



Repentance and the Universal Call of the Gospel Part 2

By Bob DeWaay

In part 1 of this two part series of articles on repentance, I presented Biblical evidence that repentance is part of the universal call of the gospel. I further showed that it is more than merely changing one's mind about Jesus; but that it involves turning from whatever we were serving and turning to God on His terms.

Those who teach that faith is mental assent and that repentance is either mental assent or an option for people after they are saved typically claim the following: if anything more than mental assent is involved, we are teaching salvation by works. One advocate of this position even warns against adding the idea of "trust" to that of faith. Bob Wilkin writes: "If we lose our grip on faith, then we lose our grip on the good news. We cannot evangelize clearly if we think faith is more than intellectual assent, that it is more than believing facts, or that it is anything other than being convinced that the saving message is true."^[i] This citation comes from a section of his article entitled, "Avoid the trust trap."

The next section in the Wilkin article is, "Avoid the temporary faith trap." There he rejects the idea that if someone gives mental assent to facts about Jesus and then fails away, that such a person never truly believed in a saving way. By this rejection Wilkin is saying that perseverance is not to be considered a sign of regeneration. According to Wilkin, the only thing necessary for salvation and full assurance of salvation, is mental assent to facts about Jesus, even if this mental assent proves to be temporary and never bears fruit. Wilkin writes, "Here's a way to remember this: Once faith, always saved."^[ii]

I once spent three months debating this matter via email with someone who is firmly in the "no Lordship" camp. It was impossible to get anywhere. We could not even agree on the meaning of John 3:16. Why? Because he believed that faith is mental assent to facts and that anyone having such faith, even for mere milliseconds, was eternally saved even if at no point in his life did he exhibit any sign of a work of grace. A thousand scriptures would not budge him from his position. So I finally left off the debate because if we cannot have the same definition of faith, neither can we agree on what it means to be saved by faith.

Those who advocate mental assent salvation often favor the gospel of John because it does not contain the word “repent.” Let us consider a section of John that I believe shows that temporary mental assent is not the Biblical definition of saving faith. In **John 8:23** Jesus made a very strong claim: *“I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins”* (**John 8:24**). In the Greek, Jesus said “Unless you believe that I AM you shall die in your sins.” There is no “he” and this is an allusion to God’s self-revelation to Moses at the burning bush. Then Jesus reiterated the “I AM” claim by saying that they would realize that He is “I AM” when they lift Him up (i.e. crucify Him – **John 8:28**). **John 8:30** says, *“As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.”* Jesus declared their status, clarified the claims about His person and work and this group believed.

Now, let us consider what happens with this very group of believers: *“Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’”* (**John 8:31, 32**). This caused them to question Jesus because they claimed they were Abraham’s offspring and did not need to be made free (verse 33). Jesus responded by telling them they were slaves to sin, and that if they were truly Abraham’s sons they would do the deeds of Abraham. This dispute escalated and the ones who had “believed” claimed that Jesus was a child of fornication, a Samaritan, and that He had a demon (see **John 8:40-48**). Jesus told them that they were liars and were of their father the devil (**John 8:44**) and concluded with, *“Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”* (**John 8:46, 47**). These were the same people who “believed” according to **John 8:30, 31**.

If we accept Wilkin’s definition of saving faith as mental assent even if it turns out to be temporary, then those who “believed” were saved. But these saved believers turned against Jesus, blasphemed Him and were told by Jesus that they “do not believe” and “are not of God.” They even tried to stone Jesus (**John 8:59**). The faith as mental assent position (even if temporary) leads to the absurdity that people who once believed the facts about Jesus (in this case that He is the great I AM who would be lifted up) are

saved even when the fruits of their “faith” were blaspheming Jesus and trying to stone Him!

The no Lordship doctrine fails to account for many other Scriptures as well. Wilkin’s proof text that he cites often is **John 6:47**: “*He who believes in Me has everlasting life.*” Wilkin insists that “believes” in that verse cannot be said to mean anything more than mental assent to the facts about Jesus. He even claims that if we have a stronger definition of faith than the one he offers, we do not believe the gospel.^[iii] He comments on **John 6:47**: “If a person defines ‘believing in Jesus’ as some special kind of faith, then he doesn’t believe what Jesus is saying.” But as it is, John 6 ends with many who had put mental assent faith in Jesus and were even his “disciples” leaving. Here is what it says:

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.” As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore. (John 6:63 – 66)

The word “can” in **John 6:65** is “*dunamai*,” the Greek word for “power” of ability. The power to come to Jesus with saving faith is something granted by God. The no Lordship doctrine seeks to make the weakest possible definition for saving faith in order to make it something easily attained by anyone and to give assurance of salvation to anyone based on their own ability to believe facts. However, Wilkin wrenches **John 6:47** totally out of the larger context of John 6. In John 6 thousands of followers believed facts about Jesus (for example that He was indeed the Prophet that Moses predicted in Deuteronomy – see **John 6:14**) but after being confronted with the truth about His flesh and blood being given as true food they leave and refuse to follow Him. John’s point is that it takes a supernatural work of God’s grace for people to truly come to Jesus. Wilkin interprets

John 6:47 to teach the **opposite** of what the larger context teaches. This is not acceptable exegesis.

Let us now return to the concept of repentance. Studying sections of John 6 and John 8 we see that the concept is there though the term is not. Those in John 6 believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah based on His miracle of multiplying bread. They even wanted to make Him king. But Jesus said that all the Father gave Him would come, that no one had the ability to come unless it was given to him by the Father, and that all who the Father gave to Christ would be raised up on the last day (see **John 6:37 – 39; 44; 65**). Far from teaching “easy believism,” John 6 confirms that the gate is narrow and the path is narrow and there are few who walk on it (**Matthew 7:14**). There will be people saying to Jesus “Lord, Lord” who will not enter the kingdom (**Matthew 7:21 – 23**). Only those who “*do the will of my Father who is in heaven*” will enter (**Matthew 7:21**).

What causes people to stumble, in my opinion, is the failure to link “faith alone” with “grace alone.” God’s grace is His effectual working that causes salvation. As we saw in **John 6:65**, believing in a saving way (what it means to come to Jesus) is “granted” by the Father. The same is true for repentance.

Repentance is “granted” by God, and is not an expression of human ability or human works. The failure to understand this, in my opinion, is what leads people to a truncated and watered down definition of faith and/or repentance. In the desire to preserve the doctrine of salvation by faith and at the same time make saving faith something that is within the grasp of all sinners without any special work of grace, they define faith as mental assent to facts about Christ.

Paul wrote to Timothy: “*And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth*” (**2Timothy 2:24 – 25**). Repentance is granted by God, not conjured up by the human will. We find the same thing in Acts: “*And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’*” (**Acts 11:18**). Since repentance is graciously granted by God, its existence at the time of salvation is not a meritorious work.

The no Lordship, or “free grace” position as they call it, forthrightly rejects the need for repentance, or even commitment to Jesus. Wilkin writes, “If special faith includes committing oneself to serve Jesus for the rest of one’s life, then Jesus was saying, ‘He who commits to serve Me for the rest of his life has everlasting life.’ That, of course, is not what Jesus said. That would be justification by works. A person who believes that does not believe the saving message.”^[iv] But as we saw in John 6, those people did not commit to serving Jesus, they left Him and Jesus said “they did not believe” (**John 6:63-66**). Their refusal to walk with Him and allow Him to determine the terms by which they would follow Him constituted unbelief. Likewise, those who “believed” in John 8 ended up seeking to stone Jesus. There is no reasonable reading of John that would lead to the conclusion that they were saved individuals.

God uses means. The means He uses to grant repentance and faith is the preaching of the law and the gospel. The law shows people they are sinners facing God’s wrath and the gospel describes Christ’s blood atonement that averts God’s wrath against sin. The preaching of repentance is appropriate in the universal call because God uses it to grant repentance for those who will believe.

The universal call is to be preached to all. As Paul said, “God is commanding all men everywhere to repent.” There are no exceptions. But if some are convicted by this message and do repent, it was because God graciously granted repentance. Repentance is not something man does first in his unregenerate state that having done it, causes salvation to come; repentance is what salvation looks like when God takes the blinders off of a sinner’s eyes, the shackles of sin off of his feet, the hardness out of his sin cursed heart, and pours into him the grace to see the glorious light of Christ. Charles Wesley described this well in the 4th verse of the hymn, “And Can it be That I Should Gain”:
“Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night; thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.” That is precisely what repentance looks like. It doesn’t entail staying in the dungeon and thinking true thoughts about certain facts about Jesus.

[i] <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2005i/wilkin.html>

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Ibid.

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