



REPENTANCE: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

(Source: Appendix B from *Hold Fast*)

Understanding how repentance is used historically in Scripture and then specifically in particular passages is critical to the concept of repentance in relation to initial salvation.

The context as well as the contextual consequences must be considered to understand repentance.

God selected Abraham to be the father of a specific nation, Israel, through which God would reveal Himself in a unique way to the rest of the world. After Abraham was declared righteous by faith (Gen. 15:6-21), God obligated Himself to Abraham through an eternal covenant, incorporating the prior promises recorded in Genesis 12:1-3: a *land*, a *seed*, and a *blessing*. An expanded development of the *seed* portion of the Abrahamic Covenant was given to David (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 89:3-4). The Davidic Covenant describes a ruling family, a house; a sphere of rule, a kingdom; and a seat of government, a throne. In Galatians 3:16 Paul wrote that the ultimate descendant and Seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ. Christ, the King, will rule over God's earthly kingdom. In a further expansion of the *blessing* portion of the Abrahamic Covenant, a New Covenant was promised to the nation of Israel (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:24-28; Joel 2:28-32).

It is in this historical setting of the covenant promise that the Gospels unveil the coming of the promised King and His offer of the promised kingdom to God's chosen people, the physical descendants of Abraham in potential fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Luke 1:30-33). The rebellious, covenant nation of Israel is being called back to God in preparation for the establishment of the kingdom. The coming of the kingdom is heralded by John the Baptist announcing, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). John, the forerunner of the King, would "turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord...so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:16-17). Moreover, John warned the nation of the "wrath to come" if they did not deal with their sin and rebellion (Matt. 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-9). While the "wrath to come" is understood as final, eternal judgment by some, the historical context best associates this wrath, in this writer's opinion, with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.¹ In preparation for the King, the nation is called on to repent and return to God in order to avoid temporal judgment.

The King, Jesus Christ, began His ministry with the very same message as John the Baptist, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). The King came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).² When the religious leaders questioned Jesus' association with sinners, He replied, "I have...come to call...sinners to repentance" (5:32). At the conclusion of His earthly ministry, Jesus instructed the Eleven to proclaim "repentance for forgiveness [i.e., repentance and forgiveness] of sins...to all

Context Is Critical

Historical Context

the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47). Yet, less than a year before, He had sent the Twelve out “to proclaim the kingdom of God” (9:2). The emphasis of the message had changed. As Jesus and the earthly kingdom, which He had come to inaugurate, were rejected by the nation, in particular by the religious leaders, the offer was withdrawn and the kingdom was postponed.

In Acts 1:6-7 just prior to His ascension, the eleven disciples even questioned Jesus about the time of the kingdom’s restoration on earth. He responded, “It is not for you to know,” indicating it was the Father’s concern, not theirs. At Christ’s ascension the kingdom’s postponement would become a reality. Knowing this, Jesus gave final instructions to the Eleven about their responsibility during the “in between time,” from Christ’s ascension to His return. Following the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and beginning in Jerusalem, Peter’s appeal to the Jewish nation was to “repent” (Acts 2:38) and to “repent and return” (3:19). He addressed the house of Israel who had rejected and crucified the King (2:3; 3:14-15).

The concept of repentance must conform to its historical framework. This particularly is true for the major passage universally used in order to explain repentance—Luke 15. This familiar text contains three parables that build to a crescendo, moving from the lost sheep (vv. 3-7), to the lost coin (vv. 8-10), to the lost son (vv. 11-32). In Luke 15:1-2, the issue is the religious leaders’ continual fixation on Christ’s association with sinners, those for whom He has come to “call...to repentance” (5:32).³ Jesus’ seeking-and-calling ministry was addressed primarily to the nation Israel, wanting them to repent and return again to their God. This is the intent of Luke 15. When something is lost and then found, whether a sheep or a coin or a son, it is cause for rejoicing (vv. 7, 10, 22-24).⁴ When a sinner repents and returns to his heavenly Father, joy in heaven is the result. The wayward son finally came to the realization that he had sinned against his father through his defiant and ungrateful behavior (v. 18). The parallel between the rebellious nation and the unruly son is in view.

Calling the covenant nation to repent from its rebellion toward God and to turn to Him is the historical context in which we find the message of repentance and the kingdom by both John the Baptist and Christ. Continued defiance resulted in the postponement of the promised earthly kingdom and brought temporal judgment to Israel at the hands of the Romans in AD 70.⁵ With the kingdom’s postponement and the Spirit’s arrival, Peter continued to appeal to the nation to “repent” (Acts 2:38; 3:19). After Peter told the Jewish crowd that they had crucified their King (2:36), they were “pierced to the heart” (v. 37). Their question “What shall we do?” (v. 37) implies that they believed Peter’s message (vv. 14-36), which is supported in verse 44.⁶ Peter answered their question in verse 38. “Repent” of your wickedness, particularly concerning their complicity in Christ’s death, “be baptized” (*in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*) and you will “receive the gift” of the New Covenant promise, which is the Holy Spirit.

We need to remember that Acts is a transitional book. In his Gospel Luke moves from the ministry of Christ to the ministry of the apostles as Christ’s witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the remainder of the earth (Acts 1:8). Within this transitional period, did the condition for repentance change? Do Gentiles also need to repent for the same reason as the Jewish nation? Does repentance continue to relate to temporal judgment, or does it relate to eternal judgment? Is repentance necessary for salvation for everyone? To provide perspective, six examples, addressing the chronological order of faith, repentance, forgiveness, water baptism (John’s or believer’s), and Spirit baptism, are presented.⁷ Accurately understanding the sequence of events or steps for each example gives insight to the conversion of a variety of groups within the New Testament. The *first two examples* relate to the preparation ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus prior to their deaths and the postponement of the kingdom. The *next two examples* involve Palestinian Jews after the kingdom is delayed. As with the Acts 1:8 mandate, the *final two illustrations* address the taking of the gospel to Samaria and then to the Gentile world.

Contextual Considerations

Identifying the Pattern

The requirements for initial salvation in the Gospels (Matt. 3; Mark 1; Luke 3) and also for John’s disciples (Acts 19) differ from those following Christ’s ascension. Christ came preaching, “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The preparation for the nation to return and receive the good news of the King and the kingdom of God involved repentance and water baptism with a view to life with the King and forgiveness of sins (chart 1). Avoidance of temporal judgment and establishment of the kingdom was the potential result of national repentance. However, for each individual, life and forgiveness were based on faith in Christ. Just as Abraham received life and blessing through faith (Gen. 15:6), forgiveness of sins is likewise available only through faith—“everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43). Notice that John’s water baptism or the baptism of repentance “by which they [individuals in the nation] expressed their repentance was a condition for the forgiveness of their sins.”⁸

1

KINGDOM PREPARATION

John the Baptist’s Judean Pattern

(Matt 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; Acts 19)

1. Repent
2. Water Baptism (John’s)
3. Faith (eternal life & forgiveness of sins)

John the Baptist’s Disciples Pattern

(Acts 19)

[Repent, Water Baptism, Faith]

(see above)

1. Water Baptism (believer’s)
2. Hands laid on by Paul
3. Spirit Baptism

In Acts 19:1-7 Paul encountered disciples of John who had already experienced (1) repentance, (2) water baptism by John, and (3) faith, each occurring earlier in the Gospel account (Matt. 3; Mark 1; Luke 3). Nevertheless Paul completed their identification with Christ through believer’s baptism and their reception of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. These last actions parallel the patterns that follow below. We must conclude that the order of events of the *kingdom preparation* pattern is: (1) repent, (2) John’s water baptism, (3) faith, (4) believer’s water baptism, (5) and Spirit baptism.

As we previously discussed concerning Acts 2 in *Contextual Considerations*, the crowd’s response with the question, “What shall we do?” (v. 37), implies their belief in the message Peter had just presented (vv. 14-36). Their faith resulted in eternal life prior to repentance, as well as before both water and Spirit baptism (chart 2). As Paul wrote concerning his own conversion experience, he asked two questions when the Lord Jesus revealed Himself on the Damascus Road. First, “Who art Thou, Lord?” (Acts 22:8). Christ responded, “I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.” Then, immediately Peter asked a second question, “What shall I do, Lord?” (v. 10). This verse does not provide a definitive “Lord, I trust in you alone for eternal life!” But is not it the obvious implication that Paul believed in Christ at that moment?⁹ Forgiveness of sins occurred following believer’s water baptism as revealed in Acts 22:16, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins.” The key order of events for the *postponed kingdom* is: (1) faith, (2) repent, (3) believer’s water baptism, (4) and Spirit baptism.

2

KINGDOM POSTPONEMENT

Judean Pattern

(Acts 2)

1. Faith (eternal life)
2. Repent
3. Water Baptism (believer's & forgiveness of sins)
4. Spirit Baptism

Pauline Pattern

(Acts 9 & 22)

1. Faith (eternal life)
2. Repent (assumed)
3. Water Baptism (believer's & forgiveness of sins)
4. Spirit Baptism (assumed)

Church Expansion

The Samaritan (Acts 8) and Gentile (Acts 10) examples do not directly address repentance; they do address faith and the baptisms (chart 3). With the Samaritans water baptism was followed by Spirit baptism (8:16-17), but with the Gentiles, Spirit baptism was followed by water baptism (10:44-48). The Gentile example concerns Cornelius, who was a “God-fearing man” (10:22; cf. vv. 2, 35).¹⁰ He found favor with God (v. 35) and, as a result, Peter was sent to him (vv. 1-2).¹¹ Again faith in each of these two examples was the basis for eternal life and forgiveness of sins (v. 43). Additionally, the Samaritan and Gentile patterns relate to the mandate of Acts 1:8. The apostle Peter’s presence and ministry validated the acceptance of Gentiles into the body of Christ, which in turn was authenticated through the Spirit’s baptism (8:17; 10:44). The *church expansion* order of events is narrowed to only three: (1) faith, (2) Spirit baptism, and (3) believer’s water baptism.

3

CHURCH EXPANSION

Samaritan Pattern

(Mixed Jew & Gentile—Acts 8)

1. Faith (eternal life & forgiveness of sins)
2. Water Baptism (believer’s)
3. Hands laid on by Peter
4. Spirit Baptism

Gentile Pattern

(Cornelius—Acts 10)

- 1a. Faith (eternal life & forgiveness of sins)
- 1b. Spirit Baptism
2. Water Baptism (believer’s)

Summary

The sequential order of events, leading to and immediately following salvation, varied within the different models (chart 4). Both the historical context and the particular people group come into play. Repentance may be a precursor to and preparer for faith as in the *Earthly Kingdom Preparation* illustrations. However, this is not always the case. Neither in the *Kingdom Postponed* or the *Church Expansion* examples is repentance required for initial salvation. Nevertheless, faith, in every case, is the only means to receive God's gracious gift of eternal life and forgiveness of sins.

4

SALVATION PATTERN SUMMARY

Kingdom Preparation

John the Baptist's Judean Pattern

(Matt 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; Acts 19)

1. Repent
2. Water Baptism (John's)
3. Faith (eternal life & forgiveness of sins)

John the Baptist's Disciples Pattern

(Acts 19)

[Repent, Water Baptism, Faith]
(see above)

1. Water Baptism (believer's)
2. Hands laid on by Paul
3. Spirit Baptism

Kingdom Postponement

Judean Pattern

(Acts 2)

1. Faith (eternal life)
2. Repent
3. Water Baptism (believer's & forgiveness of sins)
4. Spirit Baptism

Pauline Pattern

(Acts 9, 22)

1. Faith (eternal life)
2. Repent (assumed)
3. Water Baptism (believer's & forgiveness of sins)
4. Spirit Baptism (assumed)

Church Expansion

Samaritan Pattern

(Mixed Jew & Gentile—Acts 8)

1. Faith (eternal life & forgiveness of sins)
2. Water Baptism (believer's)
3. Hands laid on by Peter
4. Spirit Baptism

Gentile Pattern

(Cornelius—Acts 10)

- 1a. Faith (eternal life & forgiveness of sins)
- 1b. Spirit Baptism
2. Water Baptism (believer's)

Conclusion

The historical context, in light of the six salvation examples just discussed, must be considered in order to come to a clear understanding of repentance. Not to take into account the complexities within each group and then evaluating each in relation to the other five will invariably result in confusion. Isolating each and then interpreting them separately will only cloud and distort any understanding of repentance.



Endnotes

1. Sources that associate the “wrath to come” in these texts to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 are these:
Zane C. Hodges, Harmony with God (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 2001), pp. 52-54; *Robert N. Wilkin, Confident in Christ* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), p. 203; *J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words & Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 319-320; *David R. Anderson, “The National Repentance of Israel” Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1998): pp. 7-8; *Rene A. Lopez, “Do Believers Experience the Wrath of God?” Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2002): pp. 45-66.
2. In the preceding verse (Luke 19:9) “salvation” had just come to “a son of Abraham,” Zaccheus. Jesus’ primary ministry of “seeking and saving the lost” concerned the covenant nation.
3. Pentecost, *The Words & Works of Jesus Christ*, p. 333.
4. Each parable illustrates the character of God in reference to sinners versus that of the Pharisees. However, do not miss the point that the owners possessed both the sheep and coin before they were recovered and found. Also the father and son continued to have a relationship with one another before the restoration of fellowship occurred. The parables concern a restoration of what was once possessed. Seemingly the restoration of the covenant nation to fellowship with God is in view.
5. The principle is that disobedience results in judgment. The failure of national repentance resulted in national judgment; however, all individuals within the nation did not necessarily experience judgment.
6. Those who understand that the crowd’s reaction revealed their belief in Peter’s message include the following:
Earl D. Radmacher, Salvation (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), p.132; and *Hodges, Harmony with God*, p. 98;
7. *Hodges, Harmony with God*, pp. 92-94, 101, 104, 111-112.
In his excellent book Zane Hodges presents different models to address the chronological order of faith, repentance, forgiveness, water baptism, and Spirit baptism in different settings in the Gospels and Acts. This author will use those models, add others, and rearrange them for the argument presented.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
9. Even though not mentioned, during the three days before Ananias came to restore Paul’s sight (Acts 9:9), could it not be assumed that Paul repented?
10. Being “a devout man, and one who feared God” could imply Cornelius’s repentance to God.
11. Acts 11:19 indicates that “God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life.*” God has given Gentiles the opportunity to repent and experience life, abundant life, just as the Jewish Christians experienced it.