

Bob Wilkin and Repentance

A Free Grace Critique of:
“A Slippery Slope: Repentance and Everlasting Life”

Pastor Kelly Sensenig

I have personally corresponded by email with brother Bob Wilkin on the matter of repentance and its relationship to salvation. We agreed to disagree over this matter. However, when studying about Biblical repentance, it does not override the wonderful truth about free grace. I expressed to Bob that there are “free gracers” who espouse a non-Lordship view of repentance and view repentance as paving the way for genuine faith in Christ to take place. Bob is a committed Christian whose focus is to keep the message of grace free from legalism. I commend him for this even though I am critiquing his article and view on repentance. I appreciate Bob’s love for grace and the souls of unsaved people.

We will confirm in this study that the Bible teaches that faith alone in Christ brings a person into a right relationship with God. However, it also reveals that repentance is part of the believer’s conversion response. Salvation is by faith alone in Christ, but this is a faith that has been prepared or spawned by repentance. Theologically, both work simultaneously together to bring a person to salvation. Repentance brings a person to the place where they are ready to place their “faith alone” in Christ for deliverance. In fact, true repentance should cause a person to change their mind about a “works salvation” (Heb. 6:1) so they might place their faith alone in Christ. In short, they must change their mind about the Gospel in order to be saved!

So, can we say that salvation is still by “faith alone?” Yes! But working behind this faith is the change of mind and heart that occurs in a sinner as the sinner reacts to the revelation of God to his heart. Salvation is by faith alone (as opposed to works) but repentance is not a work. It is intertwined with faith and is what actually brings a person to “faith alone” in Christ. As we will see, both Biblical repentance and faith work independently of works (legalism).

In an article written by Bob Wilkin in “Grace in Focus” (“A slippery slope: Repentance and Everlasting life,” November-December, 2013), he argues that

repentance cannot be part of the sinner's conversion response toward God and is not a prerequisite to everlasting life. He fears that this response would mix Lordship Salvation teaching with a sinner's response and become a works-oriented salvation, which diverts from the free grace position to which many believers hold, including myself ("justified freely by his grace" - Rom. 3:24). But I contend that repentance does not unravel free grace.

According to Wilkin, a sinner must not even be "willing" to change (a desire view of repentance) or else this becomes a type of submissive/works salvation. He also argues that repentance is never mentioned in John which is the only evangelistic Gospel. However, he seems to forget that John does mention that men "loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). In other words, a person can't believe if they love darkness and want to remain in that darkness. Belief and repentance are different but are always inseparably bound together in the conversion response (Acts 20:21). John also records in the Book of Revelation that unsaved people do need to repent of their evil deeds (Rev. 2:21; 9:20-21; 16:9, 11).

Wilkin also holds that repentance is only mentioned in light of regaining fellowship with Christ and that which is needed in light of temporal judgments. However, a simple overview of Scripture would disprove these conclusions. If we would just get our noses out of all the theological journals for a while and take Scripture at face value, we would not come to these conclusions. Nor would we equate Biblical repentance with faith or Lordship Salvation. Jesus said in Luke 24:47, "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

In this Great Commission passage Jesus taught there can be no forgiveness of sins without repentance occurring in the heart. Who would want to put theological spins on what Jesus was teaching here? This means the message of repentance should not be viewed by Wilkin and others as some kind of foreign concept when addressing the sinner's response to the Gospel message. Repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Period. One should ask brother Wilkin if a person can be in open rebellion against God and still want to embrace salvation? Of course, this is an absurdity. I think Wilkin would actually agree with this.

Jesus said in Luke 13:3, "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (go to hell). Then to be sure Wilkin doesn't misunderstand, Jesus repeats the same message in Luke 13:5: "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (go to hell). The message is very clear. If you don't repent, then you must die and go to hell. And yet Wilkin says that "Repentance is always linked with escaping or lessening temporal judgment, not with eternal destiny." I'll go with what Jesus says on this matter and not Wilkin. Without repentance you cannot be saved and go to Heaven when you die. There needs to be repentance in your mind and heart before you can be saved. Jesus makes this so clear that no person listening to Him could misconstrue His point. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (go to hell). How can there be any questions about what Jesus meant by these statements? Apparently, Bob Wilkin still has questions after these clear statements given by Jesus on the subject of repentance and eternal life.

Repentance essentially means that you must change your mind, think differently, reconsider, or possess a different opinion and attitude (Luke 13:3, 5; 15:7; Acts 3:19; 17:30; Acts 26:20). Repentance speaks of a person changing their inward belief system or how they think on the inside. It is a reversal of a person's previous decisions in life. When you repent you will think differently and possess a different attitude about God, Jesus Christ, salvation, your own life of sin, and need for salvation. You will *reconsider* your ways of faulty reasoning and sinful living and realize that these things offend God's truth and holiness. Repentance speaks of *a reversal of a person's attitudes and convictions*. It speaks of an inward turning from what a person used to believe or think about God, Jesus Christ, and themselves, resulting in a person desire to turn away from his sinful life and old belief systems that are against God.

Repentance is like a triangle that has three sides. True repentance involves the *mind* (a change of thinking), the *emotions* (a change of heart or "caring afterwards" - feeling remorseful as in Matthew 21:29 and 32, 2 Cor. 7:8), and a change of a person's *will* (a decision to change direction). All three sides of the triangle are part of what it means to repent. They occur at conversion which is defined as "a miracle of a moment!"

Here is something to consider. Can a Satanist, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, or any person for that matter, come to faith *alone* in Christ *alone* and be saved by grace *alone* without repenting of their pagan belief systems, their

warped view of Christ and salvation, and their sin against God? It's very clear that repentance must be involved in the sinner's conversion.

It's very clear that God's grace does freely justify and redeem us (Rom. 3:24) and repentance (a change of mind and attitude about God, Christ, sin, salvation, and our rebellion against God) does not take away from the glorious message of "free grace." It is an integral part of our freedom brought about by grace (John 8:32, 36). How can grace be "free" without a person repenting of his sin and rebellion against God and desiring to be released from his sins? How can a person be free without repenting of his legalism (human effort to be justified before God) and his warped worldview of God and Jesus Christ? No person can be saved without repentance.

What is important is that we make a distinction between the **root** of repentance which comes before salvation and the **fruit** of repentance which follows salvation. Acts 26:19-20 illustrated this: "Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God (the **root** of repentance - a desire and willingness to turn away from sin), and do works meet for repentance (the **fruit** of repentance which comes after salvation). Wilkin never seems to separate these two aspects of repentance. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 declares, "For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols (the **root** of repentance - an inward turning away from former belief systems and known sins) to serve the living and true God (the **fruit** of repentance that comes after salvation).

The first part of this verse ("turned to God from idols") speaks of the *inward turning* of the heart to God and the person's inward desire to turn away from the sin in his life. This is where real repentance occurs. It's the *root* or *source* and *foundation* of all true repentance. If you are not willing to turn away from your sin, then you are not ready to repent. The Bible says that those who repent will turn to God. They won't want to live in rebellion against God. When you repent you will be ready to turn "to God" for His salvation and deliverance from sin. You will realize that only God can change your life, and you will turn to Him for deliverance, while at the same time turn away "from idols" or those sinful things in your life such as sex, drugs, lying, covetousness, adultery, and fornication. In

short, you will turn away from your sinful ambition and no longer desire to live in ongoing sin and open rebellion against God (1 Sam. 15:23).

Vance Havner used to say:

“It takes a radical break to turn a man from earth’s trash to heaven’s treasure.”

Neither repentance (Rom. 2:5) or faith consists of works (Eph. 2:8-9). I think some free gracers confuse the **ROOT** of repentance, a change of mind, a different attitude about one’s sinfulness and rebellion against God, which occurs in conjunction with salvation, with the **FRUIT** of repentance, which comes after salvation.

Some “free gracers” also keep beating a “dead horse” and claim that repentance is never mentioned in John’s Gospel and therefore should not be part of any conversion response. But even in John’s Gospel, Jesus repeatedly says that people choose to not believe on Him (John 3:18; 3:36; 5:40) and the simple reason for this is because repentance did not occur in their hearts. The fact that the word repentance is not mentioned in John’s Gospel in no way negates the importance and need for it to occur in the hearts of lost sinners. What must a person do to be saved? Yes, they must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31; John 5:24; 6:47). And this is a belief that has been spawned and nurtured by what the Bible calls “repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).

You simply cannot get to faith without repentance. A person is judged because of their unrepentance (Rom. 2:5) and unbelief (John 3:36). This is because you cannot have unbelief without unrepentance. In a similar way, you cannot have faith without repentance (Acts 20:21; Rev. 16:9, 11). To ignore either one cancels out the other.

Harry Ironside once stated:

“There can be no faith without repentance, and no repentance without faith. What God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

Here is the point. No person changes their mind about sin without seeking deliverance from sin. All true repentance involves a turning away from sin. It possesses an inward desire to be released from sin. *In repentance a person will want to turn away from whatever is keeping them from coming to salvation and*

faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit will put his finger on the sin and the sinner at the time of repentance and conversion. As a result, a person will no longer want to live in absolute rebellion against God. Again, it's the ministry of the Holy Spirit to reveal to a person that he or she is a sinner and in need of grace. Only the work of the Spirit upon the heart can produce repentance (John 16:8).

The Bible teaches that repentance always compliments genuine faith in Christ and works simultaneously with the expression of faith. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot get to "faith alone" without repentance occurring. A person who expresses faith alone in Christ will do so because the spiritual barriers that kept them from expressing "faith alone" in Christ have been removed by repentance. Hence, the coin illustration, which you have disavowed, is appropriate. Like a coin, both repentance and faith synergistically work together in bringing a person to Christ.

When witnessing to people who are thinking about trusting in Jesus Christ as their Savior, I will often ask, "Is there anything that is keeping you from coming to Christ today?" This will let you know whether or not they are ready to repent and place faith alone in Christ. Sometimes I will remind them that Jesus and the Bible inform us that a person does not always want to change his thinking about his personal rebellion against God, that he is an actual sinner in God's presence, and that salvation only comes through Jesus Christ and the Gospel message. I then share with the sinner that these types of barriers keep people from expressing faith in Christ or the Gospel message of His death, burial, and resurrection, which is the only message that can grant them eternal life and the forgiveness of all their sins (Eph. 1:7; 2:1; Col. 1:14; 2:13).

For instance, unsaved people cannot and will not express genuine faith in Christ (John 5:40) unless they repent about following another Jesus, another gospel (2 Cor. 11:4), a works-based religion, their Atheism, Pantheism, Hinduism, Buddhism, or their rebellion against God (Acts 17:30). Repentance, changing one's inward belief system – a reversal of one's thinking regarding sin, the Savior, and salvation, gets people to "faith alone." Both Jesus and the apostles knew this as they presented the message of faith in His person and work.

And no, I don't believe I've misunderstood what "perish" means. In these contexts of religious people who did not possess a relationship with God and last

day scoffers, who reject His offer of grace, Jesus had in mind an awful fate of judgment (spiritual ruin, the loss of well-being, from the presence of God). To “perish” (apollumi = destruction or ruin) in the contexts of God’s wrath and judgment means to maintain an everlasting but wretched existence away (cut off) from God’s presence and fellowship (Matt. 10:28). It means to be lost (same word Jesus used in Matthew 15:24). Thayer declared, with extreme clarity, that apollumi suggests “to be delivered up to eternal misery.” Ultimately, when we perish we are ruined and rendered inoperable and useless in relation to the original purpose we were created for. For the lost, their perishing goes on forever (2 Thess. 1:6-9).

Wilkin seems to paint Biblical repentance as the same picture as Lordship Salvation where a sinner is told to reform his life, give up all his sins, become something (a disciple or follower of Christ), do something, promise something, make a contract with God, or follow a program in order to be saved. Nothing could be further from the truth. If we will just get out of the way and leave sinner’s repent, we won’t need to (nor should we!) tack on legalistic requirements for salvation. Biblical repentance is NOT Lordship Salvation. Repenting before God and pledging something to God for salvation are two different things. Brokenness over sin and a willingness to turn away from sin (and desiring pardon for sin) is not the same as promising Jesus that you will become His disciple for life, turn over a new leaf, reform your ways, obey His commands, crucify the flesh, surrender your life to God, count the cost, pay the price for becoming a follower of Jesus, etc.

The point is this; sinners can experience brokenness over their sins and desire liberation from their sins without making promises, contracts, bargains, and legalistic requirements with God. There is no “slippery slope” as Wilkin suggests in his article title that leads a sinner down a lordship/legalistic/discipleship/mastery salvation path just because he wants to repent. I usually ask people, “Is there anything keeping you from coming to Christ and casting your faith upon Him? If they are not prepared to trust Christ as their Savior, then they have not yet repented of those very things, which are keeping them from the Savior (“men loved darkness rather than light” - John 3:19). A heart that is in rebellion against God cannot be saved! Essentially, *repentance involves the desire to be liberated from sin and no longer live under sin’s power.* An unsaved person will certainly possess this desire, if he is ready to express faith in Christ and be saved. Yes, only the Holy Spirit can perform this work in the human heart in that moment of awakening grace!

Wilkin also suggests that if one adds repentance to the sinner's response toward the Gospel message that the individual will lack assurance by looking back and wondering if he was sorry enough when he repented, turned away from all of his sins, or if he has fully surrendered to God and followed Christ enough. Of course, this is NOT a correct understanding of Biblical repentance, since true repentance is not presented as *degrees* of sorrowing, a lifelong program of giving up all your sins so you can go to Heaven, or surrendering, submission, reformation, etc. In the sinner's conversion response to God, repentance occurs when a person possesses a general change of mind and heart (a different attitude) regarding his sinful patterns of living and belief systems that run contrary to God's truth. It occurs when an individual desires to be liberated from sin's power and is willing to turn away from sin. Again, we must get out of the way and leave a person repent! Repentance is NOT legalism or Lordship Salvation in disguise. It is simply a preparatory step that prepares the sinner for faith alone in Christ alone.

Acts 20:20-21 agrees with this. "And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, **repentance** toward God, and **faith** toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Wilkin is apparently keeping back something that needs to be presented to sinners.

In Acts 17:30 Paul adds:

"And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent."

Who will you believe – Wilkin or Paul?

Acts 3:19 says:

"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord."

Conversion implies a turning away or reversal of one's life from a former belief system and lifestyle that was opposed to Christ.

2 Peter 3:9

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

Who will you believe, Wilkin or Peter?

Luke 5:32

“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Luke 24:47

“And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

John was commissioned to preach repentance (Luke 24:47). This message was related to Christ’s death and resurrection (Luke 24:46) in this context and it pertains to salvation and eternal life – not the Christian life.

Who will you believe, Wilkin or Jesus?

Wilkin adds, “How could what the Lord and His apostles said be accurate if the true condition of regeneration and justification is repenting and believing?” The fact of the matter is this; they did say it! Wilkin is just not willing to see it.

At one-point Wilkin claims to have changed his mind regarding “the change of mind” view of repentance. However, Bob Wilkin should *change his mind* about *changing his mind* about the *change of mind* view of repentance and *change his mind* once again about the *change of mind* view!

Scripture clearly and repeatedly declares that repentance is necessary for salvation and eternal life. Jesus taught this (Luke 5:32; 13:3; 15:7; 24:47), Paul taught this (Acts 17:30), Peter taught this (Acts 3:19; 2 Pet. 3:9; 26:20), and it was included in the Great Commission (Luke 24:47). The Bible emphatically teaches that repentance is part of a person’s conversion response toward God (1 Thess. 1:9-10). God wants all people to repent so they do not “perish,” as 2 Peter 3:9 states, which in the context is talking about the perdition of ungodly people, God’s judgment, and the Day of the Lord (2 Peter 3:7, 10). Peter declares that God wants all men to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). If this is true, then the message

needs to be clearly declared to unsaved and ungodly people who are perishing and without Christ.

Without repentance regarding one's sins and need for salvation and the Savior, no one would ever be saved. Repentance opens the door to faith in Christ. How can a person be ready or prepared to believe on Jesus Christ when they are in open rebellion against God and His way of salvation? Repentance precedes faith (Acts 20:21) and paves the way for faith to occur.

Let's use the analogy of a coin. A coin has "heads and tails" as we like to say. A coin is not a coin without both sides. In a similar way, conversion is not conversion without the both sides of repentance and faith occurring. You cannot have one without the other. From a Biblical perspective, anybody who was ever been saved has repented and has also expressed faith in Christ. Repentance is the "heads" and faith is the "tails." Both are necessary to bring a person to salvation and are joined together as a work of God's grace that takes place in the heart of an unbeliever (Rom. 2:4; Acts 18:27).

In repentance a person will possess the desire to turn away from whatever is keeping them from coming to faith and salvation in Christ. It may be a wrong view of God or Jesus Christ, a belief system that embraces idolatry, or a lifetime of being bound to Satanism ("to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins" - Acts 26:18). Repentance is a person's desire to be released from their sins. It has no resemblance to legalism or works. It is not making bargains or contracts with God as Lordship Salvation teaches.

Of course, repenting before God and pledging something to God for salvation are two different things. I do not have to cooperate with Christ's program of discipleship, or make a contract with God, which involves obeying the commands of Jesus and making a commitment to Christ's lordship, as a necessary condition of eternal life. This is **frontloading** the Gospel with works. Nor do I have to base my assurance of salvation on my performance instead of my faith in Christ (this is **backloading** the Gospel with works). I think both Wilkin and myself wholeheartedly agree on this. But none of these things mentioned above are part of Biblical repentance. Once again, we simply need to get out of the way and leave a person repent. Only when a person repents will they be ready to place faith

alone in Christ. Of course, repentance and faith happen simultaneously and are like two peas on the same pod.

When it comes to repentance and countering Reformed Theology, I think many “free-gracers” have thrown the baby out with the bathwater! How can the offer of grace at the time of one’s salvation (Titus 2:11) and the transformation that grace brings which follows a person’s salvation (Titus 2:12) be considered “free” if it keeps people bound to their former sins and belief systems which once separated them from God? This is why repentance is a prerequisite and compliment to saving faith in Christ. You cannot get to faith without repentance.

Here are the Biblical facts; we are all sinners who need to repent, or else we will “perish” or suffer God’s wrath and judgment in the afterlife (John 3:15-16; 10:28; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Thess. 2:10; 2 Pet. 3:9). This perishing was not merely connected with a prophecy about the coming AD 70 judgment; it included the terrible fate of their ultimate ruin from God’s presence forever in hell (2 Pet. 3:9). All sinners are living on borrowed time unless they repent. There was something very ominous and dreadful in the words of Jesus. Judgment is coming without repentance. Their physical death would lead to their spiritual separation from God’s presence forever (Hebrews 9:27). Both physical and spiritual death are inseparably bound together for the lost sinner.

Romans 2:5

“But after thy hardness and impenitent (unrepentant) heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

The message is clear. Repent or else! Those who teach that repentance is not related to salvation and eternal life go to great lengths to explain away the obvious truths that Jesus and the apostles taught in the Gospels and epistles, and by so doing, commit voodoo exegesis and eisegesis. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). We should follow the example of Christ and do the same in our evangelism.

Sadly, in seeking to counter some of the extremes of Reformed Theology (as I also do), my “free gracer” fellow-believers create what I believe is their own extreme

Grace Theology. The theological pendulum can swing ridiculously extreme in either direction.

“The pendulum swings, ridiculous extreme,
Bypassing the truth which lieth between.”

In closing, let me confirm that both Bob Wilkin and I rejoice in the wonderful truth that we are justified freely by his grace (Rom. 3:24). We are not enemies but fellow guardians of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ. When we critique one another's works and have points of disagreement, it does not mean we are opposing one another's Gospel ministry but acting like the Bereans of old (Acts 17:11). May God save many souls through our outreach ministries. The time is short!