What Is Biblical Repentance?
Scripture: Luke 18:13, Luke 3:8, Isaiah 55:1–13, Matt. 27:3
Code: A330

Repentance is no more a meritorious work than its counterpart, faith. It is an inward response. Genuine repentance pleads with the Lord to forgive and deliver from the burden of sin and the fear of judgment and hell. It is the attitude of the publican who, fearful of even looking toward heaven, smote his breast and cried, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Repentance is not merely behavior reform. But because true repentance involves a change of heart and purpose, it inevitably *results* in a change of behavior.

Like faith, repentance has intellectual, emotional, and volitional ramifications. Berkhof describes the *intellectual* element of repentance as "a change of view, a recognition of sin as involving personal guilt, defilement, and helplessness." The *emotional* element is "a change of feeling, manifesting itself in sorrow for sin committed against a holy God." The *volitional* element is "a change of purpose, an inward turning away from sin, and a disposition to seek pardon and cleansing." (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 486) Each of those three elements is deficient apart from the others. Repentance is a response of the total person; therefore some speak of it as total surrender.

Obviously, that view of repentance is incompatible with no-lordship theology. What do no-lordship teachers say about repentance? They do not fully agree among themselves.

Some radical no-lordship protagonists simply deny that repentance has any place in the gospel appeal: "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" (Hodges, *Absolutely Free,* 146). This view hinges on making the "saving transaction" nothing more than forensic *justification* (God's gracious declaration that all the demands of the law are fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the righteousness of Jesus Christ). This single-faceted "saving transaction" does not even bring the sinner into a right relationship with God. Thus the radical no-lordship view offers this peculiar formula: "If the issue is simply, 'What must I do to be saved?' the answer is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Ac 16:31). If the issue is the broader one, 'How can I get on harmonious terms with God?' the answer is 'repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ' (Ac 20:21)" (*AF* 146).

The insinuations underlying those statements are staggering. How or why would anyone who is unrepentant raise the question, "What must I do to be saved?" What would such a person be seeking salvation *from*? In what sense is salvation a separate issue from "get[ting] on harmonious terms with God"? Is it possible to obtain eternal salvation with no sense of the gravity of one's own sin and alienation from God? That is the implication of radical no-lordship teaching.

But the predominate no-lordship view on repentance is simply to redefine repentance as a change of mind—not a turning from sin or a change of purpose. This view states, "In both the Old and New Testaments *repentance* means 'to change one's mind' " (Ryire, *So Great Salvation*, 92). "Is repentance a condition for receiving eternal life? Yes, if it is repentance or changing one's mind

about Jesus Christ. No if it means to be sorry for sin or even resolve to turn from sin" (*SGS* 99). Repentance by that definition is simply a synonym for the no-lordship definition of faith. It is simply an intellectual exercise.

Note that the no-lordship definition of repentance *explicitly* denies the emotional and volitional elements in Berkhof's description of repentance. No-lordship repentance is *not* "be[ing] sorry for sin or even resolv[ing] to turn from sin." It means simply "changing one's mind about his former conception of God and disbelief in God and Christ" (*SGS* 98). Again, one could experience that kind of "repentance" without any understanding of the gravity of sin or the severity of God's judgment against sinners. It is a remorseless, hollow, pseudorepentance.

Repentance in the Bible

Does the no-lordship definition of repentance square with Scripture? It clearly does not. It is true that sorrow from sin is not repentance. Judas felt remorse, but he didn't repent (Matt. 27:3). Repentance is not just a resolve to do better; everyone who has ever made New Year's resolutions knows how easily human determination can be broken. Repentance certainly is not *penance*, an activity performed to try to atone for one's own sins.

But neither is repentance a solely intellectual issue. Surely even Judas changed his mind; what he didn't do was turn from his sin and throw himself on the Lord for mercy. Repentance is not just a change of *mind*; it is a change of *heart*. It is a spiritual turning, a total about-face. Repentance in the context of the new birth means turning from sin to the Savior. It is an inward response, not external activity, but its fruit will be evident in the true believer's behavior (Luke 3:8).

It has often been said that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. That coin is called *conversion*. Repentance turns from sin to Christ, and faith embraces Him as the only hope of salvation and righteousness. That is what conversion means in simple terms.

Faith and repentance are distinct concepts, but they cannot occur independently of each other. Genuine repentance is always the flip side of faith; and true faith accompanies repentance. As Berkhof stated in his *Systematic Theology*, "The two cannot be separated" (p. 487).

Isaiah 55:1-13, the classic Old Testament call to conversion, shows both sides of the coin. Faith is called for in several ways: "Come to the waters ... buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (v. 1). "Eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance" (v. 2). "Listen, that you may live" (v. 3). "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near" (v. 6).

But the passage also enjoins repentance: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the Lord" (v. 7).

As that verse demonstrates, the issue in repentance is moral, not merely intellectual. What repentance calls for is not only a "change of mind" but a turning away from the love of sin. A leading New Testament dictionary emphasizes that the New Testament concept of repentance is *not* predominately intellectual. "Rather the decision by the whole man to turn around is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward turning nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas." (*NIDNT*, 1:358) Another principal theological dictionary defines repentance as:

radical conversion, a transformation of nature, a definitive turning from evil, a resolute turning to God in total obedience (Mk. 1:15 ; Mt. 4:17 ; 18:3).... This conversion is once-for-all. There can be no going back, only advance in responsible movement along the way now taken. It affects the whole man, first and basically the centre of personal life, then logically his conduct at all times and in all situations, his thoughts, words and acts (Mt. 12:33 ff. par.; 23:26 ; Mk. 7:15 par.). The whole proclamation of Jesus ... is a proclamation of unconditional turning to God, of unconditional turning from all that is against God, not merely that which is downright evil, but that which in a given case makes total turning to God impossible.... It is addressed to all without distinction and presented with unmitigated severity in order to indicate the only way of salvation there is. It calls for total surrender, total commitment to the will of God. ... It embraces the whole walk of the new man who is claimed by the divine lordship. It carries with it the founding of a new personal relation of man to God.... It awakens joyous obedience for a life according to God's will. (Kittel, TDNT, 4:1002-3)

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