The Role of Repentance in Evangelism

Introduction

Repentance is one of the most frequently misunderstood words in the Christian vocabulary. Michael Cocoris was not over-exaggerating when he wrote:

> Repent is the most misunderstood word in the Bible. What most think is repentance is not repentance at all. What is often said to be repentance may be related to repentance, coming before it, or resulting from it, but is not part of the *nature* of repentance.[1]

For many believers, the word brings to mind ideas such as sorrow, regret, cleaning up one's life, or turning away from sinful behavior. In evangelistic preaching, the confusion often deepens. Phrases like "repent of your sins," "turn your life around," or "stop sinning and follow Jesus" are frequently presented as requirements for receiving eternal life.

These common expressions reflect popular evangelical definitions of repentance, but they do not align with the way Scripture uses the word. As a result, the message of salvation can shift—sometimes subtly, sometimes clearly—from simple faith in Christ to something that includes human effort.

Yet Scripture presents repentance in a much simpler way. In both the Old and New Testaments, the word refers to a change of mind, perspective, or understanding—not a change of behavior. While a change of mind may lead to a change in how a person lives, those outward changes are the result of repentance, not its meaning. When repentance appears alongside belief in the Gospels and Acts, the two function together to describe the inward response of one who has become convinced of the truth about Jesus Christ.

This paper seeks to clarify what repentance is, what it is not, and how it relates to the gospel message. By returning to the Bible's definition, the goal is to bring clarity to evangelistic language, remove unnecessary confusion, and preserve the simplicity of the gospel. Jesus Christ gives eternal life to all who believe in Him—and repentance, rightly understood, directs the sinner to that very act of faith.

Repentance Defined

Is repentance a requirement for salvation? God's Word indicates that it is.

- Acts 17:30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.
- 2 Pet. 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

[1] G. Michael Cocoris, Repentance: The Most Misunderstood Word in the Bible (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Grace Gospel Press, 2010), p. 9.

At the same time, John the Apostle tells us the purpose for which he wrote his Gospel:

> Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:30-31).

John states plainly that he wrote so that the reader might believe and have life in His name. He uses the term "believe" (πιστεύω, *pisteuō*) nearly one hundred times in his Gospel—over half of which refer to receiving eternal life. Yet he does not use the terms "repent" or "repentance" even once. In light of this, how can repentance be a requirement for salvation?

To answer that question, we must first define repentance. What does it mean to repent?

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *repent* as:

> To feel remorse, contrition, or self-reproach for what one has done or failed to do. To be contrite. To feel such regret for past conduct as to change one's mind regarding it. To become a more moral or religious person as a result of remorse or contrition for one's sins.[2]

The English word translated "repent" in the New Testament is the Greek word μετανοέω (*metanoeō*), which means "to change one's mind" or "to change one's perception." It does not mean "to turn from sin." In fact, Greek has several different ways to express the idea of "turning," and μετανοέω is not one of them.

There is, therefore, a significant disconnect between how modern English defines the word repent and how the term was understood in the first century. As already noted, in the New Testament repentance refers to a change of mind—not a change of behavior—while any outward change is the result of that inward shift, not its definition.

With respect to salvation, then, what must a person change his mind about? Because people come from diverse backgrounds and hold varying assumptions, the specific issues may differ. However, in relation to the gospel, three key areas are central:

1) **Sin**—Sin is truly an offense to God. All have sinned and are separated from God.
2) **Salvation**—People cannot save themselves.
3) **The Savior**—Only by trusting in Christ's substitutionary death on the cross are people able to be saved.

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie writes:

> 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.[3]

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[2] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "repent."

[3] Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), pp. 94-95

Similarly, Robert Lightner explains:

> The word *repentance* means a change of mind.… There is no question about it: repentance is necessary for salvation. However, Scripture views repentance as included in believing and not as an additional and separate condition to faith. All who have trusted Christ as Savior have changed their minds regarding Him and their sin.[4]
>
> Repentance in Scripture has to do with a change of mind. Evangelicals agree no one can be saved who does not change his mind about himself and his need, his sin which separates him from God, and about Christ as the only Savior.[5]

Repentance and faith are inseparable aspects of the same response. John does not use the term "repent" in his Gospel because the term "believe" encompasses all that is necessary for repentance.

Repentance in the Old Testament

Any careful study of repentance must begin with the Old Testament, where the foundational vocabulary and categories are first established. Two critical observations immediately shape the discussion. First, repentance cannot inherently mean "turning from sin" in the sense of moral reformation, since the Old Testament repeatedly describes God Himself as "repenting" or relenting. Second, repentance language in the Old Testament is never presented as a condition for justification; rather, justification is consistently grounded in faith apart from works (Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4). These two truths guide how we should understand the subject. If repentance does not mean moral self-reform and is never tied to receiving eternal life, then defining repentance as turning from sin as a requirement for salvation imports a meaning the Old Testament itself does not support.

Key Hebrew terms

Two primary Hebrew terms shape the Old Testament understanding of repentance: *nacham* and *shuv*. While both are sometimes associated with repentance, they carry distinct meanings and must not be conflated.

Nacham (נָחַם)*—to relent, to be sorry, to be moved to pity or compassion*

This term frequently describes a change of mind or course of action, often in response to new circumstances or intercession. Importantly, it is even used of God, which immediately rules out any notion that it inherently involves a moral turning from sin.

For example:

> "And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." (Gen 6:6)
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> "So the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people." (Exod 32:14)

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[4] Robert Lightner, *Sin, The Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), p. 167

[5] Ibid., p. 212

Clearly, when applied to God, *nacham* cannot mean turning from sin. Rather, it refers to a relenting or change in expressed intention, consistent with His character and in response to human actions. Such passages reflect not a change in God's nature, but a change in His dealings with man in time.

Shuv (שׁוּב)*—to return, turn back*

This is the most common verb associated with what is often translated as "repentance" in the Old Testament. However, its basic meaning is simply to turn or return, and it is frequently used in a physical or geographical sense.

For example:

> "So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him." (Gen 32:1)
> (*"went on his way" translates a form of shuv in context elsewhere as "return"*)

More significantly, *shuv* is used in covenantal contexts, where Israel is called to return to the Lord—that is, to restore covenant fellowship.

> "Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts. (Zech 1:3)

> "Return, O backsliding children," says the LORD; "for I am married to you." (Jer 3:14)

Here, the emphasis is not on performing works to gain salvation, but on restoring a broken relationship within an already established covenant. Israel is being called back to fellowship, not instructed on how to obtain eternal life.

Old Testament examples

God "Repenting" or "Relenting"—As noted above, *nacham* is often used of God. This alone is decisive evidence that repentance, in its Old Testament usage, cannot inherently mean moral reform or turning from sin.

In Jonah, we see both divine and human responses:

> "Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it." (Jonah 3:10)

God's "relenting" is a change in His course of judgment in response to Nineveh's response. The focus is not on a meritorious moral transformation, but on a recognition of impending judgment and a corresponding change in posture toward God.

Israel Called to "Return"—Throughout the prophets, Israel is repeatedly exhorted to "return" (*shuv*) to the Lord. This is especially prominent in books like Hosea and Jeremiah.

> "O Israel, return to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity." (Hos 14:1)

> "If you will return, O Israel," says the LORD, "return to Me…" (Jer 4:1)

These calls are directed to a people who are already in covenant with God. The issue is not how to become justified, but how to restore fellowship and align with covenant truth. This kind of repentance is not a condition for receiving eternal life.

Repentance as Recognizing Truth and Responding Appropriately—When all the data is considered, a consistent pattern emerges: repentance in the Old Testament involves people

coming to recognize the truth about God, themselves, and their situation—and responding accordingly.

This may include:

- acknowledging sin (Ps 51:3–4)
- recognizing God's righteousness
- abandoning false confidence (e.g., in idols or alliances)
- returning to proper covenant alignment

But the emphasis is not on promising future obedience as a prerequisite for divine acceptance. Rather, it is a change in perspective that results in an appropriate response.

Even in a deeply penitential passage like Psalm 51, the focus is not on earning forgiveness through reform, but on appealing to God's mercy:

> "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions." (Ps 51:1)

David casts himself entirely on God's grace—not on a pledge of moral improvement.

Why Old Testament repentance is inward—not moral self-reform

Several observations confirm that Old Testament repentance is fundamentally an inward change of mind—a recognition of truth—rather than moral self-reform:

1. The use of *nacham* for God makes it impossible to define repentance as turning from sin in a moral sense.
2. The primary term *shuv* emphasizes returning or turning, often in a covenantal or spatial sense.
3. The audience of many repentance passages is already in relationship with God (e.g., Israel under the Mosaic Covenant).
4. The context frequently concerns temporal judgment, fellowship, or national blessing—not eternal salvation.
5. The basis of restoration is consistently God's mercy, not human reform.

This stands in sharp contrast to definitions often promoted in Lordship Salvation, where repentance is defined as a decisive turning from sin in one's behavior as a condition for justification. Such a definition does not arise from the Old Testament text itself, but is imposed upon it.

Summary

As noted above, Old Testament repentance is primarily an inward change of mind and a recognition of truth. This is seen in *nacham*, which is even used of God. It is also seen in the covenantal use of *shuv*. These calls are often directed to those already in relationship with God. They typically concern temporal blessing or discipline.

When the Old Testament data is allowed to stand on its own terms, two conclusions emerge with clarity. First, repentance cannot be defined as turning from sin in a moral or behavioral sense. The fact that God is said to "repent" or relent throughout the Old Testament decisively rules out such a definition. Indeed, it is striking that God is the one who repents most frequently in the Old

Testament, demonstrating that repentance fundamentally involves a change in disposition or response, not moral reform. Second, repentance is never presented as a condition for justification. In every instance where eternal life or righteousness is in view, the consistent testimony of Scripture is that justification is by faith apart from works (Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4). Repentance language, by contrast, appears in contexts of covenant relationship, fellowship, and temporal judgment.

These observations make it clear that importing definitions drawn from *nacham* or *shuv* into the doctrine of justification is without biblical warrant. Rather than describing how one receives eternal life, Old Testament repentance describes a change of mind that is typically expressed by an appropriate response to God. This distinction is essential for preserving the clarity of the gospel as a free gift received through faith alone.

With this foundation in place, we can now turn to the New Testament to examine repentance in light of the person and work of Christ.

Repentance in the New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, the concept of repentance continues, but now in the fuller light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. As in the Old Testament, repentance is often misunderstood—frequently defined as "turning from sin" in the sense of moral reformation. However, a careful examination of the Greek terminology and its usage in context shows that repentance is fundamentally an internal change of mind or perspective, not a behavioral commitment or reform.

This distinction is essential for preserving the clarity of the gospel. If repentance is redefined as a work—such as turning from sin—it effectively becomes an additional condition for salvation alongside faith. Yet the New Testament consistently presents eternal life as received by grace through faith, apart from works (cf. John 3:16; Eph 2:8–9). Therefore, we must allow the text itself to define repentance, rather than importing theological assumptions into it.

The core Greek terms

Two closely related Greek terms form the foundation of New Testament teaching on repentance: *metanoeō* (verb) and *metanoia* (noun).

Metanoeō (μετανοέω)—*to change one's mind*

This verb is composed of *meta* ("after" or "change") and *noeō* ("to think, perceive"). Together, they convey the idea of a change of mind, thought, or perception.

Metanoia (μετάνοια)—*a change of mind or perspective*

The noun form carries the same essential meaning: a shift in understanding or viewpoint. It refers to an inward reconsideration or reorientation of thought. Standard lexical sources consistently affirm this meaning.

Some theologians attempt to incorporate moral reform into their definition of repentance. However, moral reformation is not inherent in the term itself. In fact, extra-biblical usage demonstrates that repentance does not necessarily involve a turning from sin. For example, R. C.

Trench, in *Synonyms of the New Testament*, notes that "Plutarch tells us of two murderers, who, having spared a child, afterward 'repented,' and sought to slay it."[6]

A similar example can be seen in early Christian literature. In *The Shepherd of Hermas* (second century A.D.), the verb *metanoeō* is used in a way that clearly does not denote a turning from sin. Describing those who initially respond positively to the message, the text states: "These are the ones who heard the word and want to be baptized in the name of the Lord; but when they remember the purity required by the truth, they change their minds and go back again to their evil desires."[7] Here, "change their minds" (repent) results not in moral reform, but in a return to sinful behavior. This example further demonstrates that the concept of repentance, in and of itself, does not inherently include the idea of turning from sin.

Repentance involves a change of mind that may lead to a change in behavior. However, such behavioral change is the result, not the meaning, of repentance.

How repentance is used in New Testament contexts

To understand repentance properly, we must examine how these terms are used in actual New Testament contexts.

John the Baptist's Preaching

John the Baptist's message introduces repentance in the New Testament era:

> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt 3:2)

John was calling Israel to change their minds about their spiritual condition and readiness for the coming kingdom. Many assumed covenant privilege guaranteed blessing, but John confronted that assumption:

> "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" (Matt 3:9)

Repentance here involves a shift in thinking—from false confidence to recognizing the need for righteousness in light of the coming King.

Jesus' Calls to Repentance

Jesus continues this same message:

> "Repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15)

Here, repentance and faith are closely linked. Repentance is the change of mind, and belief is the corresponding trust in the good news. They are not two separate conditions, but two sides of the same response.

In passages like Luke 13:3:

> "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

Jesus is warning of perishing due to a failure to recognize truth. The issue is not the absence of sufficient moral reform, but the refusal to change one's mind in light of God's revelation.

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[6] R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (1854; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 259.

[7] *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed., trans. Michael W. Holmes.

Apostolic Preaching in Acts

The apostles continue this usage in the book of Acts.

Peter declares:

> "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." (Acts 3:19)

Paul summarizes his message as:

> "Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20:21)

And again:

> "God now commands all men everywhere to repent." (Acts 17:30)

In each case, repentance is directed toward God and truth, not defined as a list of behavioral changes. It is a call to reconsider one's understanding of God, sin, and righteousness, especially in light of Christ.

Why repentance never inherently means "turn from sin"

A key point must be emphasized: nowhere in the New Testament is repentance lexically defined as "turning from sin."

No Lexical Basis for Moral Reform as the Definition

Greek lexicons consistently define *metanoeō* and *metanoia* in their primary sense as a change of mind, perception, or understanding. While some lexicons note additional nuances such as remorse or moral reform, these reflect secondary meanings, not elements inherent to the Greek terms themselves. Lexicons present a broad semantic range, but it is the context of a passage that determines which meaning applies. It is a common exegetical error—known as illegitimate totality transfer—to assume that all possible meanings of a word must apply in a given instance rather than allowing the context to govern its sense. Therefore, it is inappropriate to add any secondary meaning supplied by a lexicon to the primary meaning of a word unless the context clearly warrants it. Though lexicons may list secondary meanings such as remorse or moral reform, these should not be applied unless they can be demonstrated with certainty from the passage itself.

To define repentance as "turning from sin" is to import a theological conclusion into the definition, rather than deriving the definition from the language itself.

This is a significant issue in Lordship Salvation, where repentance is often presented as a commitment to forsake sin as a condition for salvation. Such a definition effectively introduces works into the gospel, even if unintentionally.

Turning from Sin Is a Possible Result, Not the Meaning

The New Testament does show that a change of mind can lead to a change in behavior. For example:

> "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death." (2 Cor 7:10)

Here, repentance is distinguished from the emotional experience (sorrow) and from the resulting change. It is the decisive internal shift that can lead to outward transformation.

Thus, turning from sin may accompany repentance, but it must not be confused with repentance itself.

Distinguishing repentance as an internal change of mind vs. an external change of behavior

It is crucial to maintain a clear distinction between:

- Repentance—an internal change of mind
- Behavioral change—the outward fruit that may follow

People often confuse the fruit of repentance with its root. The root of repentance is a change of mind; the fruit of repentance is a change in behavior. John the Baptist's interaction with the Pharisees and Sadducees illustrates this distinction:

> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance." (Matt 3:7–8)

The root of repentance: The Pharisees and Sadducees changed their minds about the wrath to come and recognized the need for baptism.

The fruit of repentance: John exhorted them to bear fruit in keeping with that changed mindset.

If repentance were primarily a change in behavior rather than a change of mind, John's exhortation would be redundant—essentially calling for behavior to match behavior. But when repentance is understood as an inward change of mind, John's instruction becomes clear: the inner change is the root, and the outward actions are its fruit. Repentance itself refers to the inward transformation, while behavioral change is the result that may follow.

Understanding the distinction between the root of repentance and the fruit of repentance preserves the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone. If repentance is defined as behavioral reform, then salvation becomes contingent upon human effort.

However, when repentance is understood as a change of mind, it fits naturally alongside faith. Both are internal responses to truth:

- Repentance involves changing one's mind about God, Christ, sin, and salvation
- Faith involves trusting in Christ alone for eternal life

This is why Scripture sometimes mention only faith (John 3:16) and other times repentance (Acts 17:30), without contradiction. They are not competing conditions, but complementary aspects of the same inward response.

Acts 26:20 provides a helpful example of this relationship. Paul declares that people should "repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance," where the works are the visible fruit that follows an inward change of mind. The sequence is important: repentance and turning to God describe the internal response of faith, while the works that follow serve as its outward fruit, not its basis. In other words, their deeds should be consistent with that change of mind.

Summary

The New Testament consistently presents repentance as a change of mind or perspective, not as a requirement to reform one's behavior. While repentance may lead to a transformed life, that

transformation is the fruit or result of a changed mind. The transformation is not the definition of repentance.

Failing to maintain this distinction leads to confusion in the gospel message and opens the door to subtle forms of works-based salvation. By contrast, a careful, textually grounded understanding preserves the simplicity and clarity of the gospel: eternal life is received by faith alone in Christ alone, with repentance understood as the necessary change of mind that accompanies that faith.

Repentance and Faith: How the Two Relate

In the study of salvation, repentance and faith are often misunderstood as two separate conditions required for eternal life. This misunderstanding has led some to insist that a sinner must first repent—turn from sin in a moral sense—before they can believe in Christ. A careful reading of Scripture, however, shows that repentance and faith are two perspectives on the same response to God's revelation in Christ. Repentance involves a change of mind, while faith involves trust in Christ. They are intimately connected but not two conditions for salvation.

Recognizing this relationship is critical for preserving the simplicity of the gospel. Eternal life is granted by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Repentance and faith—two perspectives of the same response

Repentance (*metanoia*, "change of mind") and faith (*pistis*, "trust") describe different aspects of the sinner's inward response to God's truth. Repentance refers to the inward change of mind that comes from recognizing one's true condition before God, while faith refers to trusting Christ alone for forgiveness and eternal life.

We might say that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. Lance Latham put it like this:

> … when an unsaved person BELIEVES that he can be accepted only because of Christ and His work on Calvary, he has repented. He has changed his mind about *the one issue* that God presents to us as sinners.[8]

Consider Mark 1:15, where Jesus declares:

> "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Here, repentance and belief are presented together, but notice that repentance is not a separate requirement that must be fulfilled before belief. Instead, the two describe the same turning to God from complementary angles: one intellectual and one trusting. Repentance is the natural internal shift of mind that prepares the heart for faith, not a co-requisite that adds to faith as a condition.

Why repentance is not a second condition alongside faith

A recurring confusion in modern evangelism is treating repentance as a condition for salvation separate from faith. Scripture, however, consistently presents faith alone as the condition for receiving eternal life (Eph 2:8–9).

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[8] Lance Latham, *The Two Gospels* (Chicago: Awana Clubs International, 1984), p. 24

Repentance, correctly understood as a change of mind, is not an additional requirement but part of the same inward response that faith expresses. Treating repentance as a separate prerequisite distorts the gospel and risks introducing a subtle form of works-based salvation.

When passages of scripture connect "repent" and "believe" they should be viewed as complementary rather than as separate acts. For example, Acts 20:21 link repentance and belief.

> "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must repent and turn to God, and perform deeds in keeping with their repentance." (NASB95)

Even here, repentance is not a meritorious work. It is an internal reorientation toward God, paired with faith in Christ. Paul's usage shows that repentance is a natural component of believing the gospel, especially for audiences who misunderstand or resist the truth. The "repent and believe" language is pastoral and contextual, not a formula imposing two separate requirements for justification.

Repentance as a natural component of believing the gospel

Repentance should be understood as inherent to believing the gospel, not a separate demand. The believer's change of mind flows from recognizing God's truth and responding appropriately with trust in Christ.

> "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved…" (Acts 16:31)

The text focuses on faith because faith is the defining condition for eternal life, while repentance describes the inward change of mind that accompanies that faith. Where repentance appears prominently, it is often because the hearers need to shift their thinking to be receptive to faith.

In sum, repentance and faith are inseparable yet distinct aspects of the same internal response. One emphasizes the recognition of truth, the other emphasizes trust in Christ. Neither adds a human work to the gospel, and both exist to guide the sinner to rely entirely on God's grace.

Why "Repent and Believe" Are Not Two Conditions

A frequent source of confusion in evangelism is the phrase "repent and believe." Some interpreters, particularly within Lordship Salvation circles, treat this as evidence that two separate conditions must be met to receive eternal life: first, repentance (understood as turning from sin), and second, faith in Christ. A careful examination of the New Testament, however, shows that these calls describe one unified response from different perspectives, not two conditions.

Understanding this distinction safeguards the simplicity of the gospel: salvation is by faith alone, and repentance, correctly understood as a change of mind, is simply part of the believer's response to God's truth.

Examining key passages

<u>Mark 1:15</u>

> "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."
>
> Jesus' call combines repentance and belief into a single response. Repentance refers to a change of mind—a recognition of the truth about God and the coming kingdom. Belief refers to trusting the good news that Jesus proclaimed regarding the kingdom. Together, they

describe the same inward response: first the mind acknowledges the truth, then the heart places trust in it.

Acts 2:38

> "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"
>
> Peter's message to the crowd at Pentecost emphasizes repentance as a precursor to baptism, yet the gift of the Holy Spirit is promised without mention of behavioral perfection or reform. Repentance here signals the need for a change of mind and Godward turning, which naturally flows into trust in Christ. It is not an additional work required for justification.

Acts 17:30–31

> "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead."
>
> Paul's use of "repent" is clearly connected to recognizing truth about God's coming judgment and Christ's resurrection. The passage emphasizes knowledge of reality and trust in Christ's work. Repentance and belief describe the same inward change.

Acts 20:21

> "Testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."
>
> The apostle presents repentance and faith together, but the context clarifies that they are complementary perspectives of one response. Repentance expresses the mental reorientation toward God; faith expresses trust in Christ's saving work. Both are included in the single act of turning to God that Scripture consistently requires.

Showing the unity of the response

Two observations clarify the unity of repentance and faith. First, a change of mind necessarily leads to trust in Christ. As a person recognizes God's truth and abandons false confidence in self, reliance on Christ naturally follows. Second, believing in Christ necessarily involves a change of mind about who He is and what He has accomplished. Faith is not blind assent; it presupposes a recognition that Christ alone is able to save.

For this reason, repentance and faith are not separate acts or conditions, but complementary descriptions of the same inward response to the gospel. One emphasizes recognizing the truth; the other emphasizes trusting the Savior. Together, they describe the sinner's turning to God without adding any requirement of human effort.

The consistent New Testament pattern: the one condition for eternal life is belief

Across both Gospels and Acts, the consistent pattern emerges: the one condition for eternal life is belief. Repentance language is employed when it clarifies or confronts the hearer's thinking, but it never adds a requirement of works to faith. Wherever repentance appears, it is part of the same inward response that faith describes—an internal turning to God.

Maintaining this distinction preserves the integrity of the gospel: eternal life is received through faith alone, and repentance, rightly understood as a change of mind or perspective, is inseparable from that faith, but not a separate condition.

By appreciating this unity, we can proclaim the gospel without adding unnecessary or confusing prerequisites. Those who hear the gospel can respond in trust, rather than in fear of having to perform a moral task before believing.

What Repentance Is Not

Clarifying what repentance **is** also requires explaining what it **is not**. Misunderstandings about repentance have often turned it into a moral requirement or a prerequisite for salvation, confusing justification with sanctification. Scripture, however, consistently presents repentance as an inward change of mind, not a work or performance.

Not turning from sin

Repentance is frequently defined as turning from sin in a moral or behavioral sense, yet Scripture does not define it this way. While a believer's life may change after faith, turning from sin is the *result* of repentance, not its meaning. Repentance refers to an inward change of mind—a recognition of truth—not to moral reform as a condition for salvation (Mark 1:15).

Not sorrow or emotional distress

Repentance is also not defined by sorrow, guilt, or emotional response. Salvation is not tied to how deeply one feels about sin, but to trusting Christ. While godly sorrow may accompany repentance (2 Cor 7:10), it is not essential or saving in itself.

Not a promise of obedience

Repentance is not a pledge of future obedience or a commitment to live differently in order to be saved. Salvation rests on God's grace, received by faith, not on what a person promises to do after believing (Eph 2:8–9). Obedience belongs to sanctification, not justification.

Not an additional condition alongside faith

Finally, repentance is not a second step added to faith as a requirement for eternal life. Scripture consistently presents faith alone as the condition for salvation, with repentance understood as the inward change of mind that accompanies believing. Treating repentance as a separate prerequisite introduces works into the gospel and undermines assurance.

Summary

By clearing up these common misunderstandings, we see that repentance is internal—an inward change of mind—not a change of behavior. It is a change of mind and perspective that naturally accompanies faith in Christ, but it is not itself a work, a moral reform, or a prerequisite for salvation. Recognizing what repentance **is not** preserves the clarity, simplicity, and sufficiency of salvation by grace through faith alone.

Purifying Evangelistic Language

Effective evangelism depends not only on what we teach, but also on how we communicate it. Many common evangelistic phrases, while well-intentioned, inadvertently distort the gospel by suggesting that salvation depends on human effort or moral change. Purifying our language

ensures that the gospel remains clear: eternal life is received by faith alone in Christ alone, and repentance is properly understood as a change of mind or perspective, not as a work.

Phrases to avoid

Certain phrases are especially misleading because they imply that salvation requires human performance:

- "Repent of your sins to be saved" – Suggests that one must forsake sin in order to earn salvation. Scripture does not teach this; repentance is about reorienting the mind toward God, not moral perfection.
- "Turn your life around" – Implies that life improvement or personal reform is a prerequisite for forgiveness. In reality, eternal life is a gift, not the result of self-improvement (Eph 2:8–9).
- "Commit yourself to Christ" – Conveys an idea of a binding agreement or sincere dedication prior to salvation. While commitment may follow faith, it is not required to receive eternal life.
- "Surrender everything to follow Jesus" – Suggests that forsaking possessions, habits, or goals is necessary for salvation, when Scripture consistently teaches salvation is by faith alone (John 3:16).

Using such phrases adds human works to the gospel, which can confuse hearers and undermine assurance of salvation.

Clear, biblical concepts to use

The New Testament consistently presents the sole condition for receiving eternal life with the Greek verb *pisteuō* ("to believe"). This word carries the idea of being persuaded that something is true and therefore placing one's confidence in it. In English, several terms overlap in meaning with *pisteuō*, including *believe*, *trust*, *rely*, and the phrase *take God at His word*. While no single English word perfectly captures every nuance, these terms together faithfully express the biblical concept of faith as simple reliance upon the promise of God concerning His Son.

When sharing the gospel, we should use simple, clear, and biblical terms:

- ***Believe*** – Being persuaded that Jesus gives eternal life

  A clear illustration is Martha of Bethany in John 11:25–27. Jesus declares Himself to be the resurrection and the life and asks, "Do you believe this?" Martha responds, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God."

  Here, *believe* emphasizes being convinced that Jesus' claim is true—she is persuaded of His identity and promise.

- ***Trust*** – Placing confidence in Christ personally

  The Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30–34) illustrates this well. Faced with his need, he asks, "What must I do to be saved?" and is told, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." His response is not mere acknowledgment, but personal confidence—he entrusts himself to Christ.

  Trust highlights that faith is not abstract agreement but personal reliance.

- ***Rely*** – Depending wholly on God's provision

  A good picture is Abraham in Genesis 15:6. "He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." Paul later uses this in Romans 4 to show that Abraham depended entirely on God's promise, apart from works.

  Rely underscores resting one's hope fully on what God has promised, not on oneself.

- ***Take God at His word*** – Accepting God's testimony as true

  An excellent illustration is the Israelites in Numbers 21:4–9. Those who simply looked at the bronze serpent lived, just as God said. They did nothing to cure themselves; they accepted God's provision exactly as stated.

  Jesus Himself applies this in John 3:14–15.

  This captures the idea of *taking God at His word*—responding to His promise as true and sufficient.

These words highlight faith alone as the sole condition for receiving eternal life, while avoiding the implication that human effort or moral change is required.

How to explain repentance correctly in a gospel conversation

When repentance arises in conversation, it should be framed in its biblical sense:

- Focus on changing one's mind about Christ – Explain that repentance is an inward recognition of who Christ is, acknowledging His authority and work as Savior.
- Emphasize belief as the sole condition – Make clear that salvation is not earned by deeds, emotional experiences, or personal reform, but by trusting Christ alone.

For example, an effective presentation might say:

> "Repentance means seeing your need for Christ and changing the way you think about Him. Salvation comes not from what you do, but from trusting Jesus to save you."

This approach maintains fidelity to Scripture, avoids legalistic language, and preserves the simplicity and clarity of the gospel message.

Summary

Purifying evangelistic language is essential for communicating the gospel accurately. By avoiding phrases that imply human works and emphasizing biblical terms like believe, trust, and rely, we can present repentance and faith in a way that is both understandable to our hearers and faithful to Scripture. Repentance is properly framed as a change of mind, while faith remains the defining condition for eternal life.

Addressing Popular Objections

Even when repentance is carefully defined as a change of mind or perspective, objections often arise from common assumptions or traditional phrasing in evangelism. Critics frequently argue that if repentance does not mean "turning from sin," the Bible itself seems to teach otherwise. To respond biblically, we must distinguish inward repentance from behavioral results, separating justification from sanctification and understanding the text in context.

"If repentance doesn't mean turning from sin, why did John the Baptist preach it?"

John the Baptist's call to repentance was directed at a nation accustomed to trusting in external privileges—covenantal descent, ritual observances, or moral appearances.

> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt 3:2)

John was calling Israel to change their perspective about God, the coming Messiah, and their spiritual condition. His message was inward, designed to lead people to trust in the One who would bring salvation, not a prescription for moral reform. Repentance prepared hearts to believe.

"Don't people need to turn from sin to be saved?"

While turning from sin is certainly good and desirable, Scripture distinguishes justification (being declared righteous before God) from sanctification (growing in holiness). Salvation is granted on the basis of faith in Christ, not on moral performance (Eph 2:8–9).

Behavioral change may occur, but it is not required for justification. Equating repentance with moral reform confuses these distinct biblical concepts.

"What about Zacchaeus?"

In Luke 19:1–10, Zacchaeus demonstrates generosity after meeting Jesus. Some argue this shows repentance requires works. Yet the text clarifies: his giving and restitution flowed from salvation, not into it:

> "Today salvation has come to this house…" (Luke 19:9)

Zacchaeus' actions are a result of faith, not a condition for receiving eternal life. Repentance, properly understood, refers to his internal change of mind and openness to Christ, which naturally manifested in obedience.

"Doesn't 2 Corinthians 7:10 show repentance involves sorrow?"

> "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

This verse highlights that godly sorrow may accompany repentance, but it does not define repentance itself. Repentance is the decisive inward shift in thinking, while sorrow is an emotional response that may arise from recognizing one's sin in light of God's truth. Sorrow is incidental, not essential to salvation.

"True repentance always produces fruit."

It is true that faith often results in visible fruit, but Scripture does not define repentance by the presence of fruit. Paul's instruction in Acts 20:21 emphasizes repentance and faith as inward responses:

> "Testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

Fruit may follow, but repentance itself remains an inward turning toward God. To require fruit as part of the definition is to conflate evidence of faith with the act of believing itself.

In Sum

Most objections to the biblical understanding of repentance arise from confusing inward change with outward results. John's preaching, Zacchaeus' actions, and passages like 2 Corinthians 7:10 all reinforce that repentance is a change of mind and perspective, not sorrow, moral reform, or human works. Properly understood, repentance naturally accompanies faith but does not add to it, preserving the clarity and sufficiency of salvation by grace through faith alone.

Summary and Conclusion

Repentance, as presented in Scripture, consistently refers to an inward change of mind or perspective—not to turning from sin, emotional remorse, moral reform, or any human effort. Both Old and New Testament evidence shows that repentance involves coming to recognize the truth about God, oneself, and Christ, and responding appropriately in light of that truth.

Repentance and faith together describe the sinner's inward response to the gospel, yet the New Testament is clear that faith alone is the condition for receiving eternal life. Behavioral change, sorrow over sin, and moral transformation may follow belief, but they are fruits of salvation. Maintaining this distinction preserves the clarity, simplicity, and freeness of the gospel.

For this reason, careful attention to evangelistic language is essential. Phrases that imply moral reform or personal commitment as conditions for salvation risk obscuring the gospel and undermining assurance. Scripture consistently directs sinners to believe—to trust Christ—to receive eternal life.

Ultimately, the biblical call is to use repentance correctly: as an inward turning toward God, inseparably linked to faith, without adding human effort as a requirement. When repentance is understood and proclaimed this way, the gospel remains clear, grace remains central, and Christ alone receives the glory.

Appendix A—Lexical Evidence: Repentance as a "Change of Mind"

One of the clearest lines of evidence for the meaning of repentance comes from Greek lexicons and linguistic usage. Across both classical Greek and the New Testament, the terms *metanoeō* (verb) and *metanoia* (noun) consistently describe a change of mind, perception, or understanding.

The Greek lexicons speak with remarkable consistency on this point.

BDAG (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich): Defines repentance as a change of mind that may lead to a change in behavior, but does not define it as behavior itself.[9]

Thayer's Greek Lexicon: Describes repentance as "a change of mind", particularly involving a reconsideration of one's actions or beliefs.[10]

Vine's Expository Dictionary: States that repentance is a change of mind, which results in a change of conduct, again distinguishing meaning from result.[11]

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT): Emphasizes the intellectual and volitional shift inherent in repentance, focusing on the transformation of understanding in relation to God.[12]

Liddell and Scott (Greek-English Lexicon): Repentance refers to "a change of mind" or "a change of purpose."[13]

Hermann Cremer (Biblico-Theological Lexicon): The term means "to think differently afterward… to change one's mind or opinion."[14]

General Lexical Consensus: Scholars widely agree that *metanoia* primarily denotes a mental act. Virtually all Greek lexicons agree that *metanoeō* means "to reconsider" or "to change one's mind."

This agreement is not limited to one theological camp. Even scholars who differ theologically (including Calvinistic-Reformed writers) acknowledge that the basic meaning of repentance is a change of mind, not a commitment to moral reform.

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[9] Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "μετανοέω," "μετάνοια."

[10] Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), s.v. "μετανοέω," "μετάνοια."

[11] W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), s.v. "Repent," "Repentance."

[12] Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), s.v. "μετανοέω," "μετάνοια."

[13] H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, American Edition

[14] Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, translated from the German by D. W. Simon, and William Urwick (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1892)

Further, the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) confirms this usage. The word group is repeatedly used to describe changing one's mind or intention, even of God Himself:

- God "changed His mind" regarding judgment (Jer. 18:10)
- A person may "change his mind" after making a vow (Prov. 20:25)

These usages demonstrate that repentance cannot inherently mean turning from sin, since it is used of God, who has no sin. Rather, it refers to a change in thinking or intention, the specific content of which must be determined by context.

In summary, the lexical evidence is clear and consistent:

- Repentance is fundamentally an inward change of mind
- It refers to a change of mind, perception, or understanding
- Any behavioral or moral implications are secondary results, not part of the word's meaning

If repentance is defined as moral reform, the gospel is easily confused with a call to self-improvement. But if repentance is understood as a change of mind, it fits naturally alongside faith as the inward response to the gospel—preserving the biblical teaching that eternal life is received by faith alone in Christ alone.

Appendix B—Greek Terminology Related to Repentance and Turning

A clear understanding of repentance in the New Testament requires careful attention to the Greek vocabulary itself. Much of the confusion surrounding repentance arises from blending together distinct terms that Scripture keeps separate. When words that mean "change of mind," "regret," and "turning" are treated as interchangeable, the result is a definition of repentance that goes beyond what the biblical language actually supports.

The New Testament writers, however, were precise in their word choices. They consistently used specific terms to describe internal changes of mind, emotional responses, and outward turning or conversion—and they did not confuse these categories. By examining these terms in their linguistic context, it becomes clear that repentance (*metanoeō*, *metanoia*) refers fundamentally to an internal change of mind, while other Greek words are available when the idea of turning in behavior or direction is intended.

This appendix surveys the primary Greek terms related to repentance and turning, demonstrating that the language itself supports an important distinction: repentance is the inward change of mind, while turning or transformation in conduct is the outward result that may follow. Maintaining this distinction is essential for preserving both the accuracy of biblical interpretation and the clarity of the gospel message.

Primary Terms for Repentance

Metanoeō (μετανοέω)—"to change one's mind"

The verb *metanoeō* is the primary New Testament term translated "repent." It is a compound word formed from *meta* ("after" or "change") and *noeō* ("to think," "to perceive," or "to understand"). The term therefore conveys the idea of a change in one's thinking, perception, or viewpoint.

In its basic sense, *metanoeō* means to reconsider, to think differently, or to change one's mind about something. The emphasis is internal, not behavioral. While a change of mind may lead to changes in conduct, such outcomes are not inherent in the meaning of the word itself.

Metanoia (μετάνοια)—"a change of mind"

The noun *metanoia* corresponds to the verb *metanoeō* and refers to the change of mind itself. Like its verbal form, it emphasizes an internal shift in perspective rather than an outward act of reform.

In New Testament usage, *metanoia* describes a reconsideration or change in understanding—particularly in relation to God, sin, and the person and work of Jesus Christ. The term does not intrinsically include the idea of turning from sin or reforming one's life, though such changes may follow.

Metamelomai (μεταμέλομαι)—"to regret" or "to feel remorse"

The Greek verb *metamelomai* is distinct from *metanoeō* and carries a different emphasis. It refers to regret, remorse, or emotional sorrow over something that has been done.

This term highlights the emotional dimension of response rather than an inward change of mind. For example, it is used of Judas, who "felt remorse" after betraying Christ (Matthew 27:3, NASB95).

The distinction between *metamelomai* and *metanoeō* is significant. The New Testament differentiates between regret and repentance, demonstrating that repentance is not defined by emotional sorrow. A person may feel deep remorse without experiencing a genuine change of mind, and conversely, one may change their mind without intense emotional expression.

Primary Terms for Turning and Conversion

In contrast to the terms above, the Greek language contains numerous words that explicitly describe the concept of "turning," whether physically, directionally, or behaviorally.

***Strephō* (στρέφω)—"to turn"**

Strephō is a general verb meaning "to turn" or "to turn around." It can be used in both literal and figurative contexts and is most often translated simply as "turn."

The term denotes a change in direction, whether physical or metaphorical, but does not inherently describe an internal change of mind.

***Epistrephō* (ἐπιστρέφω)—"to turn," "to return," or "to be converted"**

Epistrephō is a strengthened form of *strephō*, combining *epi* ("upon" or "back") with *strephō*. It often carries the sense of turning back, returning, or changing direction.

This word is frequently used in contexts of conversion or returning to God (e.g., Acts 3:19; Acts 26:20). It can describe a decisive change in direction in one's life.

Importantly, *epistrephō* often expresses the outward turning that may accompany or follow an internal change of mind.

***Epistrophē* (ἐπιστροφή)—"conversion"**

The noun *epistrophē* refers to a turning or conversion. It emphasizes the resulting change in direction or orientation of a person's life.

As with *epistrephō*, the focus is on the directional or behavioral aspect of change rather than the internal change of mind itself.

***Metastrephō* (μεταστρέφω)—"to turn" or "to change"**

Metastrephō is another term that clearly conveys the idea of turning or transformation. It is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word *shuv* ("to turn" or "to return").

This term demonstrates that Greek possesses precise vocabulary to express the idea of turning, especially in a behavioral or directional sense.

Terms for Specific Directions of Turning

The Greek language further includes a variety of terms that describe specific kinds of turning:

- *Apostrephō* (ἀποστρέφω): to turn away
- *Apotrepō* (ἀποτρέπω): to turn away
- *Hypostrephō* (ὑποστρέφω): to turn back or return
- *Ekklinō* (ἐκκλίνω): to turn aside or avoid

Each of these words emphasizes movement away from or toward something and often carries a directional or behavioral nuance.

General and Additional Terms for Turning

Additional terms include:

- *Ektrepō* (ἐκτρέπω): to turn aside
- *Peritrepō* (περιτρέπω): to turn around
- *Tropē* (τροπή): a turning (noun form)

These words further illustrate the richness of Greek vocabulary in expressing various forms of turning or directional change.

The Linguistic Significance

The Greek language provides a wide range of precise terms to describe different kinds of "turning," including physical movement, directional change, withdrawal, and return. Words such as *strephō*, *epistrephō*, and related terms clearly communicate the idea of turning in one's conduct or direction.

In light of this, it is highly significant that the New Testament consistently uses *metanoeō* and *metanoia* to express repentance. These terms do not denote outward turning, but rather an internal change of mind or perspective.

While a turning (*epistrephō*) may follow repentance, the New Testament maintains an important distinction between:

- the **root**: changing mind (*metanoeō*)
- the **fruit**: changing direction or behavior (*epistrephō*)

This distinction demonstrates that repentance itself is not a work, a moral reform, or a commitment to change one's behavior. Rather, it is an internal response—a reconsideration of truth—that may lead to outward changes but must not be defined by them.

Summary

The Greek terminology used in the New Testament supports the conclusion that:

- Repent (*metanoeō*) refers to a change of mind, not a change of behavior.
- Feeling emotional sorrow (*metamelomai*) is distinct from repentance.
- Turning or conversion (*epistrephō* and related terms) is expressed by different Greek words that emphasize direction and action.

The New Testament's consistent use of *metanoia*—instead of terms for "turning"—is linguistically significant and theologically instructive.

Therefore, repentance should be understood in its biblical sense as an internal change of mind, which may result in outward transformation but is not defined by it.

Appendix C—Early Church Fathers: Repentance as a Change of Mind

The testimony of the early church fathers provides important historical confirmation that repentance was understood primarily as an inward change of mind or disposition, not merely outward moral reform.

While the fathers often connected repentance with ethical transformation, their language consistently reflects a prior internal shift in thinking and orientation toward God.

Justin Martyr (2nd century): Justin describes repentance as a turning of the inner person toward God, emphasizing a change in understanding and acknowledgment of truth rather than mere external reform. In his writings, repentance involves coming to recognize truth and aligning oneself with it. In *First Apology*, he presents Christian conversion as a change in understanding and orientation toward the truth revealed in Christ, linking repentance with illumination and the knowledge of God.[15]

Irenaeus (2nd century): Irenaeus speaks of repentance in terms of returning to God in mind and heart, especially in contrast to error and false belief. His emphasis shows that repentance includes a reorientation of thought—a movement away from falsehood toward truth. He underscores that repentance is directed toward the true knowledge of God revealed in Christ.[16]

Tertullian (2nd–3rd century): Tertullian understood repentance as fundamentally a change of mind that results in a changed life, rather than the changed life itself constituting repentance. He clearly distinguished between the internal act of repentance and the outward actions that may follow. In *Against Marcion*, he writes: "Now in Greek the word for repentance (*metanoia*) is formed, not from the confession of a sin, but from a change of mind, which in God we have shown to be regulated by the occurrence of varying circumstances." (Ante-Nicene Christian Library: *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 7, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. Peter Holmes).

Origen (3rd century): Origen describes repentance in terms of an inward transformation involving the correction of understanding and reorientation of the mind in relation to God and sin. This reflects a change of mind and spiritual renewal rather than merely external behavioral change.[17]

John Chrysostom (4th century): Chrysostom describes repentance as beginning inwardly in the mind, involving a change of thought and disposition that leads to a transformed life. In his

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[15] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885).

[16] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885).

[17] Origen, *Homilies on Luke*; Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary on Luke*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

homilies, he frequently emphasizes that repentance (*metanoia*) is an internal reorientation of the soul that produces outward change, with the inward renewal preceding outward conduct. [18]

Summary of Patristic Evidence

Across these early writers, several consistent themes emerge:

- Repentance begins with an internal change of mind or understanding
- It involves recognizing truth and turning toward God
- Outward reform is viewed as the result, not the definition
- The emphasis is on inner transformation, not external performance as a condition

While the fathers sometimes speak strongly about moral change, they do not redefine repentance as moral reform itself. Instead, they reflect a pattern consistent with Scripture: repentance is the inward turning that gives rise to outward change.

The early church fathers, though not infallible, demonstrate that the understanding of repentance as a change of mind is not a modern innovation. It has deep historical roots in Christian thought.

This stands in contrast to later theological developments—particularly in sacramental and works-oriented systems—where repentance increasingly came to be associated with penance, behavioral reform, and meritorious acts.

By returning to the earlier and more textually grounded understanding, we preserve the biblical distinction between:

- The internal response of faith (including repentance)
- The external fruits that follow salvation

[18] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Repentance*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889).

Appendix D—Reformation Voices: Recovering the Meaning of Repentance

The Reformation period marked a significant recovery of the biblical meaning of repentance, especially in contrast to the medieval system of penance, which had redefined repentance as external acts of satisfaction for sin.

Reformers returned to Scripture and emphasized that repentance is fundamentally an inward change, not a system of works.

Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536): Erasmus played an important role in challenging the Latin Vulgate's rendering of repentance as *poenitentia* ("penance"). He argued in his *Annotations on the New Testament* that the Greek term *metanoia* more properly conveys the idea of a change of mind or reconsideration, rather than sacramental penance or external acts. This linguistic clarification helped contribute to a broader recovery of repentance as an internal, cognitive, and moral reorientation rather than merely an external ritual. In his *Annotations on Matthew 3:2*, he writes: "...but if the Greek word [is considered], not derived from punishment, as it seems to some [who translate it], penance, whereas more likely it would be derived from comprehending afterwards, and indeed by coming to one's senses, it is described as a change of mind."[19]

Martin Luther (1483–1546): Luther rejected the medieval Roman Catholic understanding of repentance as sacramental penance consisting of external acts. He came to understand repentance in connection with the Greek *metanoia* as an inward change of mind and turning toward God. While his broader theology of repentance includes ongoing contrition and faith, he emphasized that repentance is not a meritorious work that earns forgiveness but is rooted in an internal reorientation toward God. Reflecting on the Greek term, he wrote: "Afterwards, by the favor of the learned, who are so zealously transmitting to us the Greek and Hebrew, I learned that the same word [*poenitentia*] in Greek is *metanoia*, so that repentance or *metanoia* is 'a change of mind.'"[20]

John Calvin (1509–1564): Calvin describes repentance as involving a turning of the whole person to God, which includes the renewal of the mind and a reorientation of the heart and life. While he strongly connects repentance with moral transformation and obedience, he nevertheless grounds it in an inward change of disposition and understanding. In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he explains that the biblical languages express repentance in terms of inward turning: "The Hebrew word for repentance denotes conversion or return. The Greek word signifies change of mind or intention."[21]

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[19] Desiderius Erasmus, *Annotations on the New Testament: Matthew 3:2*, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. and ed. [editor's name if known], vol. [volume number] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[20] Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Elements of Religion* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America.

[21] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, vol. 1, book 3 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841).

Summary of Reformation Evidence

The first-generation Reformers collectively affirmed:

- Repentance is not penance (external religious acts)
- It is fundamentally an inward change of mind and heart
- It is closely tied to faith, not a separate meritorious work
- Outward transformation flows from this inward change

The Reformation recovery of repentance as a change of mind was essential for restoring the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

When repentance is redefined as a work—whether penance, moral reform, or commitment—it undermines grace. But when understood biblically, repentance harmonizes perfectly with faith as the internal response to the gospel.

Appendix E—Historical Theologians (Post-Reformation): Clarifying Repentance

Following the Reformation, many theologians continued to affirm that repentance is fundamentally an inward change of mind or disposition, even when they more closely connected it with moral transformation. While theological systems began to diverge, the core lexical and conceptual understanding of repentance as internal remained widely recognized.

John Owen (1616–1683): Owen consistently describes repentance as involving an inward change of mind, affections, and will in relation to sin and God, rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit. He emphasizes that true repentance is an internal work in the "inner man" that produces outward obedience and holiness, rather than being defined by external acts alone.[22] [23]

Thomas Watson (1620–1686): Watson presents repentance as a Spirit-wrought work involving a "sight of sin," sorrow for sin, confession, shame, hatred of sin, and turning from sin. In his treatment of repentance, the process begins with an inward recognition and understanding of sin that leads to conviction and sorrow, which then issues in outward reformation. Repentance therefore includes both internal conviction and external change, with the inward apprehension of sin functioning as the necessary starting point.[24]

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758): Edwards emphasizes that true conversion—including repentance—involves a transformation of the inner person, especially the affections and the mind's perception of divine truth. In *Religious Affections*, he teaches that genuine spiritual change is an inward alteration of the heart that produces outward effects, with the mind being "changed into the same image" through the beholding of divine glory. This reflects repentance as a reorientation of understanding and affections toward God, grounded in a new apprehension of spiritual reality.[25]

Charles Hodge (1797–1878): Hodge teaches that repentance involves a turning of the soul from sin to God, and that this turning is grounded in the believing apprehension of divine truth. In his *Systematic Theology*, he explains that repentance is a rational act that presupposes the mind's perception of truth and conviction of sin, since "unless this be produced by the believing apprehension of the truth it is not even a rational act." This reflects repentance as beginning with an intellectual recognition of truth that leads to moral and volitional change.[26]

A. H. Strong (1836–1921): Strong defines repentance as "a voluntary change of mind" in which the sinner turns from sin toward God. He explains that repentance includes the intellect, emotions, and will, but its essence lies in a decisive inward change of thought and purpose regarding sin and God. This internal change is the controlling principle from which feelings and outward actions proceed.[27]

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[22] John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965).

[23] John Owen, *Of Spiritual-Mindedness*, in *Works*, ed. Goold.

[24] Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987).

[25] Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959).

[26] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1873).

[27] Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907).

Summary of Post-Reformation Evidence

Across these theologians, several key points remain consistent:

- Repentance is rooted in an internal change of mind, perception, or conviction
- Emotional and behavioral elements may accompany repentance but are not its definition
- Outward transformation is viewed as the result of inward change
- The emphasis remains on the inner response to truth, not external reform as a condition for acceptance

At the same time, it is important to note that some post-Reformation traditions—particularly within certain strands of Reformed theology—began to more tightly connect repentance with ethical transformation. In some cases, this led to definitions that move beyond the lexical meaning and incorporate results into the definition itself.

The post-Reformation period shows both continuity and drift:

- Continuity, in that repentance is still widely acknowledged as a change of mind
- Drift, in that some theological systems begin to blend repentance with its fruits

This distinction is crucial. When the results of repentance (turning from sin, obedience, etc.) are made part of its definition, the gospel can subtly shift from grace to performance.

A careful return to the biblical and lexical meaning preserves the proper order:

- Repentance (change of mind)
- Faith (trust in Christ)
- Resulting transformation (sanctification)

Taken together, the historical and theological evidence supports a clear and necessary distinction: repentance, in its biblical and lexical sense, refers to an inward change of mind in response to truth, not a redefinition that includes its outward effects. While repentance may lead to transformed behavior, that transformation belongs to the realm of sanctification, not the condition for receiving eternal life. Preserving this distinction safeguards the freeness of the gospel, maintains the proper relationship between repentance and faith, and avoids confusing the gift of salvation with the fruit of sanctification.