

MYTH 8

No Salvation
without Rehabilitation



HOLD FAST

*And he [John] came into all the district
around the Jordan, preaching a
baptism of repentance for the forgive-
ness of sins....Therefore bear fruits
in keeping with repentance.*

Luke 3:3, 8

*From that time Jesus began to preach
and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of
heaven is at hand."*

Matthew 4:17

*Now after John had been taken into
custody, Jesus came into Galilee,
preaching the gospel of God, and
saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the
kingdom of God is at hand; repent and
believe in the gospel."*

Mark 1:14-15

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TRUTH

SAVED JUST AS YOU ARE

It's the fourth quarter of a football game with only twenty-eight seconds left on the clock when the coach calls for a time-out. The previous running play failed to pick up a first down, and time on the clock was crucial. The ball is now on their own twenty-nine yard line with a yard to go for the first down. The coach must make his decision. Go for the first down; if they make it, they win the game. On the other hand, they could punt and force the other team to go some seventy to eighty yards to score. Does he rely on his team's offense to make the first down or punt and rely on the team's defense to protect the score? Which would you choose?

The coach makes his choice based on the highest percentages. He will punt and defend. He sends out his punter, while pumping up his defense, readying them to hold the other team. The ball is snapped and then punted, but the kicker's punt goes off the side of his foot. Rather than the expected fifty-yard punt, it only goes five yards, wobbling out of bounds. The opposing team begins their drive on the thirty-four-yard line and scores before time runs out. The game is lost and the sports reporters begin to question the coach's call.

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If only the coach had known that it would be a poor punt, he would have made a different decision. But he obviously made the best decision at the time based on the information he knew. And so it is with other things in life. In fact there can be unintended consequences from conclusions we make as we study the Scripture. Well-intended, yet misguided assumptions result in wrong convictions.

Well-Intended Assumptions

One issue church leaders continually discuss relative to saving faith is repentance. Some see repentance as an integral part of initial salvation; others see it differently, not even required at conversion. [Note: this chapter does not address repentance of believers, only repentance concerning initial salvation.]

There are three ways to approach the relationship of repentance to the salvation message. The *first approach* views repentance as *a change of behavior*. Faith is combined with repentance in order to be saved and escape eternal judgment. Therefore initial salvation requires repentance plus faith.

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The *second approach* believes that repentance is a *change of mind about Christ*, making faith and repentance synonymous terms. To believe in Christ at initial salvation is to have a change of mind about the person of Jesus, in order to escape eternal judgment. The *third approach* views repentance as *a change of mind about one's sins*. In this approach

repentance should lead to a change of behavior and in doing so avoids temporal judgment, but repentance is not necessarily required for initial salvation. Initial salvation is received exclusively by faith alone.

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All three positions are taught fervently in the church. So which one correctly addresses repentance and at the same time faith? How can all three be defended from the Scripture? However well intentioned, the position of each approach determines its validity.

Repentance Defined

Biblically repentance is defined as a change of mind: “a decision to turn from one’s sins” or “an internal resolve to turn from one’s sins.”¹ Rather than a behavioral turning from sin, the emphasis is an internal decision, a choosing to turn from sin. This new sensitivity should lead to a change of behavior.

But we must not confuse the cause with the effect. The natural chain of events is as follows: internal resolve (repentance) leads to different behavioral choices, which in turn results in observable changed behavior (the effect). It is noteworthy that John the Baptist calls for those coming to him to “bear fruits in keeping with [worthy of] repentance” (Luke 3:8). As a result the multitudes asked, “What shall we do?” (v. 10). The tax collectors asked, “What shall we do?” (v. 12). And the soldiers asked, “What shall we do?” (v. 14). In each case the Baptist delineated deeds that should be evidenced by each group. These changes in behavior would be the effect of repentance. Repentance is only an internal resolve, while works are the external manifestation.²

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Assessment Required

It is critical to understand the use of repentance in its contextual

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setting. *Appendix B* discusses the historical context of repentance. The correct definition and usage, within the historical context, are crucial in order to avoid unintended consequences. So let's consider the three major views regarding repentance at initial salvation.

Repentance plus Faith

In this approach there are two necessary and equal conditions that must be met to obtain eternal life: (1) repenting from sin and (2) believing in Jesus Christ.³ Repentance is understood as the actual turning from sinful behavior or moral reformation.⁴ Faith is understood as a turning to God. James Boice writes, "When the gospel is preached it is customary to speak about forgiveness, saying that we must confess our sin and turn to God where alone we can find forgiveness for that sin. That is true enough, of course...But what is equally true...is that the gospel also requires repentance, which is not mere confession of sin but is a turning from it as well."⁵ Likewise, A.W. Tozer writes, "There can be no spiritual regeneration till there has been a moral reformation...The converted man is both reformed and regenerated. And unless the sinner is willing to reform his way of living he will never know the inward experience of regeneration."⁶

This position relates to the time of the kingdom-preparation ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus. Both proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2, John the Baptist; 4:17, Jesus). Furthering their support, advocates remind us that Jesus came preaching, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15), and Peter proclaimed, "Therefore repent and return [to God]" (Acts 3:19). Obviously in these verses John, Jesus, and Peter linked repentance with "the kingdom," "belief in the gospel," and "returning to God." However, as discussed in *Appendix B*, the historical context must be taken into consideration in order to understand how their message was related to the time and audience to which they spoke.

If there are two necessary requirements (turning from sin and

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believing in Christ) in order to be saved, a number of factors put this line of thinking into question.

First, the “repent + believe” view does not address the fact that nothing is said about repentance at the conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16), the conversions in Samaria (8:4-17), or the conversions of Nicodemus (John 3:1-16) or the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:25-34). Also this view does not account for John’s Gospel never addressing repentance (turning from sin); yet John’s Gospel is universally understood as the evangelistic gospel (John 20:30-31). John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish,” lacks any moral reformation requirement for eternal life.

Second, the “repent + believe” position relies on two texts that address *turning from* and *turning to* (Acts 26:18; 1 Thess. 1:9). Individuals are to “turn from darkness” (Acts 26:18) and to “*turn* from idols” (1 Thess. 1:9). After quoting 1 Thessalonians 1:9 as a proof text, MacArthur writes, “The simple but all too often overlooked fact is that a true change of mind will necessarily result in a change of behavior.”⁷ Even though these verses do address unbelievers coming to Christ in faith, neither text refers to behavioral changes. Rather, the emphasis is a realignment of one’s object of faith. The turning-from/turning-to concept concerns the transference of allegiance, not a behavioral change.

Third, the extent of God’s involvement in Acts 5:31 and Acts 11:18 is understood differently by each major view. The two texts read, “He [Christ] is the one whom God exalted...to grant

Approach #1

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repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31) and “God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). Since the “repentance + faith” view believes that God brings about a change of behavior at conversion, they conclude from these texts that God produces repentance. MacArthur explains, “We have seen already that repentance is a critical element of genuine faith, and that repentance is granted by God; it is not a human work. . . . Likewise, faith is a supernatural gift of God.”⁸

So the “repent + faith” view understands repentance or a change of behavior not as man’s work but God’s.⁹ This author, therefore, continues to wonder why John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles commanded repentance if it was something those commanded could not actually accomplish. Are we not being told that God carries out the reformation of a person’s life automatically? If so, why do we have commands at all? The obvious result of this view is that biblical commands lose their importance, impact, and validity.

The unintended consequence of this approach in reference to James 2:14-26 is to require works as a proof of salvation.¹⁰ If works are not evident, then God is not continually working in the person’s life.¹¹

Fourth, as a condition for initial salvation, if there is no repentance, then it follows that there is no new birth and no escape from God’s eternal judgment. This approach fails to consider the historical context as discussed in *Appendix B*.

Fifth, an interpretation of repentance, which requires behavior modification, does not conform to the biblical definition.

Faith = Repentance

The “faith = repentance” approach sees faith as the only requirement for initial salvation. Repentance, however, is understood as a “change of mind” about Christ and the gospel message.¹² As such, faith and repentance are taken as synonymous terms. Charles Ryrie writes, “This [repentance] is a valid condition for salvation when

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understood as a synonym for faith.”¹³ So not to be misunderstood, Ryrie continues, “It [repentance] is a false addition to faith when understood as a prerequisite, requiring the cleansing of the life in order to be saved.”¹⁴

In support of this view and in an attempt to harmonize Scripture, advocates of this view align two texts. These two passages consider the answer to the question, “What must I do?” Since the answer to the question, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37) at Pentecost was “Repent” (v. 38), and the answer to the Philippian jailor’s question, “What must I do be to be saved?” (Acts 16:30) was “Believe” (v. 31), we are told that salvation in the first passage comes through repentance and in the second by faith. Their conclusion: faith and repentance are used interchangeably. Thus, if faith and repentance are synonyms, John’s Gospel need not refer to repentance.

However, a number of factors oppose this assertion.

First, some verses contradict this assessment. Jesus’ statement, “*Repent and believe in the gospel*” (Mark 1:15) shows that the two are distinct, not equal. Their distinction is again evident when Paul spoke of “*repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 20:21).¹⁵

Second, as discussed in *Appendix B*, following 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 at Pentecost that they had crucified their King (Acts 2:36), “they were pierced to the heart” (v. 37). Then came the question, “What shall we do?” (v. 37). While some have concluded that Peter’s answer of “Repent” (v. 38) is equivalent to “Believe” and therefore salvation occurred, this author understands that the crowd’s reaction

Approach #2
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reveals their belief in Peter's message (vv. 14-36) prior to the question, "What shall we do?" (v. 37). Repentance followed salvation.

Third, while repentance means *a change of mind about sin* in one passage (Mark 1:5); repentance means *a change of mind about God* in another passage (Acts 2:38). The problem of equating faith and repentance is made evident by these two texts. Thus, placing them in the historical setting as discussed in *Appendix B* is the only basis for discerning their proper meaning in Scripture.

Fourth, faith is the basis for repentance. The Ninevites believed the truthfulness of Jonah's message (Jonah 3:4-9). As a result, they chose to repent, turn from their wicked ways, and judgment was withdrawn (v. 10). Likewise, John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Many repented, believing their word. In each case the decision to turn from sin was based upon belief. Since repentance is based on faith, they cannot be equivalent. Repentance is a decision; faith is a persuasion.¹⁶

Fifth, since this view believes faith is the same as repentance at initial salvation, judgment concerning faith and repentance is forced to refer to eternal judgment. Here again, history is the key (see *Appendix B*).

Faith Stands Alone

The "faith-stands-alone" position also recognizes that faith is the only requirement for initial salvation. Faith and repentance, however, are seen as distinct and separate terms. Repentance is understood as a "decision" or "internal resolve" to turn from one's sins. That decision to turn from sin should lead to a change in behavior.

This view differs from the "repent + faith" position that requires modification in behavior as a prerequisite for conversion. The faith-stands-alone view rejects moral rehabilitation as a requirement at initial salvation.

Contrary to the "faith = repentance" stance which makes

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faith equivalent to repentance, this view distinguishes faith from repentance. Faith is the basis for repentance.

Also the “*faith-stands-alone*” position understands the extent of God’s involvement in Acts 5:31 and Acts 11:18 differently from the “*repent + believe*” view. Again the two texts read, “He [Christ] is the one whom God exalted...to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31) and “God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” (11:18). Rather than concluding that God changes behavior at conversion, the “*faith-stands-alone*” view sees these texts as addressing God’s acceptance of Israel (5:31) and the Gentiles (11:18) into the body of Christ by granting the “opportunity to repent,” to receive forgiveness of sins and to experience life with Christ.¹⁷ This life is “the life of faith which is connected with Christ, the Life.”¹⁸ Addressing Acts 11:18, Zane Hodges explains, “It was thus evident that the Gentiles had entered the same ‘life experience’ that believing Jews enjoyed, this is, they were fully blessed [and fully accepted] by God with whom they were now obviously in harmony. We might say, ‘They entered into the Christian life.’”¹⁹

As a result of this view, good works in James 2:14-26 is rightly understood to mean a believer’s maturity in Christ. Fellowship, not the saving relationship, is the central issue in James 2.

In alignment with the historical context addressed in *Appendix B*, the “*faith-stands-alone*” position believes repentance may precede faith as a preparer for faith. John the Baptist’s preaching of “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:17) is an example of repentance preparing individuals to believe in Christ alone for salvation. However, one should not conclude that repentance is

Approach #3
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a requirement for conversion. There are no preconditions for initial salvation. Hodges elaborates, “It is one thing to say that repentance *facilitates* faith in Christ for eternal life—the Bible teaches that. It is quite another thing to say that repentance is a *requirement* for eternal life. That the Bible does *not* teach.”²⁰

Repentance can lead toward or facilitate faith that saves, resulting in forgiveness of sin (Luke 3:3; Acts 10:43).²¹ However, repentance may follow initial faith in Christ (Acts 2:37-38) or be excluded entirely at initial salvation (Acts 8:12-17; 16:30-31). Earl Radmacher writes, “Repentance *may* precede salvation by way of preparation...but it is *not necessary* if the individual is ready for faith, as in the case of the Philippian jailer.”²²

If repentance is necessary every time in the saving message, why is it not included? And if repentance is not equivalent to faith, then what is the role of repentance? *Repentance is a decision to turn from one’s sins in order to avoid temporal judgment* (see *Appendix B*). Trusting in Christ results in eternal life, removing the threat of eternal judgment.

It Is Your Call

You must make a choice. Is repentance at conversion (1) a required change of behavior, (2) an equivalent to faith, or (3) a realization of your waywardness from God. The latter option is the only approach that aligns with the historical context of the Gospels and of Acts.

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Myth 8, NOTES

1. Zane C. Hodges, *Harmony with God* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 2001), p. 57; Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), p. 201; David R. Anderson, "Repentance is for All Men," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (spring 1998): 10.
2. Additionally, Paul tells us that he went proclaiming, "that they [Jew and Gentile] should repent and turn to God, performing deed [works] appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). Good works aligned with the new perspective on sin. Repentance is an internal resolve, not a demonstration of the truth. Good works are the fruit of choices based on repentance.
3. John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 162.

MacArthur writes, "Repentance is a critical element of saving faith, but one must never dismiss it as simply another word for believing... Literally it means "afterthought" or "change of mind," but biblically its meaning does not stop there. As *metanoia* is used in the New Testament, it *always* speaks of a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin. In the sense Jesus used it, repentance calls for a repudiation of the old life and a turning to God for salvation" (italics added).

W. E. Vine, *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), p. 953.

Vine says, "In the N.T. the subject chiefly has reference to repentance from sin, and this change of mind involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God. The parable of the prodigal son is an outstanding illustration of this."

4. A. W. Tozer, *A Treasury of A.W. Tozer* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1980), pp. 115-117.
The title of this myth parallels the chapter title Tozer used in his work: *No Regeneration Without Reformation*. The difference is that Tozer actually taught this myth as truth.
5. James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1986), p. 108.
6. Tozer, *A Treasury of A.W. Tozer*, p. 115.
7. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 163.

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8. Ibid., p. 172.
9. Ibid., p. 88.
10. Ibid., p. 170.
11. See *Myth 10: Perseverance Required*.
12. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, p. 95.
13. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, p. 1950.
14. Ibid.
15. Peter's proclamation in Acts 3 included the words "repent...and return" (v. 19). Similarly in his defense before King Agrippa in Acts 26, Paul spoke of declaring to both the Jews and Gentiles "that they should repent and turn to God" (v. 20). In both occasions, "return" and "turn to God" seem to refer to placing "faith" in Christ.
16. See *Myth 6: Faith Is a Decision*.
17. Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on The ACTS of the Apostles* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), p. 225.
18. R. C. H. Linski, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 446-447.
19. Hodges, *Harmony with God*, p. 118.
20. Ibid., p. 93 (italics his).
21. Ibid., pp. 93-94.
22. Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville, Word Publishing, 2000), p. 134 (italics his).