



Repentance and the Universal Call of the Gospel

Part 1

By Bob DeWaay

It seems that whenever writers on this site reference repentance, they receive comments suggesting that they are teaching salvation by works. Over the years my writings have generated similar responses. Those who object to the preaching of repentance generally hold two basic premises: 1) Faith is mental assent to the facts about Jesus; 2) Repentance is either an action taken by Christians who wish to live a better life (but it's not necessary for salvation) or repentance is merely a synonym for faith as mental assent. A corollary belief is that if a person momentarily gives mental assent to the facts about Jesus that person is assured of salvation even if he or she never gives evidence of any change of life. Those who would disagree with this perspective are charged with denying salvation by faith alone and with teaching salvation by works.

John MacArthur receives the bulk of the ire from those holding this view because his books *The Gospel According to Jesus* and *The Gospel According to the Apostles* reject this viewpoint so clearly.

Some years ago I wrote an article on this topic as well [here](#). That article resulted in my having to engage in some rather long disputations with those who defend the “faith as mental assent” position. So I’ve had some practice in this discussion.

Today in this article, I will defend from Scripture the claim that repentance is properly included in the universal call of the gospel. That means, when we preach the gospel to people in general, it is appropriate, according to the Biblical pattern, to call them to repent and believe.

The meaning of repentance in the New Testament is not determined simply by its etymology, “change of mind,” but by its Biblical usage. Repentance is linked to the concept of conversion and means to “turn away from one’s former ways and turn to God.” The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* contains a lengthy entry on the Greek words for “repent” and “repentance.” Their conclusion, based on the Hebrew (not Greek) background of the New Testament is that the terms have to do with religious conversion: “Investigation of the history of the term up to [New](#) Testament days has shown us, however, the only path which may be followed, and exposition of the theological usage of the New Testament will pursue this to its destination, namely, that *ἰσθῆναι* and *ἰσθῆναι* are the forms in which the New Testament gives new expression to the ancient concept of religious and moral conversion.”^[1]

The Great Commission in Luke says this: “*and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem’*” (Luke 24:46, 47). Laying aside technical disputes about *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), this passage declares that repentance is a part of the universal call of the gospel. The subject is “repentance for forgiveness of sins” and the object of this preaching is “all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” That is lost people whoever they may be. Earlier in Luke, Jesus said that He came to “*call sinners to repentance*” (Luke 5:32) and Jesus proclaimed to those who thought tragedy in people’s lives proved they were worse sinners, “*unless you repent you shall all likewise perish.*” (Luke 13:3, 5). Peter obeyed the call to preach repentance beginning from Jerusalem

when he told his Jewish audience, “Repent” (**Acts 2:38**). Peter repeated this message in Jerusalem: “*Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away*” (**Acts 3:19a**). Luke makes it clear that Peter obeyed Jesus’ command to preach repentance for forgiveness of sins ... beginning in Jerusalem.

As Acts progresses the gospel advances from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria to remote Gentile areas according to the pattern of Acts 1:8. The later part of Acts focuses on Paul’s ministry. Did Paul preach repentance as well? Yes. Paul’s message to the Athenian philosophers shows this: “*Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead*” (**Acts 17:30, 31**). The certainty of future judgment is the reason Paul laid before them for the necessity of repentance. This is in keeping with Jesus’ words in Luke, “unless you repent you shall all likewise perish.”

To show that this was not an isolated incident but a pattern that Paul followed, we can consult other passages in Acts. In Acts 20, Paul called together the Ephesian elders and before charging them with their responsibilities, recounted his practices during his three years of ministry. He told them of his message: “*how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*” (**Acts 20:20, 21**). Paul used the noun forms “repentance and faith” to describe the actions he preached, “repent and believe.” It is instructive to note parallel passages in this section where Paul described his message in Ephesus: “to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (**Acts 20:24**) “preaching the Kingdom of God” (**Acts 20:25**); and “declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (**Acts 20:27**). There is no reason to assume these were totally unrelated topics, but as a whole described his message of Messianic salvation that God has brought to Jews and Gentiles through Christ and the many implications of this for them.

There are also passages where the term “repentance” is not used but the concept is preached. For example, at Lystra, after a supernatural healing, the pagans were calling Barnabas and Paul “Zeus” and “Hermes” respectively, wanting to offer sacrifices to them. Here is Paul’s response: “*Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them*” (**Acts 14:15**). The gospel told them to “turn from these vain things to a living God.” This is the idea of repentance and conversion. Paul used the same terminology when writing the Thessalonians, describing their conversion: “*For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how **you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God***” (**1Thessalonians 1:9**). Turning to God from idols is not merely giving mental assent to facts; it involves a supernatural transformation through grace by faith.

Further evidence that preaching repentance was consistently Paul’s practice is found in his address to Agrippa toward the end of Acts: “*Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds*

appropriate to repentance” (**Acts 26:20**). This is a very telling passage. First, it says “repent and turn to God.” This confirms that repentance involves turning “from” and turning “to.” It is not merely mental assent to certain facts. It says “performing deeds appropriate to repentance.” This means that lives actually change (not just minds) and is reminiscent of John the Baptist’s teachings in **Luke 3:8-14**. Also, this was Paul’s obedience to the heavenly vision (Acts 9) indicating that Christ Himself commissioned Paul to preach repentance to Jews and Gentiles.

The evidence from Luke/Acts is clear that repentance is part of the universal call of the gospel and therefore is to be preached to all people. The evidence also has shown that when Jesus and His apostles preached repentance, they were speaking of turning from sin and idolatry to God. Therefore, to claim that repentance has no place in gospel preaching is to argue against overwhelming and clear Biblical evidence to the contrary. I have read writings of those who nevertheless do. Some claim that because repentance is not mentioned in John, therefore it is either unnecessary or that when Luke writes extensively on repentance he meant that repentance and faith are synonymous, with both meaning “changing your mind about Christ.”^[ii] But this cannot be reconciled with various passages in Luke/Acts, especially **Acts 26:20**. Paul’s preaching throughout the region was proclamation to the lost, not special teaching for certain people who were already Christian to change certain behaviors. To “*repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance*” is not synonymous with “changing your mind about Christ.”

In part two of this series I will explore this matter further and show that repentance is something that God grants by His grace and is therefore not a meritorious work done by the sinner to earn salvation. I will further argue that showing people the need to repent is part of explaining the law and the wrath of God against their sin. It is part of the bigger picture of preaching the law and the gospel.

^[i] *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (4:1000). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

^[ii] This view is defended by Bob Wilkin: “The view of Chafer, Ryrie, and this writer [Wilkin] is that the ‘repentance’ which is required for eternal salvation is a change of mind about Christ.” ; <http://roboam.com/repentance/wilkin-04.htm>

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