

THE TERMS OF SALVATION, Pt.1

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

OUTSIDE THE DOCTRINES related to the Person and work of Christ, there is no truth more far-reaching in its implications and no fact more to be defended than that salvation in all its limitless magnitude is secured, so far as human responsibility is concerned, by believing on Christ as Savior. To this one requirement no other obligation may be added without violence to the Scriptures and total disruption of the essential doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

Only ignorance or reprehensible inattention to the structure of a right Soteriology [Doctrine of Salvation] will attempt to intrude some form of human works with its supposed merit into that which, if done at all, must by the very nature of the case, be wrought by God alone and on the principle of Sovereign grace.

But few, indeed, seem ever to comprehend the doctrine of sovereign grace, and it is charitable, at least, to revert to this fact as the explanation of the all-but-universal disposition to confuse the vital issues involved. It is the purpose of this section to demonstrate that the eternal glories which are wrought in sovereign grace are conditioned, on the human side, by faith alone.

The practical bearing of this truth must of necessity make drastic claims upon the preacher and become a qualifying influence in the soul-winning methods which are employed. The student would do well to bring his message and his methods into complete agreement with the workings of divine grace, rather than to attempt to conform this unalterable truth to human ideals.

Salvation which is by faith begins with those mighty transformations which together constitute a Christian what he is; it guarantees the safekeeping of the Christian, and brings him home to heaven conformed to the image of Christ. The preacher or soul-winner who is able to trace through these limitless realities and to preserve them from being

made to depend to any degree upon human responsibility other than saving faith in Christ, merits the high title of “a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine” (1 Tim. 4:6).

A moment’s attention to the transforming divine undertakings which enter into salvation of the lost will bring one to the realization of the truth that every feature involved presents a task which is superhuman, and, therefore, if to be accomplished at all, must be wrought by God alone. Such a discovery will prepare the mind for the reception of the truth and that the only relation man can sustain to this great undertaking is to depend utterly upon God to do it. That is the simplicity of faith.

...the only relation man can sustain to this great undertaking is to depend utterly upon God to do it. That is the simplicity of faith.

However, since moral issues are involved which have been divinely solved by Christ in His death, He has become the only qualified Savior, and saving faith is thus directed toward Him. “Whosoever believeth in Him” shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” But even when the supernatural character of salvation is recognized, it is possible to encumber the human responsibility with various complications, thus to render the whole grace undertaking ineffectual to a large degree.

These assertions lead naturally to a detailed consideration of the more common features of human responsibility which are too often erroneously added to the one requirement of faith or belief.

I. REPENT AND BELIEVE

Since repentance—conceived of as a separate act—is almost universally added to believing as a requirement on the human side for salvation, a consideration of the Biblical meaning of repentance is essential. This consideration may be traced as follows: (1) the meaning of the word, (2) the

relation of repentance to believing, (3) the relation of repentance to covenant people, (4) the absence of the demand for repentance from salvation Scriptures, and (5) the significance of repentance in specific passages.

1. THE MEANING OF THE WORD.

The word *metanoia* is in every instance translated “repentance.” The word means a change of mind. The common practice of reading into this word the thought of sorrow and heart-anguish is responsible for much confusion in the field of Soteriology. There is no reason why sorrow should not accompany repentance or lead to repentance, but the sorrow, whatever it may be, is not repentance. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, it is said that “godly sorrow worketh repentance,” that is, it leads on to repentance; but the sorrow is not to be mistaken for the change of mind which it may serve to produce.

The son cited by Christ as reported in Matthew 21:28-29 who first said “I will not go,” and afterward repented and went, is a true example of the precise meaning of the word. The New Testament call to repentance is not an urge to self-condemnation, but is a call to a change of mind which promotes a change in the course being pursued. This definition of this word as it is used in the New Testament is fundamental. Little or no progress can be made in a right induction of the Word of God on this theme, unless the true and accurate meaning of the word is discovered and defended throughout.

2. THE RELATION OF REPENTANCE TO BELIEVING.

Too often, when it is asserted—as it is here—that repentance is not to be added to belief as a separate requirement for salvation, it is assumed that by so much the claim has been set up that repentance is not necessary to salvation. Therefore, it is as dogmatically stated as language can declare, that repentance is essential to salvation and that none could be saved apart from repentance, but it is included in believing and could not be separated from it. The discussion is restricted at this point to the problem which the salvation of unregenerate

persons develops; and it is safe to say that few errors have caused so much hindrance to the salvation of the lost than the practice of demanding of them an anguish of soul before faith in Christ can be exercised.

Since such emotions cannot be produced at will, the way of salvation has thus been made impossible for all who do not experience the required anguish. This error results in another serious misdirection of the unsaved, namely, one in which they are encouraged to look inward at themselves and not away to Christ as Savior. Salvation is made to be conditioned on feelings and not on faith. Likewise, people are led by this error to measure the validity of their salvation by the intensity of anguish which preceded or accompanied it. It is in this manner that sorrow of heart becomes a most subtle form of meritorious work and to that extent a contradiction of grace.

... it is safe to say that few errors have caused so much hindrance to the salvation of the lost than the practice of demanding of them an anguish of soul before faith in Christ can be exercised.

Underlying all this supposition that tears and anguish are necessary is the most serious notion that God has not been propitiated, but that He must be softened to pity by penitent grief. The Bible declares that God is propitious because of Christ’s death for the very sin which causes human sorrow. There is no occasion to melt or temper the heart of God. His attitude toward sin and the sinner is a matter of revelation. To imply, as preachers have done so generally, that God must be mollified and made more lenient by human agony is a desperate form of unbelief. The unsaved have a gospel of good news to believe, which certainly is not the mere notion that God must be coaxed into a saving attitude of mind; it is that Christ has died and grace is extended from One who is propitious to the point of infinity. The human heart is prone to imagine that there is some form of atonement for sin through being sorry for it. Whatever may be the place of sorrow for sin in the restoration of a Christian who has transgressed, it cannot be determined with too much emphasis that for the unsaved—Jew or Gentile—there is no occasion to propitiate God or to provide any form of satisfaction by misery or distress of soul.

With glaring inconsistency, those who have preached that the unsaved must experience mental suffering before they can be saved, have completely failed to inform their hearers about how such grief of mind cannot be produced at will and since many natures are void of depression of spirit, to demand that a self-produced affliction of mind shall precede salvation by faith becomes a form of fatalism and is responsible for having driven uncounted multitudes to despair. However, it is true that, from the Arminian point of view, no greater heresy could be advanced than this contention that the supposed merit of human suffering because of personal sins should be excluded from the terms on which a soul may be saved.

As before stated, repentance, which is a change of mind, is included in believing. No individual can turn to Christ from some other confidence without a change of mind, and that, it should be noted, is all the repentance a spiritually dead individual can ever affect. ...It will be considered, too, by those who are amenable to the Word of God, that the essential preparation of heart which the Holy Spirit accomplishes in the unsaved to prepare them for an intelligent and voluntary acceptance of Christ as Savior—as defined in John 16:8-11—is not a sorrow for sin. The unsaved who come under this divine influence are illuminated—given a clear understanding—concerning but one sin, namely, that “they believe not on me.”¹

To believe on Christ is one act, regardless of the manifold results which it secures. It is not turning from something to something; but rather turning to something from something. If this terminology seems a mere play on words, it will be discovered, by more careful investigation, that this is a vital distinction. To turn from evil may easily be a complete act in itself, since the action can be terminated at that point. To turn to Christ is a solitary act, also, and the joining of these two separate acts corresponds to the notion that two acts—repentance and faith—are required for salvation.

On the other hand, turning to Christ from all other confidences is one act, and in that one act

repentance, which is a change of mind, is included. The Apostle stresses this distinction in accurate terms when he says to the Thessalonians, “You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). This text provides no comfort for those who contend that people must first, in real contrition, turn from idols—which might terminate at that point—and afterwards, as a second and separate act, turn to God. The text recognizes but one act—“You turned to God from idols”—and that is an act of faith alone.

Those who stress repentance as a second requirement along with believing, inadvertently disclose that, in their conception, the problem of personal sin is all that enters into salvation. The sin nature must also be dealt with; yet that is not a legitimate subject of repentance. Salvation contemplates many vast issues and the adjustment of the issue of personal sin, though included, is but a small portion of the whole. Acts 26:18, sometimes

drafted in proof of the idea that the unsaved must do various things in order to be saved, rather enumerates various things which are wrought for him in the saving power of God.

3. THE RELATION OF REPENTANCE TO COVENANT PEOPLE.

The term covenant people is broad in its application. It includes Israel, who are under Jehovah’s unalterable covenants and yet are to be objects of another, new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), and the Church, composed of all believers of the present age, who are also now the objects of that new covenant made in Christ’s blood (Matt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 11:25). A covenant implies relationship because it secures a right relation to God in matters belonging within the bounds of the covenant. A covenant that is unconditional, as the above-named covenants are, is not affected by any human elements, nor is it changeable even by God Himself. However, the fact of a covenant and the experience of its blessings are two different things. It is possible to be under the provisions of an unconditional covenant and to fail for the time being to enjoy its blessings because of sin. When sin has cast a limitation upon the enjoyment of a covenant and the covenant, being unchangeable,

As before stated, repentance, which is a change of mind, is included in believing. No individual can turn to Christ from some other confidence without a change of mind...

¹ Editor’s note: ellipsis added.

still abides, the issue becomes, not the remaking of the covenant, but the one issue of the sin which mars the relationship.

It therefore follows that, for the covenant people there is a need of a divine dealing with the specific sin and a separate and unrelated repentance respecting it. This repentance is expressed by confession to God. Having confessed his sin, David did not pray for his salvation to be restored; he rather prayed for the restoration of “the joy” of his salvation (Ps. 51:12). In like manner, it is joy and fellowship which confession restores for the believer (1 John 1:3-9).

When Christ came offering Himself to Israel as their Messiah and announcing their kingdom as at hand, He, with John and the apostles, called on that people to repent in preparation for the proffered kingdom. There was no appeal concerning salvation or the formation of covenants; it was restoration of the people by a change of mind which would lead them to forsake their sins (Matt. 10:6 ff.). The application of these appeals made to covenant Jews concerning their adjustments within their covenants to individual unregenerate Gentiles, who are “strangers from the covenants” (Eph. 2:12), is a serious error indeed. In like manner, a Christian may repent as a separate act (2 Cor. 7:8-10).

The conclusion of the matter is that, while covenant people are appointed to national or personal adjustment to God by repentance as a separate act, there is no basis either in reason or revelation for the demand to be made that an unregenerate person in this age must add a covenant person’s repentance to faith in order to be saved.

4. THE ABSENCE OF THE DEMAND FOR REPENTANCE FROM SALVATION SCRIPTURES.

Upwards of 115 New Testament passages condition salvation on believing, and fully 35 passages condition salvation on faith, which latter word in this use of it is an exact synonym of the former. These portions of Scripture, totaling about 150 in all, include practically all that the New Testament declares on the matter of the human responsibility

in salvation; yet each one of these texts omits any reference to repentance as a separate act. This fact, easily verified, cannot but bear enormous weight with any candid mind.

In like manner, the Gospel by John, which is written to present Christ as the object of faith unto eternal life, does not once employ the word repentance. Similarly, the Epistle to the Romans, which is the complete analysis of all that enters into the whole plan of salvation by grace, does not use the word repentance in connection with the saving of a soul, except in 2:4 where repentance is equivalent to salvation itself.

When the Apostle Paul and his companion, Silas, made reply to the jailer concerning what he should do to be saved, they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31). This reply, it is evident, fails to recognize the necessity of repentance in addition to believing. From this overwhelming mass of irrefutable

evidence, it is clear that the New Testament does not impose repentance upon the unsaved as a condition of salvation.

The Gospel of John with its direct words from the lips of Christ, the Epistle to the Romans with its exhaustive treatment of the theme in question, the Apostle Paul, and the whole array of 150 New Testament passages which are the total of the divine instruction, are incomplete and misleading if repentance must be accorded a place separate from, and independent of, believing. No thoughtful person would attempt to defend such a notion against such odds, and those who have thus undertaken doubtless have done so without weighing the evidence or considering the untenable position which they assume.

5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REPENTANCE IN SPECIFIC PASSAGES.

When entering upon this phase of this study, it is first necessary to eliminate all portions of the New Testament which introduce the word repentance in its relation to covenant people. There are, likewise, passages which employ the word repentance as a synonym of believing (cf. Acts 17:30; Rom. 2:4; 2

Having confessed his sin, David did not pray for his salvation to be restored; he rather prayed for the restoration of “the joy” of his salvation (Ps. 51:12).

Tim. 2:25; 2 Pet. 3:9). Also, there are passages which refer to a change of mind (Acts 8:22; 11:18; Heb. 6:1, 6; 12:17; Rev. 9:20, etc.). Yet, again, consideration must be accorded three passages related to Israel which are often misapplied (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31). There are references to John's baptism, which was unto repentance, that are outside the Synoptics (Acts 13:24; 19:4).

Four passages deserve more extended consideration, namely:

Luke 24:47. "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." It will be seen that repentance is not in itself equivalent to believing or faith, though, being included in believing, is used here as a synonym of the word believe. Likewise, it is to be recognized that "remission of sins" is not all that is proffered in salvation, though the phrase may serve that purpose in this instance. Above all, the passage does not require human obligations with respect to salvation. Repentance, which here represents believing, leads to remission of sin.

Acts 11:18. "When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, 'Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.'" Again repentance, which is included in believing, serves as a synonym for the word belief. The Gentiles, as always, attain to spiritual life by faith, the all-important and essential change of mind. It is also true that the passage does not prescribe two things which are necessary to salvation (cf. vs. 17).

Acts 20:21. "Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." First, though unrelated to the course of this argument, it is important to note that the Apostle here places Jews on the same level with Gentiles, and both are objects of divine grace. The Jew with his incomparable background or the Gentile with his heathen ignorance, each, must undergo a change of mind respecting God. Until they are aware of God's gracious purpose, there can be no reception of the idea of saving faith. It is quite possible to recognize God's purpose, as many do, and not receive Christ as Savior. In other words, repentance toward God could not itself constitute, in this case, the equivalent of "faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,"

though it may prepare for that faith. The introduction of the two Persons of the Godhead is significant, and that Christ is the sole object of faith is also most vital. Those who would insist that there are here two human obligations unto salvation are reminded again of the 150 portions in which such a twofold requirement is omitted.

Acts 26:20. "But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance." Again, both Jews and Gentiles are addressed as on the same footing before God. Two obligations are named here, in order that spiritual results may be secured—those to "repent and turn to God." The passage would sustain the Arminian view if repentance were, as they assert, a sorrow for sin; but if the word is given its correct meaning, namely, a change of mind, there is no difficulty. The call is for a change of mind which turns to God. This passage, also, has its equivalent in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, "You turned to God from idols."

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, an attempt has been made to demonstrate that the Biblical doctrine of repentance offers no objection to the truth that salvation is by grace through faith apart from every suggestion of human works or merit. It is asserted that repentance, which is a change of mind, enters of necessity into the very act of believing on Christ, since one cannot turn to Christ from other objects of confidence without that change of mind. Upwards of 150 texts—including all of the greatest gospel invitations—limit the human responsibility in salvation to believing or to faith. To this simple requirement nothing could be added if the glories of grace are to be preserved. ■

*This article first appeared as "The Saving Work of the Triune God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 107 (Oct. 1950). Used by permission.

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952) trusted Christ alone as Savior at the age of six under the tutelage of his parents during his father's (Thomas Franklin Chafer) first pastorate in Rock Creek, Ohio. Chafer later served as a song leader and evangelist. In time he would serve as a Bible conference president, a staff member at the New York School of the Bible, in helping to start the Philadelphia School of the Bible with C. I. Scofield, pastor the Scofield Memorial Church of Dallas, Texas, and found Dallas Theological Seminary where taught as professor of systematic theology for many years. He also wrote numerous grace-oriented, dispensational books.