

# “Repentance”

Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 762–765.

**Repentance** A conversion of heart away from sin and toward God. It begins with remorse for having offended God and entails both a change in one’s life and a determination to avoid the further occasion of sin (CCC 1427–33). The call to conversion and true repentance is one of the central themes of the New Testament and a cornerstone of the Christian life.

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### I. Repentance in the Old Testament

#### A. Words for “Repentance”

The most commonly used term in the Old Testament for repentance is *šûb* (suv), meaning literally “to turn” (in the Septuagint and NT, Greek equivalents are *apostrepho* or *epistrepho*; see also below). Another word is used, *naham* (“to sigh” or “to grieve”), to express various forms of grief and remorse. *Naham*, however, is often used in anthropomorphic descriptions of God’s decision to bestow mercy on the repentant instead of carrying out his judgment against them (e.g., 1 Chr 21:15). Most notable in this sense is Jer 18:8: “and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.” Scripture declares that God does not repent in the way that humans do (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29).

#### B. Turning Away from Sin

Repentance in the OT implied a genuine sorrow and turning away from sinful actions. For example, Solomon pleaded with God to show mercy upon those who repented and turned back to the Lord: “hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions which they have committed against you; and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them” (1 Kgs 8:47).

Often this “turning” was expressed through penitential actions — fasting, lamenting, tearing of garments, wearing sackcloth and ashes, and openly confessing guilt (cf. Ezra 10:1–5; Neh 9:1–37; Isa 63:7–64:12; Hos 6:1–3, 14:1–3; Dan 9:3–19; Joel 2:15–18).

### *C. The Prophets Call Israel to Repent*

The mission of the prophet in Israel is to call the people back to the Lord. Indictments of sin, threats of doom, promises of mercy for genuine conversion — all are part of the prophetic summons to repentance (Amos 4:6–13; Hos 5:15–6:5, 6:4–6; Isa 58:5–7). In spite of repeated apostasy, the Lord seeks Israel's return as one seeks a wayward wife (Hos 2–3). Jeremiah 3:11–14 echoes the cries for Israel to turn and be repentant: "Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry for ever" (Jer 3:12; cf. Jer 4:1–2; 6:9; 31:3). Amos, in contrast, emphasizes the judgment that Israel's failure to repent — "yet you did not return to me" — makes inevitable. For this utter faithlessness, "prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (Amos 4:12).

Hosea remains determined even in the face of such obduracy, so that the book ends with a final plea for repentance: "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, 'Take away all iniquity; accept that which is good and we will render the fruit of our lips'" (Hos 14:2). The prophets assure Israel of the great reward and happiness that will be found in such true repentance: salvation and deliverance (Isa 30:15; Jer 4:1, 26:3). The nation as a whole must repent, but each individual Israelite must also repent with a real change of heart (Ezek 18:31, 36:26–27; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Joel 2:12–13; Isa 1:16–17).

## **ii. Repentance in the New Testament**

### *A. Echoing the Prophets*

The prophetic call to conversion reaches its climax in John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, who prepared the way of the Lord. John the Baptist appeared suddenly "in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). John demanded more than mere contrition: he called for a deeper conversion that involved a change in the life of the penitent: "Bear fruits that befit repentance" (Luke 3:8; cf. Matt 3:2–11; Mark 1:4–6; Luke 3:1–14). John established the central theme that was reiterated by Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15; Matt 4:17). The call of Jesus was a familiar one, rooted in the OT prophetic message of repentance and conversion that had been delivered repeatedly to Israel. In Jesus, the call to repentance becomes personal, for he asks people not only to embrace him as Messiah, but to imitate his generosity of life as the surest path to living out the Father's will (Matt 7:21–27; 10:37–39; 11:28–30).

### *B. Repent and Believe*

Jesus came not for the righteous but for the sinner (Luke 5:32). The repentance of Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah (Matt 12:39–40; Luke 11:29–32) is what Jesus asks of his disciples (cf. Matt 1:20–24; Luke 10:13–15). The call of Jesus to repent implies more than mere sorrow for sin. He calls people also to believe (Mark 16:15–16). Repentance in faith is the beginning of the embrace of the new life that is offered by the Gospel (cf. Acts 5:31; 20:21).

Salvation is achieved by the forgiveness of sin through baptism and faith in Jesus (Acts 2:38). Those who reject faith reject the everlasting life that Christ offers to the world (John 3:36). Christian repentance is a complete transformation of the person from the life of sin to the life of Gospel charity. Thus we must proclaim repentance to the entire world:

“repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

### *C. Conversion*

Jesus teaches the universality of sin and the need for all to undergo conversion. Baptism is fundamental to conversion, but there is also the ongoing conversion in the lives of believers. In Peter, we see a vivid example of initial conversion and ongoing conversion. In his initial conversion, Peter sinks to his knees and acknowledges his sinfulness: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Then he drops everything and follows Jesus as a disciple (Matt 4:18–20). Later, having denied Christ three times, he weeps for his sin (Luke 22:62) and then reaffirms his love for Christ (John 21:15–19).

Christian conversion has both an interior and an exterior dimension. It begins in the mind and heart, where the conviction of sin arises and where the desire to draw closer to God takes place. It is significant that the NT word for “repentance” refers to a “change of mind” (Greek *metanoia*). The point is not that conversion can be reduced to a mental act, but that a change of perspective is essential to the redirection of one’s life. The interior attitude thus leads to exterior actions such as fasting (Mark 2:20; Acts 9:9, 13:2) and various forms of self-discipline and mortification (Rom 8:13; 1 Cor 9:25–27).

Hebrews tells us that “it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt” (Heb 6:4–6). The passage has been the source of much theological discussion, but at its heart is the call not to presume upon the mercy of God and to recognize the seriousness of sin because it damages the relationship that exists between a person and God (CCC 1849–53).

### *D. Paul Includes Repentance in Faith*

Paul seldom speaks of repentance directly. He does contrast godly versus worldly grief: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death” (2 Cor 7:10), and he mentions “repentance” a few more times (Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 12:21; 2 Tim 2:25). It is not that Paul’s theology has little room for repentance, but that repentance is included in Paul’s doctrine of faith. For Paul, faith is far more than mental assent — that is, the acceptance of propositions about Jesus and his redeeming work. Rather, faith for Paul is our full response to God and his revelation in the person of Christ. Faith means embracing the totality of the Gospel, including its demands to turn from sin and live the life of Christian charity. And as faith is a gift of grace, so the transformation of life that constitutes the essence of repentance is a fruit of that grace.

### **iii. The Sacrament of Penance**

Christ instituted the sacrament of penance (also called the sacrament of reconciliation) when he proclaimed to the apostles on Easter Sunday night: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23). The Church is thus given the authority to confer the grace and mercy of God necessary for ongoing conversion in the lives of individual believers.