

Repentance- It's Definition and It's Manifestation, Individually and Corporately

The Planning Committee assigned this topic to me as a companion piece to Clay's paper, *Sin – What Should We Emphasize in the Church?* In the 2010 Conclave, we presented the paper, *Dealing with Sin in the Lives of Believers*, which Clay has offered this morning as a supplement to his paper. As I pondered what the committee had asked me to do in this present paper, I realized that much of the area to be covered would be a repetition of the 2010 Conclave paper.

We have chosen, therefore, to be rather narrow in our presentation, and hope that you will read the earlier paper and this one together, as companion pieces discussing different facets of the subject.

Defining Repentance

What is repentance? What comes to our minds when we hear that word? In the English versions of the Scriptures, several Greek and Hebrew terms are rendered, *repent*.¹ Each Greek and Hebrew term, so rendered, conveys a particular idea or thought and so we begin by examining these terms and the underlying meaning of each one. Our main focus will be on the Greek terms in the New Testament, with a glance at supporting data from the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

Repentance as Sorrow and Regret

The first terms that we examine are those that refer to sorrow or regret. The most conspicuous term in the New Testament, expressing this idea, is the verb, μεταμέλομαι [*metamelomai*].² This is the term used to describe Judas' sorrow when he saw Jesus condemned, realizing that he, Judas, had sold his friend for thirty pieces of silver. The KJV renders μεταμέλομαι in this verse as, *repented himself*. The NAS renders the term in this verse as, *he felt remorse*.³

*Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, **repented himself**, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, (Matthew 27:3 KJV)*

*Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, **he felt remorse** and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, (Matthew 27:3 NAS)*

The Hebrew verb, נחם [*nacham*], conveys the same idea. נחם is an onomatopoeic term, i.e. – it sounds like what it is communicating... a sigh.

נחם is the term in Genesis 6:6 that the King James Version renders as, *repented*, and the NAS renders as, *was sorry*.

*And it **repented** the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. (Genesis 6:6 KJV)*

*And the LORD **was sorry** that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. (Genesis 6:6 NAS)*

It would not be incorrect to render Genesis 6:6 as *God sighed over the fact that He had made man*.

¹ Each English version of the Scriptures has a tendency to render the Greek terms in a particular way. The King James Version and some of the older versions render more Greek and Hebrew terms by the English term, *repent*, or, *be converted*, than do more recent versions

² We will note the use of another term for sorrow later in the paper when we address corporate repentance.

³ Scriptural quotes throughout the paper will be from the New American Standard Version, unless noted otherwise.

Repentance as Changing One's Thinking or Changing One's Understanding

Next we note the terms, *repent* or *repentance*, when they are used to render the Greek verb, μετανοέω [*metanoēō*] and the noun, μετάνοια [*metanoia*]. The underlying idea of these terms is, *to change one's mind*. These are the terms consistently used in the New Testament to describe the quality of repentance that leads to and results in salvation.

Contrasting μεταμέλομαι and μετανοέω, Gerhard Kittel comments,

- Μετανοέω implies that one has later arrived at a different view of something; Μεταμέλομαι that one has a different feeling about it.⁴
- In remorse (μεταμέλομαι) a man sees the bitter end of sin; in repentance (μετανοέω) he breaks free from it.⁵

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached a sermon indicting his audience for the murder of Jesus. He said,

"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--²³ this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. (Acts 2:22-23)

Peter then declared the true identity of the one whom they had crucified.

"This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. . . . Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:32-33,36)

Many in the crowd responded,

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

Peter replied,

"Repent [μετανοέω], and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

The term rendered, *repent*, in Acts 2:38 is, μετανοήσατε [*metanoēsate*] (imperative, aorist active, 2nd person plural of μετανοέω). What Peter was exhorting them to do was to *change their minds* about the identity of Jesus – Jesus was not just a renegade religious leader whom the Jews and Romans could kill, but was the Divine Lord and Christ. The use of the term in this passage precisely fits the literal meaning of the term, *to change one's mind*.

Belief, faith, and repentance, become synonymous when this understanding of the term is employed.

⁴ Kittel, Gerhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume IV (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1967, page 626

⁵ Kittel, page 628

In an almost identical manner, a day or so later, Peter indicted the crowd that had gathered when the lame man at the Gate Beautiful was healed.

all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement. But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered up, and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses..... And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled." (Acts 3:11-15, 17-18)

Peter then exhorted them,

"Repent [μετανοέω] therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; (Acts 3:19)

Again, given the nature of the crowd that Peter was addressing, he exhorted them to μετανοήσατε – change your minds about the identity of this one whom you disowned and put to death. He is the Prince of Life.

Repentance as Turning to or Turning from Something

In Acts 3:19 (just cited), we encounter another term sometimes translated, *repent*. This term, ἐπιστρέφω [*epistrepho*],⁶ conveys the idea of *turning*, or *returning*. For example in Mark 5:30, the term describes Jesus' physically turning around.

*And immediately Jesus, perceiving in Himself that the power proceeding from Him had gone forth, **turned around** in the crowd and said, "Who touched My garments?"* (Mark 5:30)

The term also is used to convey a *mental turning* or *returning* (when so used, the King James Version frequently renders this term as, *be converted*). Acts 3:19 is an example of the KJV's rendering the term in this manner.

*Repent ye therefore, and **be converted**, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;²⁰ And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you:* (Acts 3:19-20 KJV)

Matthew 13:15 and Mark 4:12 are other examples of the use of ἐπιστρέφω to express the sense of a mental or a moral turning.

For the heart of this people has become dull, And with their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes Lest they should see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return [ἐπιστρέφω], And I should heal them. (Matthew 13:15)

in order that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; and while hearing, they may hear and not understand lest they return [ἐπιστρέφω] and be forgiven." (Mark 4:12)⁷

⁶ The Hebrew equivalent is שׁוּב (*shub*)

⁷ Note that Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, *And I should heal them [ἰάομαι]*, but Mark quotes Jesus as saying, *and be forgiven [ἀφίημι]*. Jesus spoke Aramaic and all of the quotations of Jesus' statements in

Examples of The Interplay of Terms

Another instructive episode is found in Paul's defense before King Agrippa. Paul described the encounter that he had with Christ in Jerusalem, just a few weeks after his conversion – and how the apostle responded to Jesus' commission.

'But arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from [ἐπιστρέφω] darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'

"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 [μετανοέω] and turn [ἐπιστρέφω] to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance [μετανοέω]. (Acts 26:16-20)

Here we see another example of μετανοέω referencing a mental understanding – Paul challenged both Jews and Gentiles to believe that this Jesus whom he was proclaiming was the Son of God, the Saviour, the Lord of all, and that they could fully believe in the efficacy of the cross of Christ, as well as the resurrection. When this happened, they would turn [ἐπιστρέφω] from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God.

Not only would this repentance be a change of perception, but it should express itself in a life-style that was consistent with their understanding of the lordship of Christ (*performing deeds appropriate to repentance*).

A Broader, More Comprehensive Use of the Terms

Some passages of Scripture use μετανοέω in a broader sense of more than just a change of mind. For example, in Revelation 2:5, Jesus is chastising the Ephesian Church for having left its *first love*.

'But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent [μετανοέω] and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent [μετανοέω]. (Revelation 2:4-5)

Exactly to what the charge, *left your first love*, means, is open to debate, but it must have something to do with deeds, not with feelings,⁸ since the exhortation is to *do the deeds you did at first* (Revelation 2:5). Thus, in this passage, the term has the sense of *change*, or *reform*, i.e., *resume doing what you formerly did*.

the Four Gospels are Greek translations of Jesus' Aramaic statements. Matthew heard Jesus say these words, but Mark did not. Mark was instructed by Peter and wrote what Peter told him. In Mark's Gospel, we have a second-hand rendition of Jesus' statement (he was repeating what Peter told him, many years after the fact) and in both of them we have a Greek rendering of the statement that was made in Aramaic. There really is not a contradiction between Matthew and Mark, but different means of rendering the idea conveyed in Jesus' statement.

⁸ The love which they are chastised for leaving is ἀγάπη, which is a non-emotional word. It is a volitional word – something that one chooses, rather than an emotion which one does not choose.

Romans 2:4 is another passage in which the term is used in a more general sense of *change*.

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance [μετάνοια]? (Romans 2:4)

Luke 13:3-5 is another passage in which the term is used in the broader sense of *change* or *change of behavior and attitude*.

"I tell you, no, but unless you repent [μετανοέω], you will all likewise perish.⁴ "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?"⁵ "I tell you, no, but unless you repent [μετανοέω], you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3-5)

Jesus immediately illustrated his point by giving the parable of the fig tree. He was speaking of God's efforts to bring about reform in Israel, and how Israel continually failed to reform. Jesus was warning them that if they did not change, disaster was coming.

Two passages in Revelation, describing obstinacy, in spite of God's severe efforts to bring about repentance [μετανοέω], refer to repentance as a change of behavior (which, of course, require a different attitude as a prerequisite for that change).

In Revelation 9:20-21, After a third of mankind is killed by God-orchestrated plagues, the remaining population of the earth is indicted because, in spite of what they have experienced, they do not cease their evil deeds.

And the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent [μετανοέω] of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent [μετανοέω] of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.

The same is seen in Revelation 16:9-11

And men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues; and they did not repent [μετανοέω], so as to give Him glory.¹⁰ And the fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast; and his kingdom became darkened; and they gnawed their tongues because of pain,¹¹ and they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores; and they did not repent [μετανοέω] of their deeds. (Revelation 16:9-11)

With this data before us, we can say:

- Repentance can include sorrow or remorse concerning one's sin, but remorse alone is not sufficient.
- Biblical repentance involves a change of belief concerning God and an inner change that results in a lifestyle consistent with God's character and His Revealed Will.

Sorrow can lead to genuine repentance and genuine repentance can lead to remorse over past sins, but without the μετανοέω and the ἐπιστρέφω dimensions, salvation is not achieved.

How does all of this apply to the topic of corporate repentance?

Corporate Repentance

An instance of corporate repentance is seen in Paul's rebuke of the Church at Corinth and the church's response. The situation is recorded in I Corinthians Chapter 5. A member of the church was in a sexual relationship with his father's wife.⁹ Not only was such a practice condemned by Jewish law,¹⁰ but even the moral cesspool of Corinth would be scandalized by such fornication.¹¹

The Corinthian Church had not only tolerated the situation, but there was a boasting of some sort related to the matter. Paul strongly rebuked the church and commanded that the man be excommunicated (verses 3-13).

The desired result was achieved, as is seen in II Corinthians 7:8-10. Here we encounter another term related to repentance – this is another term for sorrow or grief. The term is λυπέω. Observe the interplay of terms and then the final conclusion.

For though I caused you sorrow (λυπέω) by my letter, I do not regret (μεταμέλομαι) it; though I did regret (μεταμέλομαι) it-- for I see that that letter caused you sorrow (λυπέω), though only for a while--⁹ I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful (λυπέω), but that you were made sorrowful(λυπέω) to the point of repentance (μεταμέλομαι [i.e. regret]); for you were made sorrowful (λυπέω) according to the will of God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.¹⁰ For the sorrow (λύπη)¹² that is according to the will of God produces a repentance (μετανοέω) without regret (ἄμεταμέλητος)¹³ leading to salvation; but the sorrow(λύπη)¹⁴ of the world produces death. (2 Corinthians 7:8-10)

The exhortation to corporate repentance [μετανοέω] also is seen in the letters to the seven churches who were the recipients of the Book of Revelation. Five of the seven churches are exhorted to repent of some characteristic or condition allowed in the church (in each of the passages cited below the term rendered, *repent*, is μετανοέω).

Ephesus: The church is indicted for leaving its first love (Revelation 2:5) *'Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent.*

Pergamum: The church is indicted for tolerating false teachers (teachers of Balaam and Nicolaitans) (Revelation 2:16) *'Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.*

Thyatira: The church is indicted for tolerating Jezebel; she and those who are aligned with her are called to repent (Revelation 2:21-22) *'And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.*

⁹ No information is given about the man's father – perhaps he was deceased or divorced from the woman in the case.

¹⁰ Leviticus 18:7-8; Deuteronomy 22:30; 27:20

¹¹ Cicero, commenting on one such case, wrote, "Oh, incredible wickedness and – except in this woman's case – unheard in all experience!" (*Cluent. 6*). The *Institutes of Gaius*, 1.63, "Neither can I marry her who aforesaid has been my mother-in-law, or my step-mother, or daughter-in-law, or step-daughter....".

¹² Noun form of λυπέω

¹³ Negative of μεταμέλομαι

¹⁴ Ditto fn 10

Sardis: The church is indicted for failing to persist in zeal and as a result, to be dying through lackadaisical commitment (Revelation 3:3) *'Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.'*

Laodicea: Thus church is indicted because financial stability had produced a lukewarm church that did not need to depend on God (Revelation 3:19) *'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent.'*

In each of these situations, the exhortation to *repent* (μετανοέω), is an exhortation to execute some sort of change – whether in attitude, or deeds, or doctrinal responsibility.

The responsibility for displaying repentance and executing the needed action, both in the incestuous situation in Corinth and in the letters to these five churches, would be the responsibility of local church leadership. Note that each of the letters to the churches in Revelation is written to the *angel of the church of xxxxx*. There are various views as to what is meant by the term, *angel* (ἄγγελος), which literally means, *messenger*. Does the term refer to some sort of a non-corporeal spiritual being – an *angel* – who is responsible for bringing about repentance, or does it refer to some sort of human spiritual authority – a preacher, a prophet, an eldership, or some other entity? No one, who is completely honest, can answer this question with certainty.

This much, however, is clear – the burden of bringing about repentance in each of these situations is the responsibility of those who are the spiritual overseers of the local church.

When somethings or someones in the church are out of order or not correct, leadership is responsible for bringing about repentance of whatever nature is required in the situation. This is a sobering responsibility. Hebrews 13:17 is a reminder that church leaders must give account for how they have led and protected the Flock of God.

Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. (Hebrews 13:17)

This is in harmony with the charge that Paul gave to the Ephesian elders when he met with them at Miletus.

"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:28-30)

Because it is the responsibility of church leaders to rebuke false doctrine and to squelch sinful practices, when this is not done, the leaders themselves must repent. What would such repentance look like? Depending on the circumstances and the seriousness of the failure, the shepherds of the congregation may need to appear before the congregation and confess their failure. They then must demonstrate by their actions that they are taking the necessary steps to undo the consequences of their failure.

Conclusion

The repentance that initially leads sinners to salvation, is a change of mind concerning the person of Jesus and full trust in His redemptive acts. Repentance is expressed by a confession of faith, followed by immersion whereby the old man is buried and a new man comes forth indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

When believers become convicted of sin or a sin in their lives, a normal response is sorrow resulting in a change in the area where change is needed. They must confess their sin to God (I John 1:9-10) and possibly to another believer (James 5:16-20).¹⁵ A good rule to follow is that the confession and repentance need to be as public as has been the sinful practice or attitude (for a more complete treatment of this subject, see the paper *Dealing with Sin in the Lives of Believers*).¹⁶

When there is corporate sin, the leaders of the local church must acknowledge the (their?) failure, and some sort of public statement may be necessary. Obvious correction of the problem must be demonstrated. Trusted translocal ministers usually are needed to facilitate this event.

¹⁵ Note that in Acts 19:17-19, a situation is described in which some who were converts had continued in their practices of sorcery, until the incident with the seven sons of Sceva (vs. 10-16). The Sceva event caused these believers to confess, publically, their sinful magical practices and to burn their books of magic.

¹⁶ I personally know of three instances in which young women who had become pregnant out of wedlock, appeared before the local church (three different women and two different churches- decades apart), publically confessed the sin, expressed repentance, and asked and received forgiveness from the church – plus encouragement and an embracing by the women of the church, resulting in the repentant sinners’ leading a chaste and honorable life – and rearing the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Here is a letter that on a Sunday morning, before the entire congregation, one such young woman read to her church:

“For the past two years, I have strayed from my walk with God. Prior to that time, I was a fully committed disciple of Jesus Christ, my Savior.

About two years ago, I took control of my life and began to live an independent life, a life that was not submitted to Christ’s Lordship.

During those two years I did many things for which I am ashamed and I deeply regret doing those things.

The choice I made was totally out of character from the person I have been all of my life, and I acknowledge that this choice was made in disobedience to God.

My prayer is that the child which will be born in December - that even though his conception was the result of disobedience - that this child will become a blessing to many and that throughout his life he will be a true worshipper of God.

I want you, my spiritual family, to know that I have fully repented and I look to God’s grace for forgiveness as I surrender anew my life into His Hands. I want to be restored to Him.

It is my desire and my intention, from this time onward to be an obedient disciple of my Lord Jesus Christ.”