

# Repentance and Salvation

By Dave DeWitt



## Thesis

In the Bible translations I am aware of, the Greek word *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) is translated “repentance.” This has led to the false idea that there are two requirements for salvation: faith + repentance. I shall here demonstrate three things:

1. The word “repentance” should not have been used to translate the Greek word *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*). New Testament repentance is always a change of mind.
2. The New Testament definitions of faith and repentance are so similar that they can be used interchangeably when it comes to salvation.
3. *Repentance* in the New Testament is a change of mind. Period. Any true change of mind results in some change of life, but *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) itself is only about a change of mind or understanding. It should never be defined as a change of life.

Therefore, my conclusion will be that there is no Biblical basis for any lordship salvation or works-based salvation, or continual ongoing maintenance of salvation.

## 1. The Word (Incorrectly) Translated “Repentance” Is Not Repentance at All. It’s a Change of Mind.

I really don’t like going to the original language to make a point, because it sounds like you can’t get the point from reading the translations. But sometimes, it’s unavoidable, and this is, unfortunately, one of those times.

- *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), when it is a noun, or
- *μετανοέω* (*metanoëo*), when it is a verb

The meaning of the word is simple, clear, and obvious. It means to *change your mind* or *change your understanding*. [Hereafter, I will use only the noun form for simplicity.]

- Meta (*μετα*) = *change*, as in the metamorphosis of a butterfly.
- Noëo (*νοεω*) = the Greek word for *mind* or *understanding*.

It means to turn around in your understanding of something. It means to leave one way and turn to another way. It’s a mental about-face. It means if I am here, then I’m not where I was. I came here from there, so I am no longer there. This has been the main cause of Christian persecution all through the centuries. Faith in Jesus Christ cannot just be added to whatever else you believe. You cannot just add Jesus to your other gods. Christianity is a change of mind away from idolatry, pantheism, atheism, or whatever you believed or didn’t believe, to receiving Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. It is to leave other gods and religious beliefs behind so you are here, not there. It’s to *turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God* (Acts 26:18). That’s *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*).

But not so with the English word “repentance.” The New Oxford American Dictionary defines the word “repent,” as to

“express sincere regret or remorse about one’s wrongdoing or sin...[to] view or think of (an action or omission) with deep regret or remorse...feel regret or penitence about...*all I did* [parenthesis and italics theirs]

According to the dictionary, repentance is regret and remorse for one’s wrongdoing. But *Μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), is not the word for regret or remorse. Actually, Greek has a word for regret or remorse. It’s *μεταμέλομαι* (*metamelomai*), and it means “to feel regret as the result of what one has done” (Louw

and Nida Lexicon). It is literally to change so that you care, are concerned or worry. It is a combination of:

μετα (*meta*) change

μελω (*melo*) care, concern or worry [possibly English gets from this the word “mellow”]

Here are a couple of examples of the use of μεταμέλομαι (*metamelomai*):

- **Matthew 21:29** *And he answered, “I will not”; but afterward he **regretted** it (KJV **repented**), [μεταμέλομαι (*metamelomai*)] and went.*
- **Matthew 27:3** *Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he **felt remorse** (KJV **repented himself**), [μεταμέλομαι (*metamelomai*)] and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders.*

This word means to *feel remorse* or *regret*. But this is not our word μετάνοια (*metanoia*), which only indicates a change of mind or understanding.

We must now notice the obvious. The Biblical μετάνοια (*metanoia*), which is almost always translated as some form of *repentance*, does not mean anything close to the dictionary definition of “repentance.”

New Testament repentance (change of mind) may or may not be associated with regret or remorse. Dictionary repentance (regret or remorse) may lead to, or follow, New Testament repentance (change of mind). Let me say that again using the definitions. Regret and remorse may lead to or follow a change of mind, but regret and remorse are **not defined as** a change of mind. For example, a person may regret that he gets drunk every night and that might lead to his changing his mind about drinking. A person may change his mind about drinking which may result in his not getting drunk every night.

But not necessarily. One does not define the other. One might regret getting drunk, but with no intention of changing his mind about doing it. He has remorse, but he goes back out and gets drunk again. Remorse is not a change of mind. Also, one might change his mind and not feel remorse at all. We change our mind about what car to drive, what kind of clothes to wear, or which computer to buy, without feeling remorse about our previous car, clothes, or computer. Whether or not it precedes or follows, to change one’s mind or understanding is not equated with a feeling of regret or remorse.

When Peter reported to the elders about the conversion of Cornelius and his friends in Caesarea, we read,

- **Acts 11:18** *When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance [μετάνοια (*metanoia*)] that leads to life. There was no regret or remorse in this repentance. Actually, the report about Cornelius before his repentance that leads to life, stated he was a devout man and one who feared God with all his household and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually (Acts 10:2). There is simply no mention at all of any regret or remorse for wrongdoing in his μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance.*
- **Acts 19:4** *Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance [μετάνοια (*metanoia*)], telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” Paul said the ministry of John the Baptist was one of [μετάνοια (*metanoia*)] changing your mind, defined as believing in Jesus, not having regret or remorse.*
- **Acts 20:21** *solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance [μετάνοια (*metanoia*)] toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul summarized his own ministry as calling both Jews and Greeks to change their mind, defined as placing faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. There is nothing here about regret or remorse.*

But didn't Paul talk about feelings of regret and remorse? Yes, he did. It's connected to things like being filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:19), examining yourself (2 Corinthians 13:5), not grieving the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), confessing your sins (1 John 1: 8-10), and maturity (Hebrews 6:1). But it is not embodied in, or tied to, the word *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), which only means a change of mind.

### **Definition Conclusion**

Therefore, if you want to continue to use the word *repentance* for *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), as it is translated almost everywhere in the New Testament, then you need to ignore the dictionary definition of repentance and replace it with "to change one's mind or understanding."

## **2. The Biblical Words "Faith" and "Repentance" Are Synonymous (Interchangeable) when It Comes to Salvation**

Ryrie lists three uses of the word *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) *repentance*. Here are his categories with his concluding comments about repentance and eternal salvation:

*First* there is a repentance that either has no relation to eternal salvation or at least does not result in salvation... (Matthew 21:28-32) ...*Second* there is a repentance that is unto eternal salvation... A *third* category of the uses of the word *repent* concerns repentance within the experience of Christian living... 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 to resolve to turn from sin, for those things *will not save*. [Charles C. Ryrie, "So Great a Salvation," Victor Books, July 1, 1989, pp. 92-99, italics emphasis his.]

Ryrie makes one other point here that should not be overlooked. We are saved by a change of mind. Being sorry for sin, or even a resolve to turn from sin, "those things will not save." Nobody can be saved by remorse, regret, or a resolve to turn from sin.

### **Coming to Faith Is Changing Your Mind**

Here are some basic definitions:

- **Faith** is trusting (not just acknowledging facts as the demons also do – James 2:19)
- **Good faith** is trusting reasonable evidence (not a blind leap)
- **Initial faith** is a decision to trust new reasonable evidence (to have a different understanding)

When I make the initial decision to believe something that I did not believe before, that necessarily involves a change of mind. As a personal example, I never believed in electric cars. I always believed electric cars were a worthless idea, which would soon die out. But I have been converted. Trusting the new information, reasonably presented, I now believe electric cars are the way of the future. We will soon all be driving electric cars. That means I have been converted. I have changed my mind about electric cars. It does not mean I feel regret or remorse about driving cars with gasoline or diesel engines. It is simply that the reasonable evidence has convinced me to trust electric cars. That change of mind is exactly how Paul called people to believing in Jesus Christ.

- **Acts 17:2-4** *And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas.*
- **Acts 28:23-24** *When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.*

Notice that Paul's message was not one of regret and remorse over sin, a resolve to turn from sin, to make Christ lord or any other works. His appeal was for a mental change about Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. *Being persuaded* is synonymous with belief, and not being persuaded is synonymous with those who *would not believe*.

### **Faith and Repentance Are Interchangeable, Not Two Requirements for Salvation**

Occasionally faith and repentance are mentioned together:

- **Mark 1:15** *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*
- **Acts 20:21** *...solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

In these verses, the word for *and* is the Greek *καί* (*kai*). It's the inclusive *and*, almost like the phrase "that is." For example, it's the word for *and* in the phrase *priests and Levites* (John 1:19). It's not the *priests and*, in addition to that, the *Levites* because all the *priests* were *Levites*. It's also the first *and* used in Mark 1:15, quoted above where the meaning is, *The time is fulfilled, and (that is) the kingdom of God is at hand*. Initial faith, like salvation faith, and repentance are synonymous, like overlapping circles.

### **Faith Is Often Given as a Requirement for Salvation, with No Mention of Repentance**

John's gospel is the one that has the stated purpose of bringing us to eternal life.

- **John 20:31** *but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

Although the gospel of John repeatedly talks about eternal salvation, it never once mentions the word *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) repentance. Neither does it mention remorse or regret or making Christ lord, a resolve to turn from sin, or any other works as a requirement for salvation.

- **John 1:12** *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.*
- **John 3:16** *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*
- **John 5:24** *Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.*
- **John 6:29** *Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."*

The book of Acts gives several examples of salvation without repentance:

- **Acts 9:1-20** The conversion of Paul never uses the word *repent* nor does it mention anything about remorse, regret, making Christ lord, or any other works.
- **Acts 13:12** No repentance or remorse and regret are mentioned as we read, *the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.*
- **Acts 16:31** When the Philippian jailor said, "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" They said, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*" But Paul and Silas said nothing about repentance. Neither did they tell the jailor to have remorse, regret, make Christ lord of his life, or resolve to turn from sin.

### **Conversely, Repentance Is Often Given as a Requirement for Salvation with No Mention of Faith**

Since we know faith is a requirement for salvation, why is it not always mentioned?

- **Matthew 3:2; 4:17** Both John the Baptist and Jesus based their ministry on the call to *repent* [*μετάνοια* (*metanoia*)] *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. They called for people to change their

minds, which was equivalent to a decision of faith. But they made no mention of regret, remorse, making Christ lord or a resolve to turn from sin.

- **Mark 6:12** When Jesus sent out the 12, *They went out and preached that men should repent [μετάνοια (metanoia)],* which is the essence of faith. But they made no mention that people should have regret, remorse, make Christ lord, or resolve to turn from sin.
- **Acts 2:38** Addressing the crowd on the day of Pentecost, *Peter said to them, “Repent [μετάνοια (metanoia)], and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* Peter’s call for repentance was equivalent to a decision of faith. But he made no mention of regret, remorse, making Christ lord, or a resolve to turn from sin, in order to receive *forgiveness of your sins* and *the gift of the Holy Spirit*.
- **Acts 17:30** Paul told the men of Athens, *Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent [μετάνοια (metanoia)].* Repentance was faith. But he did not tell them they should have regret, remorse, make Christ lord, or resolve to turn from sin.

The Biblical concept of μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance is to change your mind. This is precisely what one does when he or she receives Christ as their personal Savior through faith (John 1:12). Initial faith is a change of mind.

### **3. Repentance Is a Change of Mind, Not a Change of Life**

Most people who care enough about the issue to look at the Greek word will say, “Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of life.” Well, that’s the correct definition of μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance, but we need to understand that the change of life follows the repentance, it’s not part of the word itself. Biblical repentance [μετάνοια (*metanoia*)] is only a change of mind. Of course, any true change of mind will always have some kind of life impact (James 2:18). But that change of life might not be immediately noticeable. It may also be slow coming or hard to determine.

My grandfather received Jesus Christ as his Savior in his old age (his 70s, I think). Though he lived to be 93, if you only knew him casually, you would not notice a change in his life. He was a good man before his salvation and he was a good man after his salvation. You would only know he had become a believer if you were around him enough to hear his believing comments about God or if you asked him about his faith. Then he would give you a clear testimony of the gospel and his trusting Christ. His faith was equated with his change of mind [μετάνοια (*metanoia*)], but it would be hard to notice any change of life. And certainly, a commitment to change of life was not part of his μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance decision.

Like many people, I received Christ because I wanted to go to heaven rather than hell. Changing my life didn’t even come to mind. I was 10 years old at the time, and I don’t recall any change in my life until my second year of college, and even then, it would be hard to notice. Nonetheless, I was really saved. I can look back and see where the Holy Spirit was working in my life all those years, but I doubt if anyone would notice.

I mentioned above that I have changed my mind [μετάνοια (*metanoia*)] about electric cars. That means I now believe in electric cars. But I don’t have an electric car, yet. Can my new faith in electric cars be seen in a change in my life? I doubt if anyone would notice. I still have my gas-powered car, and I am not out looking for an electric one. Someone might notice a change in my attitude toward electric cars. I might even mention in a conversation that I think they are the car of the future. But it would be pretty hard to claim my new electric-car-repentance is accompanied by a change of life. Assuming a change of life can be identified seems to be presumptuous.

## Looking At It Logically

My electric-car-μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance stands alone as a distinct new belief, separated from whatever change of life that may follow.

- My belief in electric cars cannot be measured by my change of life.
- My belief in electric cars is now in the past and before any life change that may happen in the future.
- My new faith in electric cars is not an ongoing decision. The decision is a done deal.

Because of my new way of thinking, I will be looking intently into the development of electric cars. But the repentance/faith is the cause, a changed life is the effect. Except in quantum physics (and this is not quantum physics), never does the effect of anything produce its cause, nor is it part of the cause. A bird causes a bird nest. But the nest does not cause the bird, nor is it part of the bird. God caused creation.

Creation did not cause God nor is it part of God. Understand:

1. Every effect has a cause.
2. The cause is always greater than the effect.
3. The effect always follows the cause.
4. The effect is distinct from, never part of, the cause.

So,

1. The changed life of a believer has a cause, μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance.
2. The μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance is greater than the changed life.
3. The changed life always follows the μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance.
4. The changed life is distinct from, never part of, the μετάνοια (*metanoia*) repentance.

So, the idea of a lordship salvation, or a faith + works gospel, or the on-going “preaching the gospel to ourselves” salvation of the New Calvinists is irrational, since it sees the effect and the cause as the same thing, and that’s never ever true about anything, anywhere.

Let’s return to some Bible passages where repentance and its effect are mentioned.

- **Acts 2:38** *Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Repent [μετανοέω (*metanoeo*)] and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, is the **cause**. Receiving the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit are an **effect** of the cause.*
- **Acts 3:19** *Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away.* The **cause** is repent [μετανοέω (*metanoeo*) change your mind], the **effect** is return, so that your sins may be wiped away.

## Conclusion

We have determined:

1. If you want to use the word *repentance* as a prerequisite for salvation, then you must understand repentance in the New Testament is very different from repentance in the dictionary. In the New Testament, repentance only means “to change one’s mind or understanding.”
2. The New Testament concept of *repentance* is synonymous with the concept of faith, with respect to salvation. Both are a turning from a previous belief, or disbelief, to a new belief. If I’m here, I am no longer there.
3. *Repentance* [μετανοέω (*metanoeo*)] i.e. faith, is the cause of an ongoing life change. *Repentance* [μετανοέω (*metanoeo*)] is not the effect, nor part of, an ongoing life change.

Any idea that repentance for salvation is an ongoing remorse, or a resolve to turn from sin, is irrational. And unbiblical.