Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Repentance in the Gospel of John
Scripture: John
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One argument against repentance that is invariably found in no-lordship books goes like this: The Gospel of John, perhaps the one book in Scripture whose purpose is most explicitly evangelistic (John 20:31), never once mentions repentance. If repentance were so crucial to the gospel message, don't you suppose John would have included a call to repent?

Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "The Gospel by John, which is written to present Christ as the object of faith unto eternal life, does not once employ the word *repentance*" (*Systematic Theology*, 3:376). Chafer suggested that the Fourth Gospel would be "incomplete and misleading if repentance must be accorded a place separate from, and independent of, believing. No thoughtful person would attempt to defend [repentance as a condition of salvation] against such odds, and those who have thus undertaken doubtless have done so without weighing the evidence or considering the untenable position which they assume" (3:376-77).

More recently, Charles Ryrie has written,

It is striking to remember that the Gospel of John, the Gospel of belief, never uses the word *repent* even once. And yet John surely had many opportunities to use it in the events of our Lord's life which he recorded. It would have been most appropriate to use *repent* or *repentance* in the account of the Lord's conversation with Nicodemus. But *believe* is the word used (John 3:12 , 15). So if Nicodemus needed to repent, *believe* must be a synonym; else how could the Lord have failed to use the word *repent* when talking with him? To the Samaritan harlot, Christ did not say repent. He told her to ask (John 4:10), and when her testimony and the Lord's spread to other Samaritans, John recorded not that they repented but that they believed (verses 39 , 41-42). And there are about fifty more occurrences of "believe" or "faith" in the Gospel of John, but not one use of "repent." The climax is John 20:31 : "These have been written that you may believe ... and that believing you may have life in His name" (*SGS* 97-98).

But no one camps on this point more fiercely than Zane Hodges:

One of the most striking facts about the doctrine of repentance in the Bible is that this doctrine is totally absent from John's gospel. There is not even so much as one reference to it in John's twenty-

one chapters! Yet one lordship writer states: "No evangelism that omits the message of repentance can properly be called the gospel, for sinners cannot come to Jesus Christ apart from a radical change of heart, mind, and will."

This is an astounding statement. Since John's Gospel *does* omit the message of repentance, are we to conclude that its gospel is not the biblical gospel after all?

The very idea carries its own refutation. The fourth evangelist explicitly claims to be doing evangelism (John 20:30-31). It is not the theology of the gospel of John that is deficient; it is the theology found in lordship salvation. Indeed, the desperate efforts of lordship teachers to read repentance into the fourth gospel show plainly that they have identified their own fundamental weakness. Clearly, the message of John's gospel is complete and adequate without any reference to repentance whatsoever (*AF* 146-47).

Hodges suggests that the apostle John was purposely *avoiding* the subject of repentance (*AF* 149). He finds in the Gospel of John

not a word--not a syllable--about repentance. And if ever there was a perfect place for the evangelist to inject this theme into his gospel, this is the place.

But his silence is deafening!...

The silence of chapter one persists to the very end of the book. The fourth gospel says nothing at all about repentance, much less does it connect repentance in any way with eternal life.

This fact is the death knell for lordship theology. Only a resolute blindness can resist the obvious conclusion: *John did not regard repentance as a condition for eternal life.* If he did, he would have said so. After all, that's what his book is all about: obtaining eternal life (*AF* 148).

What are we to think of this suggestion? Is the apostle John's "silence" on repentance really a death knell for the lordship position?

Hardly. H. A. Ironside responded to this issue more than fifty years ago. He wrote:

The arrangement of the four Gospels is in perfect harmony. In the Synoptics [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] the call is to repent. In John the emphasis is laid upon believing. Some have thought that there is inconsistency or contradiction here. But we need to remember that John wrote years after the older Evangelists, and with the definite object in view of showing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, we might have life through His Name. He does not simply travel over ground already well trodden. Rather, he adds to and thus supplements the earlier records, inciting to confidence in the testimony God as given concerning His Son. He does not ignore the ministry of

repentance because he stresses the importance of faith. On the contrary, he shows to repentant souls the simplicity of salvation, of receiving eternal life, through a trusting in Him who, as the true light, casts light on every man, thus making manifest humanity's fallen condition and the need of an entire change of attitude toward self and toward God (*Except Ye Repent*, 37-38).

Zane Hodges' assertion that "the fourth gospel says nothing at all about repentance" (*AF* 148) is demonstrably false. It is true that John does not use the word *repentance*, but as we have observed elsewhere, our Lord also did not use the word *grace*. One suspects no-lordship theologians would recoil from any suggestion that the doctrine of grace was missing from Jesus' teaching.

Repentance is woven into the very fabric of the Gospel of John, though the word itself is never employed. In the account of Nicodemus, for example, repentance was clearly suggested in Jesus' command to be "born again" (John 3:3 , 5 , 7). Repentance was the point of the Old Testament illustration our Lord gave Nicodemus (vv. 14-15). In John 4 , the woman at the well *did* repent, as we see from her actions in verses 28-29.

Isn't repentance included by implication in the following Johannine descriptions of saving faith?

John 3:19-21: And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.

John 10:26-28: But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and *they follow Me*; and I give eternal life to them (emphasis added).

John 12:24-26: Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

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), practice 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.

As those terms suggest, the apostle was careful to describe conversion as a complete turnabout. To John, becoming a believer meant resurrection from death to life, a coming out of darkness and into light, abandoning lies for the truth, exchanging hatred for love, and forsaking the world for God. What are those but images of radical conversion?

Loving God is the expression John uses most frequently to describe the believer's demeanor. How can sinners begin to love God apart from genuine repentance? What does *love* imply, anyway?

Finally, remember that it is the Gospel of John that outlines the Holy Spirit's ministry of conviction toward the unbelieving world (John 16:8-11). Of what does the Holy Spirit convict unbelievers? Of "sin, righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8). Wouldn't it seem that the Holy Spirit's ministry of convicting people of sin and its consequences has the specific purpose of laying the groundwork for repentance?

Repentance underlies all John's writings. It is *understood*, not necessarily explicit. His readers were so familiar with the apostolic message that he didn't need to dwell on the issue of repentance. John was emphasizing different facets of the gospel message than those highlighted by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But he most assuredly was not writing to contradict them! His aim certainly was not to devise a no-lordship doctrine of salvation.

In fact, John's purpose was exactly the opposite. He was showing that Jesus is God (e.g., 1:1-18 ; 5:18 ; 12:37-41). John's readers clearly understood the implication of *that*: If Jesus is God and we must receive Him as God (John 1:12), our first duty in coming to Him is to repent (cf. Luke 5:8).

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