in their marriage, as there are in every marriage, in which their fellowship was *strained*. They had arguments. Sometimes they both raised their voices or gave each other the evil eye. But they didn't break fellowship. They stayed together and worked things out.

Now another couple, also married ten years, has a different experience. Both come from very dysfunctional families. Though both are believers, they are not mature. In those ten years they, too, had strains in their fellowship. But unlike the first couple, these strains led to separations that sometimes lasted for months. Man and wife actually lived in different cities and didn't communicate for days or weeks at a time. During those times they were out of fellowship.

Married people know when they are in fellowship with their spouse. They know when the fellowship is strained and something needs to be done to avoid a break in fellowship. And they know when they are out of fellowship.

The same is true in our fellowship with God. Staying in fellowship is not a matter of some sort of legalistic woo-woo. Walking in the light is not legalistic. Confessing our known sins is not legalistic. But if we set up extra Biblical rules in order to maintain fellowship, then we err.

Repentance is not for the believer who is in church every Sunday and who loves God and who confesses his sins and delights in pleasing God. It is for the believer who is away from God.

What Difference Does It Make?

Evangelism. The change is enormous. No longer will we tell someone that to be justified or born again he must *repent and* believe in Jesus. We will simply tell them the message of John 3:16.

In a famous book on evangelism the author tells of a pivotal moment in her efforts to lead a friend to Christ. For some time she'd been witnessing to her friend. Finally one day her friend said, "Okay. I'd like to become a Christian now." The author, knowing that her friend was living with a man to whom she was not married, said, "Well, you aren't ready to become a Christian until you stop living with your boyfriend. God says that is sin. You must turn from that in order to be saved."

I cringed when I read that. The friend was given a false, though well intentioned message. I thought of John 4 in which the Lord, when confronted with the same situation, did not tell the woman she had to turn from her sin to gain everlasting life.

No longer need the evangelist tell people that they must “repent and believe” in order to be born again. Faith alone in Christ alone is the cry of the evangelist who understands what repentance is (and is not).

Rescuing Errant Believers. Believers who are in fellowship with God need to keep on walking in the light of God’s Word (1 John 1:7) and confessing their sins (1 John 1:9).

But the believer who is out of fellowship with God desperately needs to repent. He needs to turn from his sinful rebellion and get back in fellowship with God. Repentance is the medicine for the believer who has ceased to walk in fellowship with God (Luke 15).

Let’s say your brother is a believer, but he strayed from the Lord in college and ever since has not been walking with the Lord. He has had a series of women with whom he has lived. They have drained all his money and left him heavily in debt. He gets drunk a lot. As a loving sibling, you urge him to repent. But since you know he is already born again, you don’t question his standing as a believer. In fact, you start by pointing out that you both know he is born again and eternally secure. You rejoice in that with him. But you tell him that you love him and are concerned about him. You can see that he is ruining not just his finances, but his life. You urge him to turn from his sinful ways and get his life straightened out.

Rescuing Errant Unbelievers. Not only are we to help bring believers back from their sins, we are also to help unbelievers do the same. Let’s say your brother is an unbeliever who grew up in a moral home but drifted in college. Same scenario as before, except this time your brother is not born again. You would still call for him to turn from his sinful ways because they are ruining his life. But here you would also remind him what hopefully you’ve told him before, that all he needs to do to have everlasting life is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as John 3:16 shows. You wouldn’t simply evangelize him without urging him to repent. You would do both. But you would keep the two distinct.

Conclusion

Repentance is one of the most misunderstood words in the Bible. But once we grasp what it means, it is a wonderful concept. God has made a way for the person who is on the path of death to escape. It is called repentance.

Anyone, believer or unbeliever, who continues down the path of rebellion against God is inviting premature death. Sooner or later, God will take his life. Repentance is the way of escape.

While repentance is not a condition of eternal life, it is the condition for ongoing physical life for the person who is living in the spiritual far country.