

**The Idea of Repentance in the Synoptic Gospels in  
Relation to the Teaching of the Evangelical Church  
Winning All (WCWA)**

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**Abstract**

*This paper assesses the concept of repentance in the Synoptic Gospels and relates same to the teaching of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA). The paper discovers that repentance is from the Greek noun μετάνοια (metanoia) which means “a change of mind, as it appears to one who repents, of a purpose he has formed or of something he has done” and the verb μετανοέω (metanoëo) that also means “to change one’s mind. That is, to repent or to change one’s mind for better, heartily to amend with abhorrence of one’s past sins.” Furthermore, the paper reveals that in the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – the concept of repentance was presented by both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ in relations to the kingdom of God. Repentance in the Synoptic Gospels is a means to conversion and also relates to the issue of faith which leads to salvation. Finally, the paper establishes, after considering some parables on the concept of repentance, that the teaching of ECWA is synonymous to what the Synoptic Gospels teach in respect to repentance and concludes that repentance is made possible through the enabling grace of God.*

**Keywords:** Repentance, Synoptic Gospels, Jesus

## Introduction

Man is a fallible being and so the need for repentance can never be overemphasized. Repentance is one of the common concepts that relate to salvation. However, as common as the concept of repentance is, its meaning remains a great debate in the comity of scholars. More so, the meaning of the concept as presented in the Synoptic Gospels also stirs serious debates whenever the issue is discussed in relations to faith and salvation. Therefore, this work is an attempt to assess the concept of repentance in the Synoptic Gospels, relating it to the teaching of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA).

## Definition of Repentance

Etymologically, repentance is from the Greek noun *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) which means “a change of mind, as it appears to one who repents, of a purpose he has formed or of something he has done” (James, 1999). The verb *μετανοέω* (*metanoëo*) also means “to change one’s mind. That is, to repent or to change one’s mind for better, heartily to amend with abhorrence of one’s past sins” (James, 1999). Croteau (2013), surmised that the three main views on the definition of *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) are (1) a turning away from one’s sins (not just a willingness or resolve to do so); (2) the intention, resolve, or willingness to turn from sins; (3) to change one’s mind (about something). To him, *μετανοέω* (*metanoëo*) and *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) do not mean “to be remorseful,” “to be sorry,” or “to regret.” This is because, according to him, repentance involves a change in the mind and conduct, which involves a turning away from sins and turning to God, which produces demonstrable results.

Therefore, Vine, Unger, Merrill & White (1996), concluded that in the New Testament, the subject of repentance chiefly has reference to “repentance” from sin, and this change of mind involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God. The parable of the Prodigal Son is an outstanding illustration of this. Christ started His ministry with a call to “repentance,” Matt. 4:17, just like John the Baptist in

Matt. 3:1ff, but the calls are addressed, not as in the Old Testament to the nation, but to the individuals

### **The Synoptic Gospels on Repentance**

The Synoptic Gospels are the records of the ministry of Jesus here on earth by the three evangelists; Matthew, Mark and Luke, beginning from the proclamation of His birth down through His ascension to heaven. As such, repentance is considered in this paper from the viewpoints of these three evangelists as recorded in their gospel accounts in the aforementioned books of the New Testament.

The Synoptic Gospels elaborate the positive and negative dimensions of following by the term ‘repentance.’ Israel had understood repentance as the appropriate response to God, for it involved turning away from sin and turning toward God in terms of one’s attitude and heart desire. John the Baptist provided the continuity with that ancient prophetic tradition by calling on people to repent (Matt. 3:2, 6, 8; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3,7-8). When Jesus began his public ministry, he likewise preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15). In fact, at one point Jesus identified His mission as one to call sinners to repentance (Matt. 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32) (*Human Response*, 2010).

Furthermore, in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus presented Himself as the cause that should occasion repentance. His appearance presented alternative that required choice. If Tyre and Sidon had seen the miracles of Jesus, they would have repented (Matt. 11:21; Luke 10:13). The people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah; Jesus presented Himself as one greater than Jonah, whose message required repentance as the only acceptable response (Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32). Therefore, according to *Human Response* (2010), Jesus identified Himself with His message, insisting on the necessity of repentance, without which people would perish (Luke 13:3, 5; 16:30-31). While repentance involves a mental reorientation, Jesus also insisted that repentance involved a change in behaviour reflecting the

new orientation (Matt. 21:28-32). This response to God results in rejoicing in heaven as a person accepts his or her place in creation by turning away from a way of life independent of God and turning to God (Luke 15:7, 10, 17-20).

Consequently, Jesus instructed his followers to make the preaching of repentance a cardinal element of their following Him. When He sent the Twelve out on their mission, they “preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:12). After the resurrection He reconfirmed the importance of repentance by instructing the apostles that they should preach repentance and forgiveness (Luke 24:47) (*Human Response*, 2010).

### **The Emphases of the Gospel Writers on Repentance**

- a. **Matthew:** Matthew centralizes the concept of repentance, redacting the tradition at Matthew 4:17 to make the summary of Jesus’ preaching identical to that of the Baptist, whose ministry reflects the prophetic tradition that summoned Israel to repentance (cf. Mt 3:2). This is further buttressed by the comparison Jesus makes between himself and Jonah, the great preacher of repentance (Mt 12:38–41). Matthew identifies repentance as the goal of Jesus’ ministry (Mt 11:20–24). He is the only Evangelist who employs the verb *metamelomai* as a synonym for *metanoēō* to describe the response of the tax collectors and harlots to the preaching of John the Baptist (Mt 21:29, 32). However, the use of the same word in Matthew 27:3, in reference to Judas’ regret following his betrayal of Jesus, does not carry the same spiritual/ethical force (Green, McKnight & Marshall, 1992).
- b. **Mark:** Mark explicitly mentions “repentance” only three times, but he does so in passages which serve to centralize the concept in the messages of the primary figures in the Gospel. In Mark 1:4, repentance is linked with John’s baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus picks up this theme of repentance in Mark 1:15, uniting it with faith as the appropriate responses to the nearness of the

kingdom. Finally, in Mark 6:12 repentance is mentioned as the content of the disciples' message. Thus, repentance can describe the entire conversion process, but Mark 1:15 reminds us that its positive counterpart is faith (Green, McKnight & Marshall, 1992).

- c. Luke:** Luke places greater stress on repentance (*metanoēō* [9x]; *metanoia* [5x]) than the other Evangelists, though the meaning remains the same throughout. He alone provides the ethical teachings that flesh out John's summons to repentance (Lk 3:10–14). In Luke 5:32, he makes the call to the sinners explicitly one unto repentance (cf. Mk 2:17; Mt 9:13), making it possible that the explanatory notes concluding the parables of the lost sheep (Lk 15:7) and the lost coin (Lk 15:10) are also Lukan explanatory redaction. He alone preserves the record of events which Jesus employs as an occasion to call for national repentance (Lk 13:3, 5), as well as other explicit references to the need for repentance (Lk 16:30; 17:3–4). Finally, he highlights the place of repentance in the message of the commissioned disciples (Lk 24:47; this is continued on in Acts; e.g., 2:37–39; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20) (Green, McKnight & Marshall, 1992).

### **John the Baptist on Repentance**

John's call to repentance derives from his conviction that the kingdom of God had drawn near (Mt 3:2). Therefore, the time of fulfillment had arrived (Mt 3:3; Lk 3:4–6), bringing with it the certain expectation of divine judgment (Mt 3:7, 10; Lk 3:7, 9). Accordingly, John fulfilled his prophetic and preparatory role by calling Israel out to the wilderness to repent, indicative of the beginning of the nation's relationship with God. For only by radical repentance, sealed and symbolized graphically by baptism, would Israel be prepared to meet its judge. Thus, John summoned Israel to "eschatological repentance." Only those who respond in this way obtain forgiveness of sins (Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3) and can anticipate being "harvested" by the "one coming after him" (Mt 3:12; Lk 3:17). Those who reject his message are left

only with the gloomy expectation of imminent divine reprisal (Mt 3:7, 10–12; Lk 3:7, 9, 16–17).

Significantly, John's summons is universal, ignoring both societal and religious status. Accordingly, the religious elite (Mt 3:7–10; Lk 3:7–9), "the crowds" (Lk 3:10–11) and even such blatant "sinners" as the tax collectors (Lk 3:13) are addressed with the same, sweeping demand. For each, repentance involves the acknowledgment of one's sinfulness (Mk 1:5; Mt 3:6) as well as a new and holy pattern of daily behavior in relation to others (Mt 3:8; Lk 3:8; Lk 3:10–14). Thus, it is clear that repentance for John does not simply consist in a "change of mind," but in a transformation of the entire person (Mt 3:10; Lk 3:9). It is in this sense that one can speak of repentance with the language of conversion (Green, McKnight & Marshall, 1992).

### **Jesus on Repentance in the Synoptic Gospels**

**Repentance as a Demand:** Jesus perceived repentance to be a complete "turning away" from one's sinful way of life. In addition to blatant sins (e.g., Lk 7:47; 19:8–10), this includes anything or any attitude which prevents an appropriate posture before God. The urgency and totality of this demand is demonstrated most clearly in the drastic images he uses (e.g., Mk 9:43–48; Mt 5:29–30; 18:8–9; cf. Mt 7:13–4). Therefore, anything that offends or hinders one's relationship with the Father is to be parted with. In addition, Jesus emphasizes on the need for the rich and self-righteous religious leaders to learn to let go of such dependence on their wealth and possessions (Lk 14:33; Mt. 6:24; Lk 16:13) and on their self-righteousness (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42; Mt 23:16–22; Mk 7:1–13; Mt 15:1–9) and repent and seek the Lord so they could be granted entrance into the kingdom of God (Lk 12:32; Mk 10:27; Mk 12:38–40; Mt 23:5–7, 14 and Lk 20:46–47; cf. Mt 6:1–6, 16–18; Lk 15:28–30). Jesus' condemnation is a call to repent and to return to the Lord of the Law (Green, McKnight & Marshall, 1992).

**Repentance as Response to the Kingdom:** Again, the appropriate response to the kingdom of God is repentance and preparation for it (Mark 1:15). Men must make positive response to the claims which it lays upon them. Since the miracles were designed to awaken, not wonder, but repentance, then the sin of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum was spiritual blindness (Matt 11:21). The presence of the kingdom calls for a change of way of life. This failure to take a decision on the matter means destruction (Quarcoopome, 1984). In related terms, Green, McKnight & Marshall (1992), affirmed that Jesus unites His call for repentance with the nearness of the Kingdom of God (Mk 1:15; Mt 4:17; cf. Mt 3:2). According to Jesus, those who remain unrepentant place themselves under the judgment of God (Mt 12:39–42; Mt 11:20-24; Lk 10:12–15; Lk 13:1–5) because forgiveness and salvation come (e.g., Lk 7:36–50; 19:9) to those who repent and thereby enter the kingdom (e.g., Mk 9:45). Also, His relationship with sinners and the poor was significant because that helps Him in dramatizing the free grace of God which confronts humanity precisely in its bankrupt predicament. In this way he confronts every person with this reality, not just the notorious “sinner,” and thereby moves them toward repentance. Those who freely acknowledge God’s free gift of grace and repent are welcomed with rejoicing and celebration in heaven (Mt. 13:44; 22:1-10; Mk 2:14-15; Mt 9:9-10; Lk 5:27-29; 19:6, 8).

### **Parable on Repentance in the Synoptic Gospels**

These are some of the parables that placed emphases on repentance and forgiveness.

1. **The Great Super (Matt 22:1-10; Lk 14:15-24):** Although the accounts are not the same, it is believed that this parable is about God summoning Israel to a Messianic banquet which is ready. By implication, this is about the presence of God’s kingdom and Jesus’ invitation to Israel to repent and enter it. Since Israel rejects the invitation, it was then extended to outcasts who accepted it

and were privileged to partake in the banquet (Quarcoopome, 1984).

2. **The Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:23-46; Mk 12:1-12; Lk 20:9-19):** This parable teaches about the kingdom of God. Jesus had come preaching the good news of the kingdom to the Jews and inviting them to repent and enter it. The Jews refused to accept the message and so were rejected in the kingdom while the Gentiles who accepted the message were accepted into the kingdom (Quarcoopome, 1984).
3. **The Pharisee and the Publican (Lk 18:9-14):** Many things are implied in this parable. However, for the sake of this work, Jesus was teaching that men cannot compete with God in righteousness and so there is no need to be proud of our moral stands for we are all sinners who have fallen short of God's glory. Therefore, in humility and repentance we must admit our sins and ask for forgiveness from God.
4. **The Lost Sheep (Matt 18:12-14; Lk 15:4-6); The Lost Coin (Lk 15:8-10):** These parables taught the same thing. God hates sin but loves the sinner and so He goes out of His way to save the repented sinner. Once this is done, there abounds great rejoicing in heaven.
5. **The Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32):** The Pharisees, represented by the elder brother, were warned about the fact that God does not discriminate between those who have been faithful and those who have committed a lot of wrongs but finally repented and changed from their wrong doings. Therefore, any sinner who truly repents of his/her sins shall be welcomed into the kingdom of God (Quarcoopome, 1984).



## **ECWA's Teaching on Repentance in Relation to the Synoptic Gospels'**

The Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), as an evangelical institution, holds basically to the Bible as the inerrant and inspired Word of God. The Bible is believed to be the complete revelation of God's will for the salvation of men, and the divine and final authority for all Christian faith and practice (ECWA Minister's Hand Book, 2002). Therefore, based on the above foundation, ECWA's teaching on repentance is synonymous to that which the Synoptic Gospels have rightly pointed out. Repentance in ECWA is man's response to the divine conviction of the Holy Spirit of his [man's] sins. Repentance leads to conversion and conversion brings the repented sinner into the family of Christ. Salvation does not in anyway reflect man's efforts but purely reflects God's grace that is received by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

All those who turned away from their sins and repented genuinely by accepting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour are positionally sanctified at the point of conversion. Progressively, they are being sanctified on a daily basis (implying that those who fall in the Christian race can always sincerely turn back to God for help through repentance). Finally, they shall experience ultimate sanctification when they enter the presence of God (Jn. 17:17; 2 Cor. 3:18; 7:1; Eph. 4:24; 5:25-27; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 10:10, 14; 12:10; 1 Jn. 2:15-17; 3:2) (ECWA Minister's Hand Book, 2002).

Finally, before any baptised member of ECWA is placed under church discipline, such a member must have realized his/her sin(s) and repented of same. The primary aim of church discipline in ECWA is to maintain purity of the Body of Christ and also to restore those who have sinned to true repentance and fellowship. If all efforts to lead the person that has sinned to repentance failed, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 is applied. Here Paul admonished that the erring brother be handed over to Satan so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. ECWA explains that the purpose of

delivering a sinning member “to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” is to bring such as person to repentance. He has deliberately chosen to serve Satan instead of Christ and has refused to repent (ECWA Minister’s Hand Book, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Repentance has been explained as the change of mind from doing what is wrong into doing that which is good. It implies turning away from sin and turning toward God. The three evangelists – Matthew, Mark and Luke – presented repentance as a major theme regarding the teachings on the kingdom of God by both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ Himself. Basically, repentance leads to conversion and so it works hand in hand with faith in Christ. By Implication therefore, the ability to acknowledge one’s sins and repent comes from the enabling grace of God not as a result of one’s efforts. Conclusively, ECWA also holds to what the Bible teaches regarding the issue of repentance.

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