

Repentance and Salvation

By Jerry Collins

- *What does it mean to repent?*
- *Does someone have to repent to be saved?*
- *What is the relationship between repentance and faith?*

The Lordship Salvation Position

For many people, repentance carries with it the idea of sorrow for sin or turning from sin and going in a different direction. The lordship salvation position adds that the Gospel requires for salvation “the full surrender of the heart, soul, mind and strength ...” (John McArthur, “The Gospel According to Jesus,” p. 68), and that repentance is a “purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead” (Ibid., p. 163).

The lordship salvation position teaches that a person must make a commitment to change his or her life as a means of getting saved. Repentance is conceived as a separate act and added to believing as a requirement for salvation. In other words, a person is saved by repenting, turning from sin demonstrated by a changed life, and by believing, putting one's trust in Christ.

According to lordship salvation, repentance and faith are separate requirements for salvation.

Since it is repentance plus faith that saves, faith often ends up being defined by the works this repentance produces. Therefore, lordship salvation teaches:

- (1) The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 57) outlines the requirements for salvation.
- (2) Denying ourselves in Matthew 16:24 teaches that without a willingness to follow Christ and deny yourself, you cannot be saved.
- (3) Receiving Christ in John 1:12 is more than simply accepting Christ but it is necessary to embrace Him and all His claims without reservation.
- (4) Believe and obey in John 3:36 means to make Christ lord of one's life as a requirement for salvation.

Obedience becomes a synonym for faith. Since lordship salvation adds the works of repentance to faith as a requirement of salvation, its understanding of repentance must be rejected (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The remainder of this brochure will explain why this position must be rejected by evaluating another view of repentance, commonly referred to as grace salvation.

The Grace Salvation Position

The Greek word for “repentance” is used 58 times in the New Testament and means *a change of mind*. It refers to the thinking of people who thought one thing or made one decision and then, based on further evidence of some kind, changed their minds.

This change of mind leads to a different course of action, and that action must be determined by the context in which the word is used. Hebrews 12:7 illustrates this definition of a change of mind. It says, *For you know that afterward, when he [Esau] wanted to inherit a blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for **repentance**, though he sought it diligently with*

tears (emphasis mine). What was it that Esau could not find? It was not a turning from his sinful behavior. What he could not find was a way to change his father's mind. The issue was settled, and no matter how much Esau pleaded, he could not change Isaac's mind about Isaac blessing Jacob instead of him.

In passages where salvation is in view, repentance involves a change of mind about Christ and His Gospel. It is a change of mind about any form of trust in human works to trust in Christ's work alone. Repentance and faith are never viewed as two different requirements for salvation. Dr. Charles Ryrie asks,

“What kind of repentance saves? Not a sorrow for sins or even a sorrow that results in cleaning up one's life. People who reform have repented; that is, they have changed their minds about their past lives, but that kind of repentance, albeit genuine, does not of itself save them. The only kind of repentance that saves is a change of mind about Jesus Christ. People can weep; people can resolve to turn from their past sins; but those things in themselves cannot save. The only kind of repentance that saves anyone, anywhere, anytime is a change of mind about Jesus Christ. The sense of sin and sorrow because of sin may stir up a person's mind or conscience so that he or she realizes the need for a Savior, but if there is no change of mind about Jesus Christ, there will be no salvation” (Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, pp. 94-95).

For instance, after Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, the people who heard it were *pierced to the heart* and asked Peter and the rest of the apostles what they should do with what they heard. We read in Acts 2:38 that Peter told them to *repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sin s ...* (emphasis mine). Repent about what? Peter concluded his message by claiming that *God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified* (verse 36). So Peter told them to change their minds about Jesus of Nazareth. Acknowledge Jesus as God and Savior. Change your minds and believe that He is God and your Messiah, who died and rose again from the dead. This kind of repentance saves. Repentance like that meant they could be baptized as a result of their forgiveness of sins. In this case, repentance is the essence of believing and stands for faith in the person and work of Christ.

Repentance and faith are not two separate requirements for salvation. We have one requirement of salvation, namely, faith in Christ. Repentance means to change one's mind about his or her previous conception of God, whether it is disbelief in God or polytheism or idolatry (see Acts 20:21 and 1 Thessalonians 1:9). Faith in Christ, then, is the expression of that change of mind which focuses on the new direction that change about God must take which is trusting God's Son, Jesus Christ, alone as one's Savior.

Saving faith defines repentance

So salvation is not a two-step process, but just one step, faith defined by repentance (changing your mind about Christ).

Repentance and Faith

There are a few other reasons why repentance must not be separate from faith:

(1) Approximately 150 portions of Scripture condition salvation on believing alone. Yet each one of these omits any reference to repentance as a separate or necessary act to faith. An example is Acts 16:30-31, where Paul answered the question, *What must I do to be saved?* with a simple and clear, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!*

(2) In Paul's letters, repentance is only referenced five times (Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10; 12:21; and 2 Timothy 2:25), and all of these are about repentance in Christian living. Only one of these references is in the book of Romans—Paul's complete analysis of the doctrine of salvation. Yet, when teaching about salvation, Paul always mentions faith and never repentance. It's not in the book of Galatians either, where Paul argues that there is no other Gospel. If a separate act of repentance were a necessary part of this Gospel, wouldn't he have said so in his defense of it?

(3) Repentance is completely absent from John's Gospel. The stated purpose of the Gospel of John is to bring men to faith in Jesus Christ (John 20:31). Yet John never once uses the word “repent.” If repentance, when used in connection with eternal salvation, is a separate requirement from faith in Christ, then John does not give the whole Gospel. It is not that John is unfamiliar with repentance. He had heard John the Baptist preach it and saw John baptize people with his baptism of repentance. Later, as a disciple of Jesus, he heard Him call people to repentance many times. John himself wrote about repentance in Revelation but not a word about repentance in his Gospel about belief!

We must conclude that saving faith is not separate from but defined by repentance. That kind of repentance is what changes a person's mind about who Jesus is and trusts Him as Savior.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What does it mean to repent?*

A: Repentance means to change your mind. When the context is salvation, it means to change your mind about who Jesus Christ is.

Q: *Does someone have to repent to be saved?*

A: Yes, if it means changing your mind about Jesus Christ. No, if it means to resolve to turn from your sin.

Q: *What is the relationship between repentance and faith?*

A: Without a change of mind about Jesus Christ, no one can be saved, but it is faith that saves, not some additional repentance. Saving faith defines repentance.