

# FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE

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## REPENTANCE

If faith alone in Christ alone is all that is required for *salvation* (as in justification and regeneration) what role is there for repentance? There are basically two different answers given by those who believe that faith alone in Christ alone (*sola fide*) is all that is required for justification and regeneration. Both of these views recognize an important role for repentance while maintaining a commitment to *sola fide*. Before I differentiate between these two views I will first note what they agree on.

(1) They agree that repentance from particular sins or a pattern of sinful behavior may (and should) be repented of *before* an unbeliever turns in faith to Christ for salvation. For example, a man who is not a believer but who drives “under the influence” should repent of this sinful and dangerous behavior even if he has no intention of getting right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the right thing for him to do even if he is not right with God.

(2) They agree that an unbeliever may (and should) repent of particular sins or a pattern of sinful behavior *when* they turn in faith to Christ for salvation. For example, suppose that a drug addict desires to get right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no better time for him to repent of his drug abuse than at the moment he trusts in Christ for salvation. While repentance from drug abuse does not equal faith in Christ, repentance from drug abuse is the kind of thing someone who has put his faith in Christ can and should do at the very time he trusts in Christ for salvation.

Stated differently, they agree that a believer (even a new believer) *should always* and without exception repent of particular sins or a pattern of sinful behavior from the time they come to Christ in faith until Christ comes for them or they go to be with the Lord. For example, suppose that before a person trusts in Christ for salvation he is guilty of marital infidelity (i.e., adultery), along with any and all other sins he is guilty of, they agree that he should repent of marital infidelity. They agree that from the time a person comes to faith in Christ until

Christ comes for him a believer should repent of all particular sins and all patterns of sin, without exception.

(3) They agree that repentance of a particular sin (such as lying or stealing) or a sinful lifestyle (such as cheating on your taxes, or abusing alcohol) while not a condition of salvation (i.e., as in justification or regeneration) should, without exception, characterize the life lived by the believer. While *faith in Christ* does not equal repentance of a particular sin (except unbelief in and rejection of Christ), *faithfulness to Christ* does include a life characterized by repentance of any and all sin. Salvation as in regeneration and justification requires faith alone in Christ alone. Salvation as in maturation and sanctification requires faith in Christ plus faithfulness to Christ. Salvation in the first sense is about salvation from the penalty of sin, once and forever. Salvation in the second sense is about salvation from the power of sin on a continuing base.

One way to reconcile *sola fide* (i.e., faith alone in Christ alone) with some of the commands and calls to repentance (i.e., what can be called saving-repentance) is by seeing that repentance must be understood first and foremost as a *change of mind*. What an unbeliever must change his mind about is Christ. To be saved he must repent from his unbelief and corresponding rejection of Christ and turn to Christ in faith and thereby personally receive Him as Savior. According to Dr. Ryrie, this:

...Is the only kind or content of repentance that saves (Acts 2: 38; 17: 30; 2 Pet. 3: 9). However, saving repentance may be preceded by repentance concerning sin (which activates an individual's sense of need for forgiveness) or a repentance toward God (which alerts him to the fact that he has offended a holy God...). This aspect of repentance (like John 16: 8-11) is still not saving unless it is accompanied by faith in Christ (Acts 20: 21).<sup>[i]</sup>

And:

Repentance means a genuine change of mind that affects the life in some way. Like other significant theological terms it must be defined specifically by asking a further question, namely, change the mind about what? Unsaved people can truly repent but without being saved, as for example, to change the mind about a bad habit and to break that habit as a result... And unsaved people can repent unto salvation. This saving repentance has to involve a change of mind about Christ so that whatever a person thought of Him before, he changes his mind and trusts Him to be his Savior.<sup>[ii]</sup>

On the day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter, while preaching to the Jews that were gathered, says:

*Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' 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. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.'* And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation.' Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them (Acts 2:36–41).

\*Repentance for the Judeans involved rejecting their former attitudes and opinions concerning who Jesus was. In faith they had to accept Him for who He declared Himself to be while on earth, a declaration that was confirmed by His resurrection and ascension. <sup>[iii]</sup>

Thus, Peter's call to repentance was a call *from unbelief*, evidenced as a rejection of Christ as the Jewish Messiah and Savior of the world (Jn. 1:11). It was also a call *to faith in Christ* as their Messiah and Savior (Jn. 1:12). Again, this view does not suggest that Christians are not supposed to repent of particular sins (from the time they come to Christ until the time Christ comes for them), when they commit them, or of a sinful pattern, if and when they fall into such a pattern. Only that in this initial and primary sense, a person is only required (i.e., to obtain salvation from the penalty of sin) to repent *from* unbelief and rejection of Jesus Christ *to* faith in Jesus Christ, the one and only means available to receive Him. Calvary pastor, David Guzik insists that:

Responding to the question 'what shall we do?' Peter gave them something to *do*. This means we must *do* something to be saved; we must *do* something to follow Jesus, it doesn't just 'happen'... The first thing he told them to *do* is **repent**. To repent does not mean to feel sorry, but it means to change one's mind or direction—they had thought a certain way about Jesus before (considering Him worthy of crucifixion); now they must turn around their thinking, embracing Him as Lord and Messiah. <sup>[iv]</sup>

After we turn to Christ in faith and trust Him for salvation, what we do (such as repent of our sins when we commit them) is very important. A call to repent in the

primary sense is not different than a call to faith in Christ for salvation. Again, in this view, whereas repentance from unbelief in Christ to faith in Christ is necessary for salvation (as in justification and regeneration) repentance of particular sins or of a pattern of sin is necessary for salvation (as in sanctification and maturation). This second kind of repentance involves and is required for restoration of the fellowship that is broken when a believer sins as well as to avoid losing rewards for the believer in the next life. The Apostle Paul asked believers in Rome:

*...Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to **repentance**? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God (Rom. 2: 4-11).*

\*Repentance literally means "to change one's mind." In this context, it means to reject one's sinful habits and turn to God. This is the only occurrence of this word in Romans. [2:5](#) Wrath as used here is different from the "wrath of God" in [1:18](#). There God's wrath was His present anger; here the word refers to God's future wrath. Most take this future wrath to refer to the Day of Judgment. Thus people who continue in their rebellion against God are accumulating wrath for themselves. [2:7](#) According to this verse, it seems that eternal life can be gained by doing good. But Romans clearly teaches justification by faith ([3:22](#)). But Paul does not contradict himself. The subject of this verse is judgment, not justification. Believers who continue in good works will receive rewards in the life to come. Whenever the New Testament speaks of eternal life as a present possession, it is a gift received by faith ([John 3:16](#)); but whenever it refers to eternal life as something to be received in the future by those who are already believers, it refers to eternal rewards (see [5:21](#); [Gal. 6:8](#); [1 Tim. 6:17](#); [Tit. 1:2](#); [1 Pet. 1:7](#)).<sup>[v]</sup>

Another way in which sola fide (or faith alone in Christ alone) can be reconciled to the biblical commands to repent insists that none of the calls to repent in Scripture are calls to repent as a condition of salvation as in justification as Paul typically uses that term, and repentance in and of itself (i.e., without faith in Christ) never results in the receiving the free gift of eternal life, which always comes when a

person trust in Christ for salvation. In this view, it is not so much a definition of repentance that is at issue. Rather, the focus is on what is at stake when an individual or a group (such as an individual, a nation or a church) fails to repent.

When unrepented of (in this view), sin leads to judgment. When repented of, it can also lead to faith in Christ that brings about salvation, as in justification and regeneration. No one is saved because they repent (without faith in Christ) but even the unsaved may be spared from temporal judgment when and if they do repent. The saved, however, will be judged when and if they refuse to repent of sin and they will lose out on intimacy with God in time and reward from God in eternity. With a believer in mind, Professor Hodges says that:

Repentance can and should bring glory to God... And it does so when it is properly understood, not as a condition for eternal salvation but as the means by which we can reach harmony with our Maker no matter how far we have strayed from Him.

With an unbeliever in mind he says:

The unsaved can find in repentance a road that leads him to faith in Christ and to fellowship with the Father in heaven.

With a believer who has not yet repented of something he needs to repent of in mind, Professor Hodges says that:

Even when he comes to faith in Christ before repentance, as he later repents of long continued sins he can find fellowship with his Savior and with his God... Like everything else God does for us, this is only possible because He gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. It is one of the numberless benefits of the cross of Christ.

By itself or without faith in Christ Professor Hodges says:

As wonderful as it is, there is one thing repentance cannot do for us. It cannot give us eternal life or security from eternal judgment.<sup>[vi]</sup>

Again, these views firmly hold to sola fide (faith alone in Christ alone) while recognizing a very important role and place for the repentance of sin, before and after a person turns in faith to Christ for salvation as in justification and regeneration. For me, what is most important is that they agree on what is most important. Namely that only through faith in Christ can a lost person become a saved person and that always through faith in Christ a lost person becomes a saved

person. Stated differently only through faith alone in Christ alone does a person receive the gift of eternal life and always through faith alone in Christ alone a person receives the gift of eternal life. Maintaining fellowship with God, which is the birthright of every believer, depends on repentance for fellowship that has been broken or lost because of sin unrepented of.

Again, even if a lost person fails to repent of a particular sin when he turns in faith to Christ for salvation, it does not mean that he is not saved. Sometimes a new believer (sometimes even an older believer) does not even know that a particular sin is a sin and therefore does not always repent of everything sinful they are engaged in. Nevertheless, as soon as a believer realizes that this or that behavior is sinful (and therefore an offense to God) he should repent of that sinful behavior.

To see that a certain behavior is sinful according to Scripture is all that a believer needs to know. Once he knows this, it is immediately time to repent. Scripture makes “ignorance” of what is and what is not sinful an inexcusable excuse for the student of Scripture. The fact that God’s Word is so readily available to almost every believer makes ignorance of Scripture excusable for all but the newest of believers or individuals who have no possible access to Scripture. Working with the Word of God, the Spirit of God insures that almost every believer can and should know what he needs to repent of and when he needs to repent of what he needs to repent.

<sup>[i]</sup> Hebrews: *Five Warnings for believers*, 3

<sup>[ii]</sup> Charles Ryrie

<sup>[iii]</sup> *The NKJV Study Bible*

<sup>[iv]</sup> David Guzik, *Verse By Verse Commentary*, ACTS, 30

<sup>[v]</sup> *The NKJV Study Bible*

<sup>[vi]</sup> Zane Hodges, *Harmony With God*, 122-123