

BASIC BIBLE DOCTRINE WORD STUDY 1 – REPENT

What does repent mean, how is it used in Scripture, and how does repent and the gospel of justification before God work together?

1. DEFINITIONS

English

Merriam Webster

re•pent \ri- 'pent\ *verb*

[Middle English, from Anglo-French *repentir*, from Medieval Latin *repenitēre*, from Latin *re-* + Late Latin *poenitēre* to feel regret, alteration of Latin *paenitēre*—more at PENITENT] *verb intransitive* 14th century

1: to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life

2a: to feel regret or contrition

b: to change one's mind (verb transitive)

1: to cause to feel regret or contrition

2: to feel sorrow, regret, or contrition for

re•pen•tance \ri- 'pen-tʰn (t)s\ *noun*

14th century: the action or process of repenting especially for misdeeds or moral shortcomings *synonym* see PENITENCE

Oxford

1: Feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin.

< View or think of (an action or omission) with deep regret or remorse.

< Feel regret or penitence about.

Webster's 1828

repent', *verb intransitive* [Latin *re* and *paeniteo*, from *paena*, pain. Gr. **See Pain.**]

1. To feel pain, sorrow or regret for something done or spoken;

2. To express sorrow for something past.

3. To change the mind in consequence of the inconvenience or injury done by past conduct.

4. Applied to the Supreme Being, to change the course of providential dealings.

5. In theology, to sorrow or be pained for sin, as a violation of God's holy law, a dishonor to his character and government, and the foulest ingratitude to a Being of infinite benevolence.

repentance', *noun*

1. To remember with sorrow; as, to *repent* rash words; to *repent* an injury done to a neighbor; to *repent* follies and vices.

2. In theology, the pain, regret or affliction which a person feels on account of his past conduct, because it exposes him to punishment. This sorrow proceeding merely from the fear of punishment, is called legal repentance, as being excited by the terrors of legal penalties, and it may exist without an amendment of life.

3. Real penitence; sorrow or deep contrition for sin, as an offense and dishonor to God, a violation of his holy law, and the basest ingratitude towards a Being of infinite benevolence. This is called evangelical repentance, and is accompanied and followed by amendment of life.

4. Repentance is a change of mind, or a conversion from sin to God. Repentance is the relinquishment of any practice, from conviction that it has offended God.

Hebrew

נָחַם *nēcham* – According to the Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament the basic meaning is to comfort, with an etymological relationship “*to breath pantingly.*” The greater theological understanding is “*to be sorry and seek comfort.*” The emphasis typically is *to be sorry, to be grieved.*

The Lexham Theological Wordbook indicates that the active sense of this word means to have compassion. This describes the act of feeling regret, offering comfort, or having compassion.

Genesis 6:6-7 – The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them."

Genesis 50:21 – “So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So, he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Judges 2:18 – When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.

Isaiah 12:1 – Then you will say on that day, "I will give thanks to You, O LORD; For although You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, And You comfort me.

Jeremiah 8:6 – "I have listened and heard, They have spoken what is not right; No man repented of his wickedness, Saying, 'What have I done?' Everyone turned to his course, Like a horse charging into the battle.

Greek

μετανοέω *metanoēō* – BDAG - *change one's mind, feel remorse, repent, be converted*

Liddell-Scott - *perceive afterwards or too late* – As opposed to anticipate. *Change one's mind or purpose*

Moulton-Milligan - the verb is used of “change of mind.” Its meaning deepens with Christianity, and in the NT it is more than “repent,” and indicates a complete change of attitude, spiritual and moral, towards God.

Modern Theological Definitions

In 2010 Michael Cocoris wrote a book on repentance and concluded, “In the New Testament, the Greek words “repent” and “repentance” mean “to change one’s mind.” The object of what people are changing their minds about is determined by the context. The message of repentance is preached to unbelievers and believers.”

Charles Ryrie stated that the word repent was “to change your mind.”

Zane Hodges concludes in his book on repentance where he states that the message in the Gospels (to the Jews about the Kingdom) and the message to Gentiles (typically pagans) involve repentance. The common

thread was idols and idol worship. For the Jew, this was captured in the idea self-righteousness (Romans 10:1-4) and for the Gentile, their repentance concerned forsaking idols and recognizing and worshiping the only true God. For Zane Hodges, the concluding definition is the book's namesake, "Harmony with God."

Vines Dictionary states that repentance always (with one exception) involves changing your mind for the better and always repentance from sin. The explanation continues, "The subject chiefly has reference to 'repentance' from sin and turning to God."

Merrill Unger states in his new dictionary, "Although faith alone is the condition for salvation, repentance is bound up with faith and inseparable from it." Unger states that faith without repentance is impossible and there can be no saving faith without true repentance. Unger states that repentance has three essential elements:

1. Genuine sorrow toward God on account of sin
2. Inward repugnance to sin necessarily followed by the actual forsaking of it
3. Humble self-surrender to the will and service of God

Biblestudytools.com concludes with these NT terms: regret, changed of mind, seized with remorse.

John MacArthur says that repentance is not a work but is an inward response. Genuine repentance "pleads with the Lord to forgive and deliver from the burden of sin and the fear of judgment and hell." Repentance, however, is not merely intellectual but moral in MacArthur's understanding. He relies on Kittle's theological understanding of the word: radical conversion, a transformation of nature, a definitive turning from evil, and a resolute turning to God in total obedience. This conversion is once-for-all. There can be no going back, only advancing in responsible movement along the way now taken. It affects the whole man, first and basically the center of personal life, then logically, his conduct at all times and in all situations, his thoughts, words, and acts.

Louis Berkhof defines repentance in his systematic theology in three components. Repentance is a total surrender of the person: intellectual, emotional, volitional.

Definition Conclusion:

From the Greek and Hebrew Lexicons, we see a simplistic understanding of "**נָחַם**, *nēcham*" and "**μετανοέω** *metanoēō*." The Hebrew word is defined as regret, pained with sorrow, comfort or to desire to be comforted. The Greek word is to change one's mind, to regret.

"**נָחַם**, *nēcham*" is used over 100 times in the Hebrew Scripture. In the Septuagint "**μετανοέω** *metanoēō*" is used 20 times. Of those, 13 times the Greek translators of the Hebrew Scriptures uses "**μετανοέω** *metanoēō*" for "**נָחַם**, *nēcham*."

1st Samuel 15:29 2x; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 10, 4:2; Zechariah 8:14; Jeremiah 4:28, 8:6*, 18:8, 10, 31:19*

The Hebrew and Greek words are not equivalent but they do have some overlap. The overlap is in the context of "a change of mind" or "relenting." I would propose the definition of the Greek word group "**μετανοέω**" is "a change of mind" or "relenting" with a possible third definition "being sorry," though not connected to emotion or volition.

2. GREEK NEW TESTAMENT USE OF REPENT

In the Greek NT, there are three words to consider, “**μετανοέω** *metanoēō*” (verb); “**μετάνοια** *metanoia*” (noun); “**ἀμετανόητος** *ametanoētos*” (negative adjective)

Here is the NT distribution of this word group.

Matthew 7

Mark 3

Luke 14

Acts 11

Romans 2

2nd Corinthians 3

2nd Timothy 1

Hebrews 3

2nd Peter 1

Revelation 10

In the Gospels, the word is initially associated with John the Baptizer and Jesus’ message that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In Matthew 3:1-3, the term is explained as “make ready the way of the Lord.” John’s message was to prepare the people so that they would recognize and believe in the One who came after him, namely Jesus the Messiah (Acts 19:3-4).

In Matthew 3:8, John the Baptizer proclaims, “Therefore produce fruits worthy of repentance” (my translation). Is “**μετάνοια**” a work? If true repentance includes works then this phrase is redundant.

In Mark 1:14-15, Jesus took up the mantle of John the Baptizer. He trained His disciples to proclaim the same message that John preached (Mark 6:12). Are “repent” and “believe the gospel” synonymous? Believe means to be convinced concerning a proposition. Here, the two terms are used next to each other, but one does not equal the other. Repent does not mean believe.

In Luke 13:1-4 – Jesus challenges their presupposition about people who died at the hands of Pilate or an accident. The thought was that these men died because of their sin. Jesus tells them no, change the way you are thinking about them. This is definitely a change of thought term in this context.

Luke 17:1-4 – Here, the word “**μετανοέω** *metanoēō*” seems to be more about a sorrow or relenting. What is interesting is that this statement by the Lord Jesus does not fit with some theologians’ ideas of “true genuine repentance.”

Luke 15:1-7 – A shepherd who has lost one of his hundred is likened to one sinner and 99 who are righteous. The 99 do not need to repent. They have stayed where they are. Understanding that the parables are concerning the kingdom and the context is about Israel, Jesus is concerned about those who are part of the flock who have gone wayward. It is a happy day when they return.

In Acts and the Epistles, this word group is used a few times. In these areas, let's focus on the ones that appear to be referring to repent and salvation.

Acts 11:18 – God has given the repentance to the Gentiles unto life (My translation). Keeping in line with Acts 19:4, repentance was a preparation for believing in Jesus. The statement seems to indicate that they recognized that the Gentiles were prepared to hear and believe the gospel of life through Jesus Christ.

Acts 20:21 – Paul was testifying earnestly to both Jews and Greeks the repentance toward God and the faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Looking back into Paul's sermons, he uses the term when proclaiming to the Jews and/or Gentiles (Acts 13:24; 17:30; 19:4). We already concluded that Acts 13:24 and 19:4 work together. In Acts 17:30, the context seems to be "change your mind." Repentance in Acts seems to be in hindsight, reflecting upon what happened. But the imperative *for* eternal life is lacking.

In the Pauline Epistles, the word is not used in regard to any presentations of the gospel. He does use it in regard to the admonishment and correction of the church (2nd Corinthians 7:9-10, 12:21; 2nd Timothy 2:25). In 2nd Corinthians 7:9, grief and repentance are not synonymous. In this context, grief or sorrowfulness (emotional) is not equated to repentance.

If the repentance is preached to both Jew and Gentile, the question must be asked, "Repent concerning what?" With the given that "**μετανοέω**" foundationally means "change your mind" or "relent," we must define what the primary problem is for each group. In Romans 10:1-3, the problem facing the Jew is delineated, they sought to establish their own righteousness. They believed in keeping the law (not sinning and doing good). They had worked for a good standing with God. In Hebrews 6:1, the writer states clearly that the Hebrews didn't need to reestablish a foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God. The Jewish repentance concerns a change in their mind concerning how to establish righteousness before a perfect and holy God.

To the Gentile, the primary problem is that they do not know who the true creator God is. Acts 17:22-31 makes this clear in the sermon at Mars Hill. The Gentiles needed to change their minds about the fact that their idols are not real gods and there is only one true God.

How many of these verses are clear about what a person must do to obtain the righteousness of God and have eternal life? None of these. "**μετάνοια** metanoia" is taught in the Gospels but each use of the word needs to be exegetically examined in order to understand the meaning of the word in its context.

3. REPENT AND THE GOSPEL OF JUSTIFICATION

The biblical record is clear as to how a person individually obtains eternal life. There are many verses that speak to the simple truth of how someone has eternal life (has been saved; has the righteousness of God). Is there a connection to the word repent?

Handout #1 - Ten passages in the Epistles make this truth abundantly clear. How many of these verses contained repent? None of these passages contain the word repent.

The only book written to unbelievers is the Gospel of John. Furthermore, this Gospel was written in regard to the whole world and not focused on Israel as the main receiver of the gospel. Handout #2 – Ten passages in John demonstrate clearly how one receives eternal life. How many of these verses contain the word repent? None of them do. In fact the Gospel of John in its entirety does not contain any form of "**μετανοέω**" or "**μετάνοια**."

CONCLUSION

The concept of repentance has some difficulties. There are compelling arguments that claim that repent is more than a change of mind. The preaching of John the Baptizer has unanswered questions such as, “In what way did the baptism of repentance prepare people to believe in Jesus?”

Words have meaning and the etymology does lend us some assistance. The problem surfaces when we take every phrase and imply inference and implication based upon the reader’s thoughts and opinions then revert those thoughts and place them back into the definition.

We also have to be careful not to paint with a too broad of brush and state that definition is only one idea. The range of definitions needs to be considered and let the context dictate. As stated, I am convinced through the use in Scripture that the definitions of the Greek word group of “μετανοέω” is:

1. To change one’s mind
2. To relent, abandon one’s position
3. Realization and admittance of wrongdoing

We have also concluded that regardless of the definition, it is not clearly tied to the gospel of justification. If we desire to be biblical in our evangelism, then I propose that the word is not used to proclaim the good news to the lost rather than try to explain why biblical repentance is not the same as the English primary definition: “to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life” or “to feel regret or contrition” or “to be fully penitent.” Use the word as Paul did in the epistles and teach and proclaim it to the wayward believer (doctrine or moral error).