

Quotes on Repentance as a Change of Mind, Part 1

The meaning of repentance is a contemporary controversy. When we examine a sampling of quotes from historical sources there is general agreement that repentance is essentially an inner change of mind or heart. The information below is selected from an article by Jonathan Perrault. You can find his article with more complete quotes and bibliography in the Grace Research Room at GraceLife.org or at the author's web site FreeGraceFreeSpeech.blogspot.com. The selections and sources below are abbreviated to save space.

Flavius Josephus (37-100 A.D.) in *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, Wars of the Jews*, Book 3, transl. William Whiston: "And thus did Vespasian march with his army, and came to the bounds of Galilee, where he pitched his camp and restrained his soldiers, who were eager for war; he also showed his army to the enemy, in order to affright them, and to afford them a season for repentance [*metanoia*], to see whether they would change their minds..."

Shepherd of Hermas (c. 140 A.D.) in *Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision 3, chapter 7, transl. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*: "These are they that heard the word, and would be baptized unto the name of the Lord. Then, when they call to their remembrance the purity of the truth, they change their minds [*metanoēō*], and go back again after their evil desires."

Polycarp (69-155 A.D.) in *A Translation of the Epistles of Clement of Rome, Polycarp, and Ignatius*, transl. Temple Chevallier: "The Proconsul said unto him [Polycarp], 'I have wild beasts ready; to those I will cast thee, unless thou repent.' He answered, 'Call for them, then: for we Christians are fixed in our minds, not to change [i.e. not to repent] from good to evil.'"

Tertullian (c. 155–c. 220 A.D.) in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of The Writings of The Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 7, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, transl. Peter Holmes, *Against Marcion*: "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."

Athanasius (4th–5th century A.D.) in *De Parables, Question 133, The Works of the Right Rev. William Beveridge*, ed. Thomas Hartwell Horne: "...the author of the questions ascribed to Athanasius, explains *metanoēin*, by *tou metatithesthai ton noun apo tou kakou pros to agathon*; 'the changing of the mind from bad to good.'" (The Greek is transcribed into English letters.)

Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon (1859): "*Metanoia*, as, *ē*, after-thought: a change of mind on reflection: hence *repentance*..." (The Greek is transcribed into English letters.)

Cremer's Lexicon (1892): "*μετάνοια*, ἡ, change of mind, repentance.... In the N.T., and especially in Luke, corresponding with *μετανοεῖν* [to repent], it is = repentance, with reference to *νοῦς* [mind, intellect, thought] as the faculty of moral reflection."

Alexander Souter in *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament (1917)*: "*metanoēō*, I change my mind, I change the inner man (particularly with reference to acceptance of the will of God by the *nous* [mind] instead of rejection)" ... "*metanoia*, a change of mind, a change in the inner man."

Abbot-Smith's Lexicon (1922): "*metanoēō*...to change one's mind or purpose, hence, to repent... *metanoia*...after-thought, change of mind, repentance."

Desiderus Erasmus (1466-1536) in *Annotation on Matthew 3:2*: "...but if the Greek word, [is] 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*." (Translated from the Latin)

Martin Luther (1483–1546) quoted by Henry Eyster Jacobs in *Elements of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Board of Publication of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran church in North America): "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.'"

John Calvin (1509-1564) in *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, Book 3, transl. John Allen: "The Hebrew word for repentance, denotes conversion or return. The Greek word signifies change of mind or intention."

Philip Schaff in *A Religious Encyclopedia: or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology*, vol. 3 (1884): “The Reformers went back to the original idea of repentance as ‘a transmutation of the mind and affections’ (*transmutation mentis et affectus* — Luther)... Calvin did not differ from Luther, although he failed to emphasize the pangs for sin committed as much as he.”

William Tyndale (1494-1536) in *Tyndale’s New Testament*: “And the Greek in the New Testament hath perpetually *metanoēō* to turn in the heart and mind, and to come to the right knowledge, and to a man’s right wit again.

Edward Fisher in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1646): “First, that the word repent, in the original, signifies a change of our minds from false waies to the right, and of our hearts from evil to good...” (Old English *waies* = ways)

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2: “The word in the New Testament which is most frequently translated repentance, most properly signifies a change of mind.”

Adam Clarke (1762-1832) in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary and Critical Notes on the New Testament*, on Acts 11:18: “As the word *metanoia* which we translate *repentance* signifies literally a *change of mind*, it may here be referred to a change of religious views...”

John Campbell (1795-1867) in *Theology for Youth*, cited by John Bowes in the Preface to his *New Testament: Translated from the Purest Greek*: “What is the general import of the term ‘repentance’ in the Scriptures? It’s general import is, that *entire change of mind* which takes place on a sinner’s conversion to God.”

Hermann Olshausen (1796-1839) in *Biblical Commentary on the New Testament*, vol. 1, on Matt. 3:2: “*Metanoia*, *repentance*, *change of mind*, denotes here the result of the law in its effect on the mind.

John Peter Lange (1802-1884) in *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff, on Matt. 3:2: “The expression, ‘*Repent ye*,’ is not equivalent with ‘*Do penance*.’ The original means, *Change your minds*, your mode of thinking and of viewing things...”

Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889) in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1: “[John the Baptist] called them to repentance—a ‘change of mind’...”

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown (1883) in *A Commentary: Critical, Practical and Explanatory*, on Acts 2:38: “Repent—The word denotes *change of mind*, and here includes the reception of the Gospel as the proper issue of that revolution of mind which they were then undergoing.”

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889) in *God’s Way of Peace*: “The word repentance signifies in the Greek, ‘change of mind...’”

Henry Alford (1810-1871) in *Homilies on the Former Part of the Acts of the Apostles*, on Acts 2:38: “Well then, what was the answer which the Apostle Peter gave to them? ‘*Change your mind*’—‘*Repent*’. It is well, sometimes, to express words with their simple derivative force. ‘*Change your minds*’—not, do penance: there is no outward act implied in the word further than the inward state of mind will necessarily and naturally bring about.”

Conclusion

It is clear that those who were closest to the original language and many scholars later agreed that repentance was an inner change. Any addition of outward conduct was imported by theological bias. Many of those quoted above also associated repentance with salvation which did not contradict salvation by grace through faith because they understood that repentance, like faith, was an inner change, a change of mind or heart.