

What Is Repentance?

Most people have only a vague idea of what the word means. What exactly is repentance?

by Cecil Maranville

Jesus, Christ, Christian and saved are words familiar to many in the Western world. But *repent* is seldom mentioned by religious figures, and few people comprehend what it means.

You may be surprised to learn how much the word and concept of repentance are a part of the teachings of Jesus Christ, the early Church and the entire Bible.

For example: “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom 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, emphasis added throughout). So begins Mark’s account of the message Jesus brought.

While many religious teachers quote the apostle Paul, they don’t usually point out that repentance was a central part of his message. “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked,” said Paul to the Athenians, “but now [He] commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world . . .” (Acts 17:30-31).

All followers of Christ should clearly understand repentance. Likewise, every genuine servant of Christ should teach what He and His early disciples taught. “[Christ] . . . called the twelve [disciples] to Himself, and began to send them out . . . So they went out and preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:7-12).

Theme of God’s messengers

What did Jesus, Paul and the original apostles say to people? What did they expect their hearers to do? Most important, what does their message have to do with you and me?

“That people should repent” is a consistent theme of God’s messengers and ministers. We find the message of repentance throughout the Bible, Old and New Testament alike.

In the Old Testament God’s command to repent was most often directed at nations or other groups, whereas the New Testament’s emphasis is most often on the *individual’s* need to turn from his wicked ways.

If you have thought that “repent” pertains only to criminals, pornographers, drug dealers and the like, you’ve been misinformed.

A good place to begin to understand the meaning of repentance is with these plain words of God through the prophet Isaiah: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put

away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil” (Isaiah 1:16).

Evil is a strong word. The phrase “cease to do evil” is foundational to understanding repentance. Simply put, we are to *stop doing wrong things*.

Wash off the dirt

Starting with God’s words through Isaiah, what do we learn that we need to wash off? What is the evil that God wants us to stop doing?

If you answer that “dirty” and “evil” refer to breaking God’s laws, you are on the right track. Repentance requires that we stop doing bad things—the things that, whether we realize it or not, hurt others and ourselves. God’s laws *define* the kinds of thoughts and behaviors that cause people to suffer.

Notice Jeremiah 26:1-6, 13. In this message from the prophet Jeremiah to Judah, God defines “evil” as breaking His law and “repentance” as turning to obedience to God’s commands. When God told the Jews to “turn from [their] evil way” (verse 3), the Hebrew word for “way” means a journey, a course of life, a way of life. An up-to-date synonym is “lifestyle.”

If they didn’t repent, God said, He would make them “like Shiloh.” This warning reminded the people of the Philistines’ annihilation of that city several hundred years before. This was a warning of the consequences for flagrant and sinful courses of action if they didn’t change their ways. God takes sin seriously. (To better understand the purpose of God’s laws, and where sin leads, please request the free booklets *The Ten Commandments* and *Why Does God Allow Suffering?*)

So we begin to construct our biblical definition of repentance: *Repentance involves turning from a life of evil and disobedience.*

But what is “good”?

We’ve seen from the Bible what we need to turn *from*. But our definition is not complete. Now we need to consider what we must turn *to*. Not only do we need to *stop* doing bad things, we must *do* good things instead.

We read earlier in Isaiah 1:16 that God commands us to “cease to do evil.” The very next words of God that follow are “*Learn to do good . . .*” (verse 17).

God expects us to grow in the grace and

knowledge of Jesus Christ—in the awareness of what He says is acceptable (2 Peter 3:17-18). This must be a continual task of every truly devoted Christian, an enduring commitment. Sadly, many religious teachers speak only of an initial commitment to God rather than a new way of life.

Most people normally want to be thought of as good, but few are stirred to investigate what God calls good. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul urges us to “prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

To “prove” in this context means putting something to the test, to examine, to try, to discern. That speaks of learning through *doing*, accompanied by reason and reflection. In other words, the proof of what is the acceptable—the perfect—will of God is in the doing.

Our lives constantly change. Change comes to us simply through the process of maturing and aging. Circumstances around us change—job, finances, health and family. As they do, pressures and stresses upon us change.

In addition to such physical matters, if God is working with us He brings various spiritual concepts to our awareness at various times. These factors all demand that we continue to ask and discern what is good. The Bible is the source of the answer. Then we must continue *proving* what is good by putting it into practice, by a changed way of living that is now in accordance with His instruction.

A different way of thinking

Repentance goes beyond living by what we personally consider to be good. Repentance is a way of godly thinking that guides our actions. Notice Jesus’ words in Matthew 9:13: “I desire mercy [a way of thinking and resultant action] and not sacrifice [religion based only on ritual].”

Christ amplified this thought in Matthew 18:3: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (New Revised Standard Version). The Greek word translated “change” means “to turn quite around or reverse, to convert” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*).

This is a much greater commitment than short-lived promises made on the spur of the moment. It’s also deeper than the pledges people make in moments of crisis, sincere though they might be at the time.

While we’re looking at the meaning of

words, let's consider how the New Testament uses *repentance* and *repent*. To paraphrase the *Strong's* definition, *repentance* includes a sense of compunction for guilt, a reversal of one's decision, a resolve to think differently, to reconsider. We find in these meanings a combination of *conviction* and *action*.

Now we've added significantly to our construction of a definition: *Repentance is turning from a life of evil and disobedience to an obedient way of thinking and living.*

Feelings can mislead

Our definition is still incomplete. Let's explore the idea of "compunction" a little further. It is defined in *The American Unabridged Dictionary* as "uneasiness caused by guilt, a prick of the conscience; remorse."

We find a biblical example of compunction in Acts 2:37-38: "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy [Spirit]" (King James Version).

This passage demonstrates that repentance begins with the "prick of the conscience" but goes beyond that to thought and action.

Although a sense of guilt can trigger the beginning of repentance, we need to realize that emotions aren't always an accurate guide in this crucial spiritual matter. We can see how inaccurate one's senses or feelings can be by looking at Christ's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus showed that it is possible for a person to *feel* spiritually acceptable when he clearly is not. The obvious message is this: Don't rely solely on your feelings when it comes to spiritual matters.

John adds that there is a time to respond to our feelings and a time to ignore them (1 John 3:18-21). We have to properly educate our consciences, the basis for any sense of guilt or remorse, through study and proper understanding of God's Word.

In this same chapter, 1 John 3, we read of yet another defining aspect of repentance. We are to learn to love other people, believe in Christ and all He taught and choose ways that please God. These actions will result in a personal relationship with God and godly relationships with other people (verses 22-24.)

God amplifies His expectations in Jeremiah 7:1-14, 21-23. First we must change our thoughts, then our actions. Part of the change is to learn to conduct our relationships with other people in a godly manner. "For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you . . ." (verses 5-7, NRSV).

Notice John's words on this point: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also" (1 John 4:20-21). We must build godly relationships with other people if we are to build the right relationship with God.

Some mistakenly view Bible prophecy as a club and prophets as the men who wielded it. On the contrary, prophecy is an appeal from God to His people, asking them to change so He can fully demonstrate His love for them. Our relationship with God includes responding to His direction and correction. God describes this as an intimate relationship in which "I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 8:10).

Let's assemble what we have found into our definition: *Repentance is turning from a life of evil and disobedience to an obedient way of thinking and living that results in a personal relationship with God and a godly relationship with people.*

A comprehensive definition

Do we now have a comprehensive defi-

inition? Not quite. We need to add one more important aspect. We have seen this element in several references so far, although we haven't specifically pointed it out.

When is a person finished with repentance? *Never!* If you aren't familiar with the section of Scripture quoted at the beginning of this article, Isaiah 1:16-20, take time to read it. These verses summarize the meaning of repentance. They speak of a *lifelong* way of thinking and acting. Repentance is not limited to a point in time or an emotional experience when a person makes a commitment to God—commonly said to be "giving your heart to the Lord." It is much, much more.

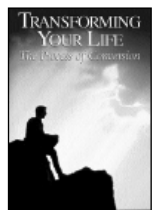
So we add this final thought to complete our definition: *Repentance is a continual turning from a life of evil and disobedience to an obedient way of thinking and living that results in a personal relationship with God and a godly relationship with people.*

If this concept of repentance is new to you, you probably have not repented—as shocking as that might seem. We don't say this in judgment but to give you the same message Jesus taught. You can see how integral repentance is to the Christian way of life and God's expectations for us.

Failing to understand and respond to God's call to repent could prevent us from enjoying all of the blessings He would like to give us. The foremost blessing is salvation itself. So the subject of repentance couldn't be more important to you.

Recommended Reading

The Bible shows repentance to be the first step in forming a right relationship with God. What more does God ask? What do you need to do? To learn more, be sure to request your free copies of *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and *The Road to Eternal Life*. Both booklets are free.



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