

# REPENTANCE: IS IT NECESSARY FOR SALVATION?

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## INTRODUCTION

Why is repentance hardly ever preached in the pulpits anymore? The trend in today's seeker friendly church movement is to take away the cross and everything that is offensive in the gospel message. Why is the message of the Bible replaced with entertainment and watered down preaching? Have pastors become more interested in having the biggest churches possible rather than with preaching the truth and caring for people's eternal destination? A. W. Tozer said,

I think there is little doubt that the teaching of salvation without repentance has lowered the moral standards of the Church and produced a multitude of deceived religious professors who erroneously believe themselves to be saved when in fact they are still in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity.<sup>1</sup>

Not only have the majority of the churches stopped preaching repentance but also, many theologians have started to challenge the classical teaching that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation by either denying its necessity or redefining the meaning of it. Paul's challenge to the believers in Rome is as appropriate for today's Christianity to "Not be conformed to this world" (Rom 12.2).<sup>2</sup> Christians should return to the Biblical teaching that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation!

## REPENTANCE: IS IT NECESSARY FOR SALVATION?

### Background

### Three views on Repentance

When Jesus walked on the face of the earth, He challenged people to “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1.15). Was Jesus preaching a false gospel? Of course not! In the twentieth century a group of theologians started to challenge the classical historical Christian belief that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation. Lewis Sperry Chafer who started to popularize this idea said, “The New Testament does not impose repentance upon the unsaved as a condition of salvation.”<sup>3</sup> This new doctrine, called “easy believism” by its opponents, states that the only condition to be saved is to believe. In the end of the 1980’s John F. MacArthur published the book *The Gospel According to Jesus* in which he defended the classical Christian view on repentance. This started a big debate, “The Lordship debate,” in which MacArthur’s opponents started to call his and the classical Christian teaching on repentance, “Lordship salvation”. In this debate there are three views on repentance, the Lordship, No-lordship, and radical No-lordship.

The Lordship or the classical, historical Christian view on repentance is well summarized by MacArthur, “Repentance is turning from sin. It is not a work but a divinely bestowed grace. Repentance is a change of heart, but genuine repentance will effect a change of behavior as well.”<sup>4</sup> This is the view that will be defended in this paper.

The No-lordship position advocates that repentance is not a part of conversion, but simply is a change of mind about Christ. The proponents of this view state that faith is a synonym of repentance and that repentance is not meant to be a part of the gospel message. One of its most famous supporters, Charles C. Ryrie has said (regarding Jesus’ commission to the disciples to preach repentance and remission of sins (Luke 24.47)), “Luke’s rendering of the Great commission uses repentance in the same way as believing in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> The No-lordship position is the most common among those who deny the classical Christian view of repentance.

The Radical No-lordship position goes a step further by holding that repentance has absolutely nothing to do with salvation. This

viewpoint is led by Zane Hodge who has said,

Though genuine repentance may precede salvation,...it need not do so. And because it is not essential to the saving transaction as such, it is in no sense a condition for that transaction<sup>6</sup>

The proponents of this view say that repentance does not have anything to do with faith.

### *The Meaning of Repentance*

If repentance would just be a synonym of faith then all of the passages in the Scripture which mentions both repentance and faith together would not make sense. For example, Jesus, in Mark 1.15 would have said, "Believe and believe in the gospel", instead of "Repent and believe". Historical Christianity has always made a distinction between repentance and faith. They are two aspects of the Biblical teaching on conversion that comes together like Siamese twins. They are distinct but inseparable. Wayne Grudem has said,

Scripture puts repentance and faith together as different aspects of the one act of coming to Christ for salvation. It is not that a person first turns from sin and next trusts in Christ, or first trusts in Christ and then turns from sin, but rather that both occur at the same time. When we turn to Christ *for* salvation from our sins, we are simultaneously turning *away* from the sins that we are asking Christ to save us from.<sup>7</sup>

Those who deny that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation commonly accuse those who are teaching it that they are preaching salvation by works, when in fact the Scripture is teaching that repentance is a gift from God. They generally argue that if repentance is not the same thing as faith then repentance would precede faith and it would be a system of works and repentance would be done in the old sin nature and fallen man has no capacity to repent. This is

incorrect because the Bible teaches that both repentance (Acts 5.31; 11.18; 2 Tim 2.25) and faith (Acts 13.48; 14.27; Eph 2.8-9; Phil 1.29; Heb 12.2; 2 Pet 1.1) are God's gracious gifts and without God's enablement no one can come to Him (John 6.44; Rom 3.11; 1 Cor 2.14; Eph 2.1-5).

At the same time, the Bible challenges non-Christians to repent from their sins (Acts 8.22; 14.15; 17.30; 26.20) and to believe in the gospel (Mark 1.15; Acts 16.31). Augustus H. Strong has well described conversion by stating,

Conversion is that voluntary change in the mind of the sinner, in which he turns, on the one hand, from sin, and on the other hand, to Christ. The former or negative element in conversion, namely, the turning from sin, we denominate repentance. The latter or positive element in conversion, namely, the turning to Christ, we denominate faith.<sup>8</sup>

Repentance does not mean that a person should change his life before he can come to God, but the fruit of repentance will result in a changed life. Repentance is a one time act in which a person, through God's gracious enablement, lets go of the sins that he clung to and at the same time takes hold of Christ as his only hope for salvation; however, it does not stop there. True repentance is not only something that occurs at conversion, but it continues throughout the whole life of a genuine believer (cf. Col 1.23; Heb 3.6, 14; 1 Joh 1.9). Wayne Grudem has well defined repentance as "A heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."<sup>9</sup> Without the classical preaching of repentance, the gospel is distorted!

### *The Use of Repentance in the Old Testament*

The teaching of the Old Testament clearly affirms that repentance is more than just recognition of sin, but it also involves a turning away from sin. In the Old Testament, two words are mainly

used for repentance, *naham* and *shuwb*. *Naham* means to “be sorry, repent, regret, be comforted, and comfort”<sup>10</sup> and is often followed with a change of direction and lifestyle. *Shuwb* means to turn or return and is used in the Old Testament as to turn from sin and to turn to God. The Old Testament is full of passages teaching that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation. Isaiah 55.1-8 clearly teaches that. In verse seven it says, “Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.” The Old Testament teaches both that God turns people from sin to Himself (Psa 80.7; Jer 31.18; Lam 5.21) and that men turn themselves from sin unto God (Prov 28.13; Isa 59.20; Eze 14.6; 33.9, 11; Joel 2.12-14). A good example of repentance in the Old Testament is Jonah’s preaching to the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3.1-10). As a consequence of Jonah’s preaching, the King of Nineveh challenged each one of his people to “Turn [*shuwb*] from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands” (Jonah 3.8). When the Old Testament speaks about repentance, it does not only speak of a change of mind about God, but a turning from sin unto Him.

### *The Use of Repentance in the New Testament*

In the New Testament three words are used to teach repentance, *metanoia* (verb. *metanoeo*), *metamelomai*, and *epistrophe* (verb. *epistrepho*). *Metanoia* comes from *meta* and *nous* and literally means change of mind, but more than that it speak of a change of purpose; according to W. E. Vine, except in a few verses, it always speaks of a repentance from sin.<sup>11</sup> The Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates has said that *metanoia*, “In a religious sense, implies pious sorrow for unbelief and sin and a turning from them unto God and the gospel of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest has said regarding *metanoia*, “This includes not only the act of changing one’s attitude towards and opinion of sin but also that of forsaking it.”<sup>13</sup> *Metanoia* is more than just a change of mind, it involves the intellect (2 Tim 2.25), emotions (2 Cor 7.9-10), and will (Acts 8.22).<sup>14</sup> *Metamelomai* means to be

sorry, to feel remorse, and change one's mind. It only occurs in five verses in the New Testament and emphasizes emotional regret. The word is used to describe Judas' regret (Matt 27.3) and does not necessarily involve a true repentance. The third word *epistrophe* means to turn and return and is used in the New Testament for unconverted that they both should turn from sin and turn to God (Acts 3.19, 26; 14.15; 26.20; 1 Thess 1.9).

As seen in the meaning and the use of both the Old and New Testament words for repentance, it is impossible to come to a No-Lordship conclusion without distorting the Scriptures. Both in the Old and the New Testament usage, repentance clearly teaches that it is impossible to speak of a turning to God without a turning from sin.

### *In the Gospels*

The teaching of repentance is central to the Gospels; John the Baptist, Jesus and the disciples all challenged people to repent. Repentance is at the heart of the gospel message. When Jesus commissioned the disciples, He challenged them to preach repentance (Luke 24.46-47, cf. Mark 6.12; Luke 10.13-16).

#### *In John the Baptist's teaching*

John the Baptist was a forerunner who came to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mark 1.2-3). His preaching and baptism about repentance was to prepare the people for the coming Christ. He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3.2)! His call for repentance was not only meant that the people should change their mind of who Christ is, but meant a change of conduct that they should turn away from their sins. He said, "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Matt 3.8; Luke 3.8). John the Baptist challenged the people that the axe was already laid at the root of the trees and every tree that does not bear fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt 3.10, Luke 3.9). When the people heard this, they asked John what they should do; John, in the proceeding verses gave them examples from what they should repent (Luke 3.10-14).

### *In Jesus' Teaching*

Repentance was a central theme in Jesus teaching. He confronted people to, "Repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1.15). It is clear from Jesus' teaching that when He challenged people to repent, He meant more than just changing their minds about Him. In Luke 10.13 He said, "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes." This clearly indicates that repentance is more than just a change of mind, but a change of heart that leads to a changed life. Jesus gave another example in Luke 11.32 when He spoke of how the people in Nineveh repented, not only changed their mind, but turned away from their sins (cf. Jonah 3.1-10). He said that they will arise in judgment against this generation because they repented, in contrast to many of Jesus' listeners. In Matt 18.3, when the disciples had argued who was the greatest, Jesus said, "unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." The word for converted is *strepho* which means to turn. Here Jesus said that unless people turn (change) and become like little children they will not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. This signifies a turning from being proud to being humble (Matt 18.4, cf. Prov 3.33-34; Jas 4.6).

Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5.32). When He said this, He used the word *righteous* ironically about the self-righteous Pharisees who did not want to repent. It is clear from the gospel accounts that Jesus not only called sinners to change their mind about him, but also to turn from their own way unto him. After Jesus had pronounced His woes on Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum because they did not repent (Matt 11.20-24), He invited the people to "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt 11.28-30). Here Jesus challenged the Jews who were under a law, keeping legalism, to make a 180 degree turn from their

burden of legalism and sins and to come Him, but He did not stop there. He also asked them to make an exchange - their burden for His yoke, indicating their submission to His Lordship and discipleship.<sup>15</sup>

In Luke 13.1 Jesus was told about some Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their Sacrifice. Jesus responded,

Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish (Luke 13.2-5).

Here Jesus clearly challenged his listeners to repent from their sins. Further more, Jesus went on to explain His words with a parable regarding a fig tree that did not bear any fruit. When its owner saw that it bore no fruit, he let it stay for one more year with the command that it should be cut down if it bore no fruit (Luke 13.6-9). Without totally distorting the Scriptures, it is impossible to think of anything else than that Jesus' listeners should repent from their sins and bearing fruit worthy of repentance.

Even if the word repentance is not used in the Sermon on the Mount, it is one of Jesus' most clear teaching on repentance. In Matt 7.13-14 He said, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." This is a challenge to go through the narrow gate and to walk the difficult road. All people are on the "highway to hell", and are challenged to repent and turn to the narrow way. In Luke 13.24, Jesus said, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able." The word for strive is *agonizomai*, which is used in John 18.36 to fight and in 1 Cor 9.24-25 it means to compete to try to win a running race. This clearly implies repentance. Jesus, in His sermon,

went on to speak about the true Christian who will be known by his fruit and that every tree that does not bear good fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt 7.15-20). True repentance will be characterized by a changed life. Nobody is saved by works, but true faith will produce works because faith without works is dead (Eph 2.8-10; Jas 2.26). It is clear from the continuation in this passage that many believe themselves to be saved when in fact they are on their way to hell. Jesus said,

Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness (Matt 7.21-23).

Jesus also taught the principle of repentance in parables. In the parable of the Sower, He spoke about people's response to the Word of God. Jesus himself interpreted the parable (Matt 13.18-23; Mark 4.13-20; Luke 8.11-15). He said that the seed represented the Word of God (Luke 8.11). There are four soils that represent the response of the hearts of the hearers. Immediately after the first type of hearers had listened to the message, the devil came and took away the words from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved (Luke 8.12). The second kind of listeners had a superficial faith and fell away when tribulation came (Luke 8.13). The third type of hearers was not willing to pay the price of discipleship and never produced any mature fruit, revealing that they were not true believers (Luke 8.14). Only the last soil proved to be a genuine convert and was the only one who bore fruit (Luke 8.15; cf. Matt 7.16-23).

In Matt 13.44-46, Jesus told the parables of the treasure and the pearl. In the parable of the hidden treasure, a man found a treasure in a field, hid it again, and sold everything he had to buy the field. In the parable of the pearl, a merchant was looking for fine pearls, and when he found one of great value, he sold everything he

had in order to buy it. The classical interpretation of this passage is as MacArthur has stated,

Both parables make the same point: a sinner who understands the priceless riches of the kingdom will gladly yield everything else he cherishes to obtain it. The corresponding truth is also clear by implication: those who cling to their earthly treasures forfeit the far greater wealth of the kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

However, those who deny the historical classical view on repentance deny this by saying that the man who found the treasure and the merchant who found the pearl is Christ. This reads too much into the text. Regarding this MacArthur has said,

First, the field in this parable is not said to be the world...Second, Scofield [A promoter of the No-Lordship salvation] rejects the classical interpretation of these parables because he is trying to read too much into them...Third and most important, Jesus was giving these parables to unveil the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven – not to explain the atonement.<sup>17</sup>

In Luke 15, tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus, which led to complaints from the Pharisees and scribes. To reveal their hypocrisy and self-righteousness, Jesus told three parables about God's attitude towards repentant sinners. Jesus finished the first parable of the lost sheep with the words, "I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15.7). The next parable of the lost coin is finished with that "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15.10). Finally, the parable of the lost son clearly illustrates how the son repented from his sins and came back to the Father who was waiting for him to come back (cf. with the parable in Matt 21.28-31). This stands in contrast to the older son (illustrating the Pharisees and scribes) who revealed his stony and unregenerate heart in his attitude towards his brother and father.

### *In Jesus' Meeting with People*

Once, a rich young ruler came and asked Jesus what he should do in order to inherit eternal life (Mark 10.17). Most modern day preachers would have just told him to repeat a short prayer. What did Jesus do? He challenged Him to turn away from his god, his riches, and then to come and follow Him. The man went away grieved because he had many possessions (Mark 10.21-22). Wayne Grudem said, "Jesus consistently puts his finger on the area of sin most influential in that person's life"<sup>18</sup> After the man's response Jesus said, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10.23)! The rich young ruler stands in contrast to another rich man, Zacchaeus who clearly manifested the fruits of repentance by saying, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold" (Luke 19.8). Jesus responded, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19.9-10). In another passage Jesus said, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16.13). When Jesus called a third rich man named Matthew and Levi, He told him, "Follow Me," and he immediately left his tax office and possibility of income and followed Jesus (Luke 5.27-28). This was also the case when Jesus told Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him. Immediately they left everything and followed Him (Matt 4.19-22; Luke 5.11). When the accusers of the woman caught in adultery had left, Jesus challenged her to "Go and sin no more" (John 8.11). Does not this imply repentance?

### *No Distinction between a True Believer and a Disciple*

Modern day evangelism (Twentieth Century) has started to make a distinction between a believer and a disciple. This is something totally foreign to Jesus. When He commissioned his disciples, He did not tell them to go out into the whole world and make people believers and then if they are committed to make them

disciples. Jesus told them,

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age. Amen (Matt 28.19-20).

When Jesus spoke of discipleship, He sometimes addressed the twelve as in Matthew 10, but He often spoke to the unregenerate multitude. In Luke 14.25-34, He challenged the multitude that they could not be His disciples unless they put Him before their families and their own lives. Jesus continued to tell them that they should count the cost if they were ready to be His disciples by telling two stories, one of a man that was making a calculation if he could afford to build a tower and another of a king who made a calculation if he could win a war. After Jesus told those stories He said, "Likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14.33). If there are two steps in the Christian life, Jesus would not have told this to the unconverted multitude. In Mark 8.34-38 Jesus told the multitude,

Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.

This teaching stands in sharp contrast to modern day preaching which counts taking up the cross as a second step in the Christian walk. Jesus here told His listeners that in order for somebody to be saved; they had to deny themselves and take up their crosses and

follow Him. At this time people did not understand that Jesus had to die. The cross was an instrument of execution, so they understood this as to die to themselves, which clearly indicates repentance. In the parallel passage in Luke 9.23, it speaks of taking up the cross daily. Mark was not speaking of a second step in the Christian's life but of salvation.

This does not mean that everybody that is called disciples in the Scripture was true born again believers (John 6.60-66). The Scriptures is also filled with examples of professors who believed in Jesus, but not unto salvation (ex. Matt 7.21-23; Luke 8.13; John 2.23-24; 8.31-32).

### *A Response to the Argument from John*

Those who oppose the classical view on repentance have foremost in their argument the gospel of John, wherein is written, "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20.31), never once mentions the word repentance.<sup>19</sup> If John meant that repentance was not necessary for salvation he would contradict the other Gospels; however, he did not contradict them but rather supplemented them. Even if the word repentance is never used in John, the concept of repentance is clearly taught in the book.

Repentance is implied in John 3.19-21 where Jesus states that men come from darkness to light, also after Jesus had healed the paralytic, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (John 5.14); moreover, Jesus challenges the adulteress to "Go and sin no more" (John 8.11). In John 10.26-28, Jesus taught that the character of His sheep is that they listen to his voice and follow him, as exemplified in John 12.25-26 where He said, "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor."

John F. MacArthur has said,

To say that John called for a faith that excluded repentance is to

grossly misconstrue the apostle's concept of what it means to be a believer. Although John never uses repent as a verb, the verbs he does employ are even stronger. He teaches that all true believers love the light (3:19), come to the light (3:20-21), obey the Son (3:36), practise the truth (3:21), worship in spirit and truth (4.23-24), honor God (5:22-24); do good deeds (5:29), eat Jesus' flesh and drink His blood (6:48-66), love God (8.42, cf. 1 John 2.15), follow Jesus (10:26-28) and keep Jesus' commandments (14.15). Those ideas hardly concur with no-lordship salvation! All of them presuppose repentance, commitment and a desire to obey.<sup>20</sup>

The apostle John elsewhere in 1 John used a whole epistle to teach about assurance of salvation (1 John 5.13). In this epistle, the proof that someone has become a genuine believer is a changed lifestyle which clearly sets repentance as prerequisite for salvation (1 John 1.6, 8; 2.3-6; 3.3; 3.14, 18-19, 24; 4.13; 5.18).

### *In the Book of Acts*

The book of Acts that gives the early history of the church and its spread has as its central theme the apostles' preaching of the resurrection and that people should turn from their sins to the risen Messiah. When Peter preached on Pentecost, he proclaimed the resurrection of the Messiah and rebuked the people who had crucified Jesus, so that they came under conviction and asked, "What shall we do" (Acts 2.36-37)? Peter's reply was, "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" (Acts 2.38).

In Acts 3 after the healing of the lame man, Peter and John went into the temple, and Peter preached to the people about the resurrection and rebuked them for taking part in the murdering of Jesus (Acts 3.13-15); further, he challenged them to repent from their sins and turn to the Messiah (Acts 3.19, 26). A few days later, more than five thousand men had been converted (Acts 4.4). What did their

conversion mean? Geisler has said,

The unlikely overnight conversion of devout tradition-ridden Jews from a law-keeping, Sabbath-observing, sacrifice-offering religion to one that repudiated all these as followers of Christ is best explained by their encounters with the resurrected Christ.<sup>21</sup>

For those Jews it meant a radical repentance that would cause them to be kicked out of the synagogues, risk losing their jobs, and immediately they would become victims of persecution which could cost them their own lives (cf. John 9.22; 16.2). These things happened in the harsh persecution that followed, so that all except the apostles were scattered through the region of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8.1) with the consequence that the gospel was taken further away and that God also “Granted to the Gentiles repentance to life” (Acts 11.18).

After the Apostle Paul’s radical conversion, he went from city to city and preached that people should repent and believe in the risen Messiah. For example, in Lystra he preached “That you should turn from these useless things to the living God” (Acts 14.15), and in Athens he challenged the idol worshippers; “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17.30). To say that Paul only commanded the idol worshippers to repent about Christ is not Biblical sound. Paul, of course, spoke that they had to repent from their sinful idol worship. For example, a Hindu can not be saved if he just adds Jesus to the rest of his gods. When Paul was questioned by Agrippa, he told Agrippa that God had sent him to the Gentiles, “To open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26.18). Paul further explained that he had preached that Jews and Gentiles “Should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance” (Acts 26.20). This stands in total contrast to modern day preaching.

In contrast to the no-lordship view on repentance, the book of

Acts clearly teaches that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation and challenges unconverted people to turn from their sins and at the same time turn to Christ as their only hope for salvation (Acts 3.26; 8.22; 14.15; 15.3; 26.18, 20).

Those who deny that Acts set repentance as a condition for salvation often use Acts 16.31 as an argument that the only thing necessary for salvation is faith. In Acts 16.30 the Philippian jailer, after trying to take his own life, asked Paul and Silas, “Sir what must I do to believe”? They responded, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16.31). Even if the word repentance is not mentioned in the text, the man clearly understood the consequences of becoming a Christian (Acts 16.16-34), as he was at the end of himself, just a few minutes away from committing suicide. Verse 32 explains that Paul and Silas continued to share about salvation with him and by his deeds the jailer proved that his repentance was genuine (Acts 16.33-34).<sup>22</sup> Earlier in Acts, when Peter was asked the same question, he challenged his listeners to repent (Acts 2.37-38).

### *In the Epistles*

That repentance from sin is necessary for salvation is not just something that is taught in the Gospels and the book of Acts, but it is also affirmed in the Epistles. In Rom 2.4-5 Paul said that it is the goodness of God that leads to repentance and that it is because of their unrepentant (*ametanoeton*) hearts that people are treasuring up for themselves wrath on the Day of Judgment. The book of Romans also teaches that sanctification can not be divorced from justification, but will be the natural flow after a person has become born again (Rom 6.1-2, 6-8, 17-18; 8.8-9, 29-30, cf. 1 Cor 1.2; 6.11; Heb 10.14; 12.14).

When Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he was aware that there were unconverted people in the church; therefore, he challenged the Corinthians, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in

you?—unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Cor 13.5). Earlier in 2 Cor 12.20-21 he had revealed his fear that some of them had not repented from their heinous sins of which some Paul, earlier in 1 Cor 6.9-10, had said that those who practice them will not inherit the kingdom of God. In 2 Cor 7.9-10 Paul said,

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.

This does not necessary speak of a repentance unto conversion but more likely speaks of the Corinthian’s repentance in their attitude towards Paul; however, it reveals that godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul spoke about their repentance, how they “Turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thes 1.9) and in 2 Tim 2.25 he spoke about repentance as a gift (Greek. *doe*) from God. Paul also, in several passages, listed the things of those who practice these will not inherit the kingdom of God (Rom 1.28-32; 1 Cor 6.9-10; Gal 5.19-21; Eph 5.5; Phil 3.17-19, cf. Rev 21.8), signifying repentance from sin in order for salvation.

Many of the books in the New Testament (Hebrews; James; 2 Peter; 1 John; Jude) are filled with warning passages to admonish “believers” to examine if they are really saved, and if not, to repent. As seen above from the example of 1 John, the sign that somebody has become a genuine believer is a changed lifestyle. Peter in 2 Pet 1.10 challenged his readers to make their calling and election sure. He also said that the Lord is, “Not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3.9).

The apostle John, in the book of Revelation, described the response of those who received the judgment of the plagues, that they,

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 (Rev 9.20-21).

Neither did they repent to give God glory (Rev 16.9) or from their deeds (Rev 16.11).

As seen, it is a foreign matter in the Epistles to speak of repentance to Christ and not from sin. In the moment a sinner turns to Christ, he also turns away from the sin he clings to (this does not mean that a sinner should clean up his life before he can come to Christ).

### *True Faith Will Result in Perseverance and a Changed Lifestyle*

It is evident that the Bible does not teach salvation by works as the Roman Catholics preach; however, faith without works is dead. James in his letter brings out, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas 2.26). If faith does not result in a changed lifestyle it is a pseudo-faith. Christ "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Tit 2.14). Christians are saved by grace (Eph 2.8-9) and "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph 2.10). It is plain from the Bible that if somebody has become born again he will bear fruit, and if not, it is a sign that he is not a genuine believer (Matt 7.15-20; 13.23; 21.41; Luke 3.9; 6.43-44; 8.14-15; 13.1-9; John 15.1-16; Rom 6.22; 7.4; Gal 5.22-23). This does not mean that a true Christian can not stumble and fall, but if he does, he will not remain in this state continuously. True Christians are kept by God's power through faith (1 Pet 1.3-5, cf. John 10.27-29; 1 Cor 1.8-9; Phil 1.6; 1 Thes 5.24; Jude 24) and will persevere to the end (Col 1.21-23; Heb 3.6, 14). The Bible is also filled with false professors who did not have a true faith (ex. Matt 7.21-23; Luke 8.11-15; John 6.60-66; Acts 8.13; 1 John 2.19; Jude

19). This does not mean that the Bible teaches sinless perfection (1 John 1.8). When a true Christian sins, the Holy Spirit within him will be grieved (Eph 4.30) and he will be chastised by God (Heb 12.3-11). This discipline is the very sign that somebody is a true child of God (Heb 12.7-8).

Those who deny that repentance is necessary for salvation generally divide Christians into carnal and spiritual. The doctrine of the carnal Christian is a new doctrine teaching that a Christian can be saved without bearing any fruit and having a changed lifestyle. This doctrine was developed in the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>23</sup> and expressed by Lewis Sperry Chafer in *He That Is Spiritual*.<sup>24</sup> The whole doctrine is built upon a misunderstanding of 1 Cor 2.14-3.3. In verse one to three of the third chapter, Paul told the Corinthians,

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

In 1 Corinthians Paul rebuked the Corinthians for behaving carnally (in a non-Christian way), but this is not a state in which the Christian remains constantly, for if he does, it is a sign that he is not born again. To say something different is foreign to the Scripture. All believers are spiritual (Rom 8.9), otherwise they are not born again; but still they are capable of behaving in a carnal way. Paul in Romans 8 makes a clear distinction between the spiritual (born again) and the carnal (un-regenerate).<sup>25</sup> He said, "So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Rom 8.8-9). To say that a person can be born again and live a whole life without bearing any fruit is totally contrary to the Scriptures which teach that without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12.14). If a true Christian behaves in a carnal way, he will be under God's discipline (Heb

12.3-11).

### *A Summary of the Use of Repentance in Church History*

Those who deny that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation often accuse those who preach repentance for being legalists, and emphasize the reformers saying, *sola fide* '(faith alone)<sup>26</sup>; however, this is not what the reformers meant. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the following generations of reformers all went against the Roman Catholic teaching of salvation by works and held that a man is justified by faith alone apart from works (Rom 4.5), but that a true faith will result in a changed life, because faith without works is dead. This is also the teaching of the early church fathers from the generation after the apostles to Augustine. After Augustine the church gradually went into the Roman Catholic darkness through the Dark Ages until the dawn of the Reformation when the Biblical doctrine of justification was rediscovered.<sup>27</sup> To say that to preach repentance is legalism is to accuse the church through its whole history of being legalistic. The preaching of repentance and that a true born again believer will do good works has always been the preaching of the true church. MacArthur has well written, "The fact remains that prior to this century and the rise of Chafer-Scofield dispensationalism, no prominent theologians or pastors ever embraced the tenets of no-lordship doctrine."<sup>28</sup> Those who oppose the preaching of repentance hardly find any support in church history and in fact are promoting a new doctrine!

### *A Plea to Return to the Historical, Classical View on Repentance*

Why are divorces, abortions, and immorality almost as common inside the church as outside? Why do eighty to ninety percent of those who make a profession of faith never return to church again?<sup>29</sup> The trend in the seeker friendly church movement is to take away everything that is offensive out of the gospel thereby taking away its

very soul. The modern day proclamation of the gospel is not presented in the same way as Jesus, the apostles, and the saints throughout church history proclaimed it. The standard pattern of how to present the gospel in today's churches is to take away everything that is offensive and try to manipulate people to make a decision for Christ "while every eye is closed." This is done by appealing to people's emotions with soft background music and a seller mentality speech, to get the unconverted to repeat a prayer and as a sign of it to lift their hands, then afterwards giving them false assurance that they are saved. This is as un-Biblical as it can be! The so-called salvation prayer is never mentioned in the Bible. Some quote Rom 10.8-10 to defend it, but the confession with the mouth is simply a response to that a new-converted person has been justified (cf. Rom 10.14). This confession is not a work of the preacher but of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12.3, cf. 1 John 4.2).

The apostles, Jesus, and the saints throughout church history has always preached on law, sin, and hell, and challenged people to turn from their sins to Jesus as their only hope for salvation. They did not manipulate people to a decision but left them to the work of the Holy Spirit! Why do preachers not trust in the work of the only One that is worthy to be trusted, or do they have to manipulate people to false professions that will not last?

Leonard Ravenhill said, "We're preaching an acceptable Gospel today, making it as painless as we can. And all we do is give people a shot to put them to sleep so they get to hell quicker. We need some hellfire preaching on repentance."<sup>30</sup> The cure for the church is not a new method of self-improvement or a how to list, but a return to the Biblical preaching of repentance. Christians should repent from preaching a false gospel and return to their Bibles!

## CONCLUSION

It is strange how somebody can come to a conclusion that the Bible does not teach that repentance from sin is necessary for salvation when the evidence for it is so obvious. The question is do

they not want the Bible to teach it? Both the Old and the New Testament teach that repentance is a divine grace in which God turns people from sin unto Himself (Psa 80.7; Jer 31.18; Acts 5.31; 11.18; 2 Tim 2.25) and at the same time that man turns himself from sin unto God (Isa 55.7; Eze 33.9-11; Luke 13.1-9; Acts 3.26; 8.22; 14.15; 26.18, 20; 1 Thes 1.9). It is impossible to speak of a turning to God without a turning away from something else.

By taking away repentance from the gospel the church is making itself guilty of preaching a false gospel which gives people false assurance. J. I. Packer has well said,

The call to repent was the first and fundamental summons in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2), Jesus (Matt. 4:17), the Twelve (Mark 6:12), Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2:38), Paul to the Gentiles (Acts 17:30; 26:20), and the glorified Christ to five of the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19)<sup>31</sup>

The western church should repent and return to the Biblical teaching on repentance, otherwise its candlestick might be removed (Rev 2.5). Church, be prepared, "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God" (1 Pet 4.17)?

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