

Grace Notes

Number 83

Is Repentance in John's Gospel?

Some who have trouble accepting that eternal salvation is by faith alone insist that repentance (as turning from sins) is also necessary. That is why they claim repentance is in John's Gospel even though the word is not present in verb or noun form (*metaneō*, *metanoia*). They argue that the concept of repentance is present in various passages, but their definition and assumptions of repentance in John cannot be supported.

The meaning of repentance

The meaning of *repentance* has been explained previously (*GraceNotes* no. 22, "Repentance: What's in a Word"). Overall, linguists agree that repentance means *change of mind*. *Mind* (*nous*) sometimes refers to moral attitude as well as intellect (Rom. 1:28; 7:23, 25; Eph. 4:17, 23; Col. 2:18). Repentance, as an inner change of mind or heart, is distinct from an outer change of conduct, though that is expected (Matt. 3:8/Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). Also, sin is not always the object of repentance (cf. Acts 17:30; 20:21; Heb. 6:1); context determines that. Nor is it a second condition for salvation, which is through faith alone. Since faith is the assurance that something is true, when one is persuaded about a truth, there is a change of mind or heart. Faith can express this change (Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32; 24:47; Acts 11:18; 17:30, 34; 2 Peter 3:9).

The absence of the word

Advocates of repentance in John reject the argument that it is not present because the word does not appear. They argue that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence and give as an example the book of Esther, which does not mention God. But evidence is that which testifies to a claim or assumption of truth, of which there is none about repentance in John. Their reasoning is circular, assuming true the point they seek to prove. Their argument would be valid if John showed that repentance as turning from sins is a necessary condition of salvation. Consider that, unlike the other Gospel authors, John does not mention repentance as part of John the Baptist's message (1:24-27; 3:22-26), but focuses on his purpose of bearing witness to Christ so that all through him might believe (1:6-8; 3:27-36).

The inference of repentance

Some argue that even if the words *repent/repentance* are not present, the concept of repentance is present by inference in certain passages. Here are the passages most commonly cited.

John 3:14-15. It is claimed that Jesus uses this reference to Numbers 21:4-9 because the Israelites who sinned in the wilderness had to turn from their sins to be healed. But there is no indication that turning from sin saves the Israelites. Yes, they realize their sin (Num. 21:7), but they are not healed by that. For healing, they merely have to look at the serpent on the pole just as Jesus' audience needs only look to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for salvation from their sin. The emphasis is not at all on turning from sins, but on the simplicity and availability of faith in Christ as Savior. The following verses 16 and 18 say that condemnation results from not believing in Christ, not from failing to turn from sins.

John 3:19-21. Jesus said that those who do evil do not come to the light. In light of the previous context as well as the consistent evangelistic use of the phrase "come to" in the Gospels, Jesus is simply making the observation that those who prefer their sin do not believe in Him as Savior. They would certainly have to change their mind about their sin and its consequences in order to come to the light, but turning from sins is not made a condition of salvation.

John 3:36. The claim is that *apeitheō* in this verse can be translated "does not obey" (NASB), therefore whoever does not obey Jesus' *implied command* to repent will not see eternal life. But this again assumes the point it is trying to make; there is no command to repent. Besides, *obey* is not defined in the context, especially as turning from sin. The NKJV translates it as "does not believe," which is what the context demands. This is the

Number 83

counterpoint to the first part of the verse where belief results in eternal life (also see 3:18 where unbelief results in condemnation).

John 4:1-42. Because Jesus mentions the woman's sinful relationship to a man, some claim He is demanding that she turn from that sin in order to receive eternal life. Yet no such demand is in the story. Jesus' mention of her sin was to convince her about who He was, the omniscient Messiah. Convinced of His identity, she believes (4:29, 40-42). Jesus' only condition for receiving the gift of eternal life is "ask" (v. 10), which is an analogy for *believe*. As a result of the woman's witness, many Samaritans do believe (v. 39).

John 5:1-15. When Jesus heals the lame man, He tells him to "sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." Some claim this is a demand for the man to turn from his sin. Yet there is no indication in the story that the man is saved at that time or even offered salvation. Jesus is implying that his sins contributed to his illness and therefore he should stop sinning to prevent a more serious illness.

John 8:1-11. Jesus pardons a woman caught in adultery and says to her "Go and sin no more." But as in the previous story, there is no indication that the woman gets saved or is offered salvation. The implication is that if she stops sinning, she will avoid being caught in fornication in the future.

John 12:40. Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:10 which predicts the unresponsiveness of Israel and applies it to His present situation. He uses Isaiah's language of seeing, understanding, and turning, which verses 37-39 show are figures of speech for believing in juxtaposition to verse 42 where some rulers believe. The turning here is not turning from sin, but turning to the Lord, a way to describe those who come to faith in Christ (cf. Luke 1:16; Acts 9:53; 11:21; 2 Cor. 3:16).

The adequacy of believing

In John 20:30-31, John explains why he chooses to record certain signs that Jesus did. He writes so that his readers will believe in Jesus as the Christ and have eternal life. In this important purpose statement, John says nothing about repentance, as is consistent throughout his Gospel. However, he uses *believe* ninety-eight times with almost half of those used as the condition for salvation. Besides the passages already mentioned, here are some significant examples showing the sufficiency of faith for salvation.

- John 5:38-40. The Jews who are trying to kill Jesus, are not told to turn from that sin, but to come to Him and *believe*, which certainly implies a change of thinking and resultant new behavior.
- John 6:28-29. When the Jews ask what "works" they could do to please God, Jesus answers that there is only one "work"—*believe*. He could have easily said *repent and believe*, but did not.
- John 8:24. Jesus warns the Jews that they will die in their sins if they do not *believe* that He is the Messiah. Though He mentions sins, Jesus does not mention repentance or turning from their sins.
- John 16:8-9. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to convict the world of sin because the world does not believe in Jesus. The obvious remedy for their conviction of sin is not to turn from sins, but *believe* in Jesus as their Savior from sin. The problem is one's sinful condition, not specific sins.
- John 20:24-29. In his unbelief, Thomas needs to change his thinking about Christ. Both Thomas and Jesus describe this *change of mind* as *believing* (vv. 25, 29).

Conclusion

John was not ignorant of the word repentance for he uses it a dozen times in the Book of Revelation. Why, then, does he exclude it from his explicitly evangelistic Gospel? While repentance as a change of heart may be depicted by belief, the idea that repentance as turning from sins is never explicitly confirmed, much less made a condition of salvation. John is showing that believing in Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Savior is sufficient for eternal salvation. That will take a change of mind or thinking about Him, which *belief* adequately implies.