

Text: Acts 20.21

Proposition: Repentance is the subtext that gives sharp definition to saving faith.

Today we will camp out in Acts 20.21. It's the kind of verse I love to preach, full of theology, but even more importantly, full of concepts essential to salvation.

Here is the verse:

Ac 20.21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We will read the full context in just a minute, but I wanted to have the verse in your minds right at the start.

I've given our message this title:

The Solemn Testimony

The idea of "solemn testimony" is in the first word of the verse. The lexicon defines it this way:

"to state something in such a way that the auditor is to be impressed with its seriousness. ... **1. to make a solemn declaration about the truth of someth. testify of, bear witness to** (orig. under oath) ... **2. to exhort with authority in matters of extraordinary importance, freq. w. ref. to higher powers and/or suggestion of peril, solemnly urge, exhort, warn**"¹ The first def. is used here.

When you want to impress someone with the truth of your statement, or its importance, you might "solemnly swear" as in a courtroom.

Or you might modulate your tone to indicate the seriousness of your subject, or make some announcement or call for people to listen very carefully.

Paul notes that he gave this message universally, to both Jews and Greeks. The message was the same to everyone.

The content of the message is "repentance ... and faith." That is the subject of our message today.

Let's read our passage and come back to our text:

¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Read Ac 20.18-21, text 21

The church emerged from the Reformation proclaiming the five “solas” (Latin: *only, or alone*):

- sola gratia* (grace alone)
- sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone)
- solus Christus* (Christ alone)
- soli Deo Gloria* (the glory of God alone)
- sola fide* (faith alone)

I moved “*sola fide*” to the last in the list, it’s usually second.

When you think of how someone is born again, can you express it in one essential term? *Faith alone*.

When we come to our text, describing Paul’s solemn proclamation, what are we to make of: “testifying ... of repentance ... and faith”

When I go to my theology books, it is striking that almost every reference to this passage spends most of its time discussing *repentance* and not *faith*. Why is that?

What role does repentance play in salvation?

We sometimes criticize soulwinning plans (like the “Four Spiritual Laws” of Campus Crusade) for leaving out repentance. What is repentance?

Proposition: Repentance is the subtext that gives sharp definition to saving faith.

I. The connection between repentance and faith

A. The connection in our passage

1. The grammatical construction

a. Two “verbal” nouns

1) Repentance (“change of mind”)

2) Faith (“belief”)

b. One article and a copula (“the” “and”)

1) “The” [Noun1] “and” [Noun2]

2) Like 2 Pt 1.1

2 Pt 1.1 ¶ Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our **God** and **Savior**, Jesus Christ:

- a) Lit: “the God of us and Saviour...”
- b) The article communicates *unity* (and in this case *identity*)
- c. Our text: “the [unto God] repentance and faith [the unto our Lord Jesus]”
 - 1) “the ... construction in the least implies some sort of unity between μετάνοια [repentance] and πίστις [faith].”²
 - 2) “The evidence suggests that, in Luke’s usage, saving faith *includes* repentance.”³

“Repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 21) is a beautifully balanced way of expressing what is essential for justification (cf. 26:20–23; Rom. 10:9–10; 2 Cor. 5:20–6:2). One must change his or her mind Godward and place trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴

B. The connection in other passages

- 1. Paul’s testimony to Agrippa (Ac 26.20-23)
 - a. Jews and Gentiles must repent (20)
 - b. Jews and Gentiles must receive Christ [faith] (23)
- 2. Paul’s message to the Corinthians (2Co 5.20-6.2)
 - a. Be reconciled to God [repentance] (5.20)
 - b. Receive grace [faith] (6.1)

² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 289.

³ Wallace, 289.

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ac 20.18-21.

3. Paul's message to the Romans (10.9-10)

- a. Confess [repentance] with the mouth
- b. Believe [faith] in the heart

Both of these last two texts give us an idea of what "repentance towards God" means:

- It means reconciliation with God [you were unreconciled]
- It means confessing Jesus as Lord [you refused to acknowledge him]

More to come...

Our point here, faith and repentance are connected, and we can say, even in passages where the call is for simple faith, repentance is implied.

Ac 16.31 They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

"In those texts which speak simply of faith, a 'theological shorthand' seems to be employed: Luke envisions repentance as the inceptive act of which the entirety may be called πίστις. Thus, for Luke, conversion is not a two-step process, but one step, faith-but the kind of faith that *includes* repentance."⁵

II. The universal preaching of repentance and faith

A. The apostles called for repentance

Ac 2.38 Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Ac 3.19 "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;

⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 289.

Ac 8.22 “Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

Ac 17.30 “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent,

Ac 19.4 Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”

B. The apostles called for faith

Ac 15.7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Ac 15.9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

Ac 15.11 “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

Ac 16.31 They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Ac 19.4 Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”

The message of the apostles include both repentance and faith in their gospel appeal

C. The message is for all people

1. Both Jews and Gentiles must repent
2. Both Jews and Gentiles must believe

Some people come to our text and say that it is teaching repentance for those idol-worshipping Gentiles and faith for those Messiah-denying Jews.

3. Both Jews and Gentiles must repent
4. Both Jews and Gentiles must believe

III. The personal implications of repentance and faith

A. The point of repentance: surrender to God

1. Popular misapplications of repentance in the call to salvation

- a. Some teach that you must consciously turn from sin for salvation, citing Ac 3.19 and Lk 24.47 (John MacArthur, Ray Comfort, et al — so called “Lordship salvation”)

Ac 3.19 “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;

Lk 24.47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

- 1) But note: repentance produces forgiveness of sins, these passages do not state the object of repentance

- 2) In our passage, the call is “repentance unto God”

- b. Some think of repentance as “sorrow for sin”

- 1) Partly due to the Latin version

Act 3:19 **paenitemini** igitur et convertimini ut deleantur vestra peccata

- 2) With the rise of penitence teaching in the Roman church, came the idea of sorrow, penitence, for sin

- 3) Luther rediscovered “change of mind” in translating the Bible into German

“Terms often confused with repentance, such as penitence, remorse or penance, do not do justice to the impact of grace which we call repentance.”⁶

⁶ R. Kearsley, “Repentance” J. I Packer, David F. Wright, and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 581.

2. What does it mean to “repent unto God”?

a. The first sin responded to Satan’s temptation

Gn 3.4-5 The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die!⁵ “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

b. The first sin attempts to usurp God’s authority, placing self on the throne of life

- 1) Jews on their own authority deny the Messiah God sent
- 2) Gentiles on their own authority repress the truth and worship creation (creatures of all kinds including self)
- 3) All people think they can find spiritual satisfaction through their own agency

Rm 3.23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

c. Repentance unto God means:

- 1) I admit I am a sinner
- 2) I admit I cannot save myself
- 3) I admit God is God (and no one or nothing else)
- 4) I surrender to God; I lay down my arms

“Repentance means a genuine change of mind that affects the life in some way.”⁷

B. The point of faith: rely on Jesus

1. Faith does not mean, “believe the facts about Jesus”

- a. “Oh, I have faith, I believe Jesus is a real person.”
- b. “Oh, I have faith, I believe Jesus was born of a virgin.”
- c. “Oh, I have faith, I believe that Jesus is God.”

This kind of faith assents to truths, but effects no change in the heart.

⁷ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1999), 389.

2. Saving faith repents of self (same as, “surrenders to God”) and relies on Jesus alone for salvation

The chair illustration

The Niagara Falls illustration: Charles Blondin, 1859, Nik Wallenda, 2012 (Blondin made several crossings, one with another man on his back)

Are you on the Lord’s back?

Conclusion:

Proposition: Repentance is the subtext that gives sharp definition to saving faith.

Threefold idea in Repentance:

1. Intellectual: a change of mind
2. Emotional: real contrition (e.g., Publican smote his breast)
3. Volitional: a change of behaviour (Prodigal: “I will rise and go” — and he did)