

The Free Grace Gospel—Repentance versus Faith

By Bob Nyberg

Some Questions:

- The gospel of John uses the term “faith” but does not use the term “repentance.” In light of this fact, how can repentance be a requirement for salvation?
- Are these terms totally unrelated or is there an overlap in their semantic range of meaning?

Some Options:

- Lordship Salvation (such as John MacArthur): Repentance is necessary for salvation. Repentance is defined as “turning from sin.” While repentance “implies a change of mind,” its primary meaning involves turning from sin.

John MacArthur wrote:

As *metanoia* is used in the New Testament, it *always* speaks of a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin.¹

Repentance is not merely being ashamed or sorry over sin, although genuine repentance always involves an element of remorse. It is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead.²

- Free Grace #1 (such as Charles Ryrie and Robert Lightner): Repentance is necessary for salvation. Repentance is defined as “changing the mind.” With regard to salvation, the lost sinner needs to change his mind about: 1) sin — sin is truly an offense to God and he has offended God by his sin; 2) salvation — he cannot save himself; and 3) the Savior — only by trusting in Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross can he truly be saved. There is an overlap in the semantic range of meaning between the terms “faith” and “repentance.” They are two sides of the same coin. John does not use the term “repentance” in his gospel because the term “faith” carries all the necessary elements of “repentance.”

Charles Ryrie wrote:

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

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 162

² *Ibid.*, p. 163

³ Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1989), pp. 94-95

Robert Lightner wrote:

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

- Free Grace #2 (such as Zane Hodges): Repentance is not necessary for salvation. Repentance is defined as “turning from sin.” There is no overlap in the semantic range of meaning between the terms “faith” and “repentance.”

Zane Hodges wrote:

So far we have reached two fundamental conclusions about repentance. These are: (1) that repentance is not in any way a condition for eternal salvation; and (2) repentance is the decision to turn from sin to avoid, or bring to an end, God’s temporal judgment.⁶

Faith alone (not repentance *and* faith) is the sole condition for justification and eternal life.⁷

There can be no compromise on this point if we wish to preserve and to proclaim the biblical truth of *sola fide*. To make repentance a condition for eternal salvation is nothing less than a regression toward Roman Catholic dogma.⁸

The main words in the Greek New Testament for repentance are the noun *metanoia* (“repentance”) and the verb *metanoēō* (“to repent”). Originally, these Greek words meant to change one’s mind. But the standard Greek-English dictionary does not list any New Testament passage where the meaning “to change one’s mind” actually occurs. In general use, the Greek verb and noun had come to be roughly equivalent to the English words “to repent” and “repentance.” In the Septuagint, or Greek Old Testament, the Greek verb translates a Hebrew word meaning “to regret,” “to repent.” It follows that the translation of these words in our English Bibles is generally satisfactory, and the discussion in this chapter will take that fact for granted.⁹

⁴ Robert Lightner, *Sin, The Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life*. (Nashville, Tennessee), p. 167

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 212

⁶ Zane Hodges, *Harmony with God* (Dallas, Texas, 2001), p. 57

⁷ Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free* (Dallas, Texas, 2001), p. 144

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 146

According to Zane, the words *metanoia* and *metanoēō* originally meant to change one's mind. However in the New Testament the meaning of those words was changed to "turn from sin in order to avoid, or bring to an end, God's temporal judgment."

If the meaning of *metanoia* and *metanoēō* really changed, then what word(s) did the writers of the New Testament use to express the concept of "changing one's mind?" Zane does not bother to answer that question for the simple fact that there is no answer. There is not another term used in the Greek New Testament which means to "change one's mind."

Did the meaning of these words actually change in New Testament times? Extra biblical literature indicates that it did not change. According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, "when the idea of change of *noúis* establishes itself, emotional and volitional elements come in, but the change is not necessarily ethical; it may be from good to bad."¹⁰ In fact, Trench cites a passage from Plutarch in which two murderers, who, having spared a child, afterwards repented and tried to slay it.¹¹

The Jewish Historian Josephus also used the word repent with the idea of a change from a good sense to a bad sense. In writing about Herod's fear of John the Baptist's influence of he wrote:

Accordingly he [Herod] thought the best course was to arrest him [John the Baptist] and put him to death before he caused a riot, rather than wait until a revolt broke out and then have to repent of permitting such trouble to arise. Because of this suspicion on Herod's part, John was sent in chains to the fortress of Machaerus... and there put to death.¹²

From these examples, it's obvious that during the time period in which the New Testament was written that the terms *metanoia* and *metanoēō* did not come to mean "turn from sin." Certainly a decision to "turn from sin" can be involved as one changes their mind. But a definition of the terms *metanoia* and *metanoēō* cannot be limited to just "turning from sin." In the Septuagint the word repent (*metanoēō*) was used with regard to God. If the basic meaning of the word repent carries with it the idea of turning from sin, then how are we to apply this to God?

When a person changes their mind, it often results in a change of actions. For example, the weather forecast said that it would be a sunny day. But as I walked out the door, I saw clouds and heard thunder in the distance. I changed my mind about the veracity of the weather forecast and brought an umbrella with me as I left the house. A change of mind resulted in a change of actions. But there is a direct connection between the two.

According to Zane Hodges, the Greek words *metanoia* and *metanoēō* are roughly equivalent to the English words "to repent" and "repentance."

How do we understand the word "repent?" The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as:

¹⁰ Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, p. 639

¹¹ R.C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, p. 259

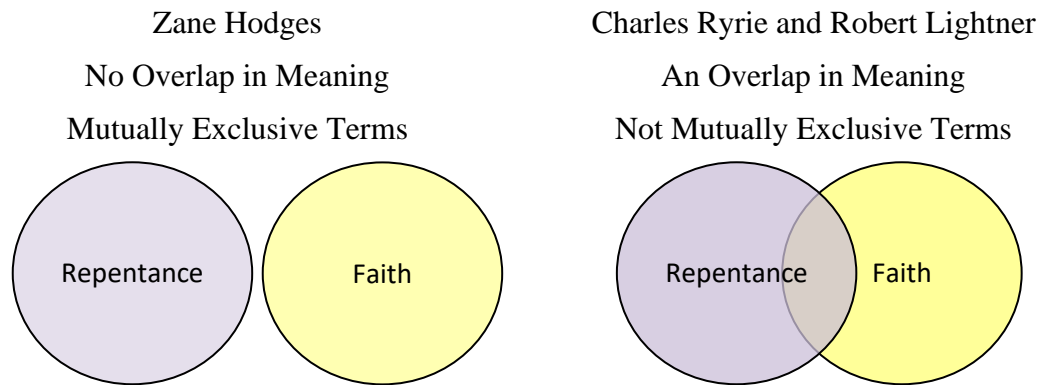
¹² Josephus, *Antiquities*. XVIII, 116-19

1. To feel remorse, contrition, or self-reproach for what one has done or failed to do; be contrite. 2. To feel such regret for past conduct as to change one’s mind regarding it: *repented of intemperate behavior*. 3. To make a change for the better as a result of remorse or contrition for one's sins.¹³

In English, there is little or no overlap in the semantic range of meaning between the terms *faith* and *repentance*. There is a dichotomy between these two terms. They are mutually exclusive. The terms *faith* and *repentance* are referring to two separate and distinct issues.

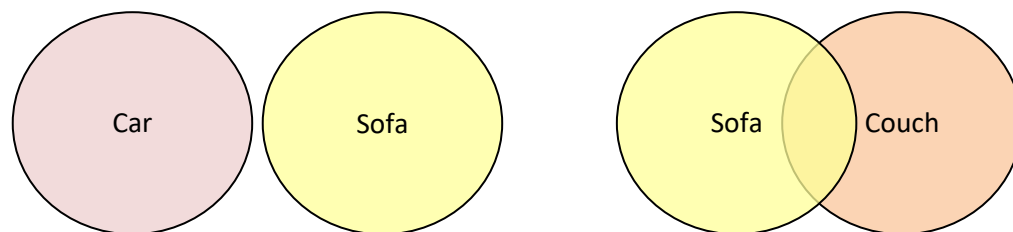
Zane seems comfortable to use the English definition for “repent,” rather than use the etymology of Greek for a definition.

In contrast, Charles Ryrie and Robert Lightner see an overlap in the semantic range of meaning between the terms *faith* and *repentance*. Although *faith* and *repentance* are not exact synonyms, they are by no means referring to separate and distinct issues. Aspects of *faith* are involved in *repentance*. In order to repent, a person must exercise faith. The terms are not mutually exclusive.



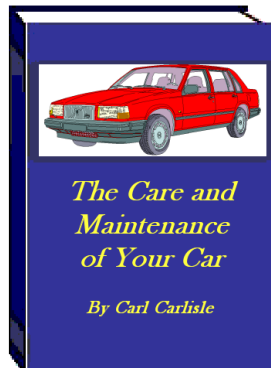
Consider the terms *car* and *sofa*. Is there any overlap in the semantic range of meaning between the terms? Other than the fact that I sit in *car* and on a *sofa*, there probably is not much overlap in the meanings of these two terms. They could not be used as synonymous terms. There’s not much chance of confusing the two.

What about the terms *sofa* and *couch*? Is there an overlap in the semantic range of meaning between the terms? A couch is very similar to a sofa and the two terms are often used synonymously. The word *couch* is derived from Middle French (*couche*) and is defined as an article of furniture for sitting or reclining. The word *sofa* is taken from Arabic (*suffah*) and is defined as a long upholstered seat usually with arms and a back.



¹³ <http://www.bartleby.com/61/86/R0158600.html>

Let's say I read these books:



Is there any chance that I would see the subject matter as being either the same or similar?
Probably not.

What if I read these books:



I would probably come to the conclusion that the two authors are talking about similar topics. There could be some differences. A couch might not be upholstered whereas a sofa would be. The couch in the psychiatrist's office might not have arms, whereas a sofa normally would have arms. But there are certainly many similarities between the two topics.

Zane begins with the assumption that *faith* and *repentance* are mutually exclusive. Therefore the gospel of John cannot possibly be using the term *faith* as a substitute for *repentance*. Using only the English definitions of these words, Zane's hypothesis might be worth considering. To bolster his assertion, Zane claims that the Greek word changed its meaning at the time the New Testament was written. Yet, the facts from extra biblical literature do not bear this out.

Personally, I feel more comfortable with the concept of repentance as taught by Dr. Ryrie and Dr. Lightner.

Bob Nyberg