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# Repentance and Faith: Who Does the Turning?

## The Language and Its Implications

Theodore Mueller

“Repent and believe,” says our Lord throughout the Old and New Testaments. And throughout the centuries the question has been debated as to who performs the turning away from sin and turning to the Lord. The same question also pertains to faith: Who “performs” the believing? To what extent is the one named as the subject of the two verbs engaged in the activity, state, or process expressed by these verbs?

Modern Protestant theology maintains that the individual indeed performs the activity of turning and believing. He decides to turn to and believe in Christ. Some go so far as to say that the individual is totally and solely responsible for achieving repentance and faith. Bill Bright takes this position: “I repent means that I change my attitude toward my sins,” a sentence found in a section stressing “what I *must do* to appropriate God’s love and forgiveness.”<sup>1</sup> J. Goetzmann expresses the same thought: “Repentance is regarded as an act open to man and as a duty. It is a possibility given to man by God as an eschatological gift of grace, and it is also a duty required of him.”<sup>2</sup>

The Lutheran Confessions state the opposite position: Of his own free will man is not able to repent and believe. “These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify and to justify and quicken the terrified,”<sup>3</sup> which is a definition of repentance. The Formula of Concord treats the subject in depth: “Through the fall of our first parents man is so corrupted that in divine things, concerning our conversion and salvation, he is by nature blind and does not and cannot understand the Word of God when it is preached, but considers it foolishness; nor does he of himself approach God, but he is and remains an enemy of God until by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word which is preached and heard, he is converted, becomes a believer, is regenerated and renewed.”<sup>4</sup> And the Formula declares: “Holy Scriptures ascribes conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and everything that belongs to its real beginning and completion in no way to the human powers of the natural free will, be it entirely or one half or the least and tiniest part, but altogether and alone to the divine operation and the Holy Spirit, as the Apology declares. To some

extent reason and free will are able to lead an outwardly virtuous life. But to be born anew, to receive inwardly a new heart, mind and spirit, is solely the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> With respect to the efficient cause man’s natural powers cannot contribute anything or help in any way.<sup>6</sup>

The Lutheran position is crystal clear concerning man’s action in his repentance and faith. Yet many well-meaning people wonder: God commanded it. Therefore, is it not man who performs it? Why else command it? When we say, “I repent,” and, “I believe,” is it not *I* who do the turning and believing? Does not our language imply such a performance? Recent developments in linguistics bring new light to this problem and clarify what Scripture says. And although turning to the secular discipline of linguistics for a theological explanation might be startling to some, it should not be considered unusual; for orthodox theology is based upon the language of Scripture, and a poor understanding of language produces bad theology.

The explanation presented here draws on a few grammatical concepts which must be understood first in order to apply them to the subject of repentance and faith. I beg the indulgence of the reader while wending my way through the thicket of the grammatical forest; it is, however, a clear and easy path and requires no special knowledge of linguistics or related disciplines. It is part of the daily usage of every speaker. A sentence usually consists of a verb and a subject as in the following cases:

I drove to St. Louis.

I write a paper.

I am preaching God’s word.

The verb expresses an action; the subject often states who performs the action, the doer. In grammatical terms the doer is called the *agent* and is defined as the instigator of the action. The agent decides to perform, and carries out the action by his own power and energy. The problem arises when it is assumed that every subject is the agent of what is expressed by the verb. In the sentence, “The window broke,” did the window instigate the action of breaking? Of course not. The verbs mentioned in the above examples belong to a category of verbs which express an action, a dynamic event. These verbs require an agent and are, therefore, called “action verbs.”

Other verbs express not an action but a state or a situation:

I like chocolate.

I doubt your words.

I know French.

This category of verbs expresses a stative situation and is,

therefore, referred to as “stative verbs.” They express a psychological state of mind or emotions; they specify a certain disposition or condition. The subject of such a verb usually names the person or thing which is in that state. That kind of a subject is called an *experiencer* to distinguish it from an *agent*. It specifies the one undergoing the sensation, emotion, or cognition.

Action verbs are distinguished from stative verbs in English by a simple test. The progressive tense can only be used with action verbs:

I am driving to St. Louis.

I will be writing a paper.

I am preaching God’s Word.

The progressive tense cannot be used with stative verbs:

\*I am liking chocolate.

\*I am doubting your words.

\*I am knowing French.

The verbs *hear* as opposed to *listen* and *see* as opposed to *look* illustrate the distinction between action and stative verbs and between agent and experiencer:

I see a girl.

I hear music.

In these sentences the subject undergoes a sensation which he cannot avoid unless he is blind or deaf. The subject is an experiencer. *Hear* and *see* are stative verbs. But the following sentences are different:

I look at a girl.

I listen to your words.

In these sentences the subject is the agent, determines to engage in the activity, and carries it out. *Look* and *listen* are action verbs.

This simple distinction is at the heart of the discussion about repentance and faith. The question can be restated: Are *repent* and *believe* action or stative verbs? Do we perceive the subject of these verbs as agent or experiencer? Modern Protestantism views these verbs as action verbs and the subject as the agent, while Lutherans view them as stative verbs and the subject as the experiencer. Thus theology in this instance is reduced to a question of language, and of grammar in particular. Only sound linguistic analysis leads to sound theology. Resolving the linguistic and theological question is predicated on an analysis of the verbs *repent* and *believe*. The progressive conjugation can be applied as a test. English does not allow the use of a progressive tense with these verbs. We do not say, \*‘‘I am repenting,’’ or, \*‘‘I am believing.’’ Thus, in English these verbs are stative verbs. However, the Lord revealed His truth through the medium not of

English, but of the Hebrew and Greek languages. The analysis, therefore, must be based on the meaning which these words had in the original text of Scripture.

The Greek verb for *repent*, *metanoeo*, which renders the Hebrew *niham* (“feel regret”), is interpreted by Arndt, Bauer, and Gingrich as “to change one’s mind,” then as “feel remorse, repent, be converted.” They cite non-biblical authors and then apply the meaning to Scripture. Goetzmann, in the article cited above, states that the preposition *meta* is used with verbs of motion and mental activity. “The change of mind involves the recognition that the previous opinion was false or bad; we get the meaning of feel remorse, regret. . . . The NT stresses the thought, the will, the *nous*.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, this verb expresses a mental disposition. Accordingly, it belongs to the stative verb group. It is the English language which has introduced the notion of an action, not present in the original. Note that the verb *repent* does not describe the process of changing or turning, but rather refers to the resultant state of mind, a condition which is different from what it was before. The same is implied when a father tells his disobedient son, “When you have changed your attitude, you may come back.”

The Greek verb *pisteuo* corresponds to the Hebrew verbs *batah* (“to feel safe”) and the hiphil of *'aman* (“to view as reliable, to trust”) and is interpreted by Arndt, Bauer, and Gingrich as (1) to be convinced of, (2) to believe in, trust, in addition to being convinced. Harris summarizes his discussion of this verb as an intellectual apprehension, a simple credence, the confident trust that an individual places in a divine person.<sup>8</sup> Rossiter and Pearce, in their discussion of the role of trust in interpersonal communication, analyze the concept meticulously and describe how trust originates and increases. Trust is a belief, a state of mind towards someone; it is confidence or expectation and is generated not by an act of the will or a decision by someone, but rather “trusting behavior on your part sometimes produces trust in the other. . . . All you can do is to offer trusting behavior in the hope that the other person will respond with trust.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the verb *to believe* also expresses a psychological state, not an action. Trust in God develops and increases as a result of, or in reaction to His Word and promises, the means of grace, and not as a function of one’s decision, effort, or activity.

The verbs *to repent* and *to believe* belong to the stative verb group. Therefore, the grammatical subject is an experiencer — that is, one who undergoes the sensation, emotion, or cognition,

and not the agent, or doer of the action. This grammatical analysis, therefore, supports the view expressed by the Lutheran Confessions and demonstrates clearly that man cannot play an active or decisive role in his conversion or his faith. The language implies as much.

Repentance frequently seems to imply more than a mere passive state. In such phrases as "produce deeds that are consistent with repentance" (Acts 26:20) and "unless you repent you will all perish" (Luke 13:3) it seems that actions are suggested, namely, good works. A problem arises when the fruits of repentance are confused with repentance proper. Good works are, indeed, expected and demanded, but as the evidence of the changed attitude. Just as the gifts brought to mother do not constitute love itself but a demonstration of it, so the good works are the demonstration of repentance, as expressed in the NIV translation, "prove their repentance by their deeds" (Acts 26:20). The verbs describing the good works (such as "give to the needy, help your neighbor, speak well of him, go to church, confess your Lord," etc.) are action verbs with an agent as subject. There the individual initiates and performs the deeds. Those actions prove and show the attitude and state of mind of a repentant person trusting in his Lord. But with respect to repentance and faith, however, the individual named as subject experiences the sensation or state, and only the Holy Spirit through the means of grace is the effective cause for this disposition.

Yet there remains the question of why does the Lord order repentance and faith if these verbs do not express actions. Normally stative verbs are not used in the imperative. We do not say, \*"Be healthy!" \*"Feel good!" \*"Like these vegetables!" However, the exclusion of the imperative is not an absolute rule with this category of verbs. We do say: "Trust me!" "Be cheerful!" "Cheer up!" Such expressions are encouragements, exhortations, and not commandments to be obeyed, and are analogous to the jussive and cohortative in Hebrew. Furthermore, Greek and Hebrew do not follow the rules of English grammar. The translators have rendered into English imperatives Greek and Hebrew forms which in those languages may not have had the same constraints as English. Thus, "Repent!" "Change your mind!" "Believe in your Lord!" "Trust Him!" are encouragements, rather than orders.

The distinction between the two types of verbs noted above has profound implications for the pastor's activities. Through his words God brings about repentance and faith, nurtures and

strengthens trust in the Lord. An inept ambassador can do great damage by misrepresenting the message entrusted to him. So can the pastor when he misunderstands the nature and growth of faith. Repentance and faith, though not the same, are intimately related and go hand in hand. Every believer is in the state of repentance; to come to faith includes turning to the Lord. The practical implications which are discussed subsequently center around faith, but are applicable to repentance as well. Only faith is mentioned, particularly since the concept is so widely misunderstood and misrepresented today. When faith is presented as man's activity the impression is given that he must contribute something to his salvation — a form of work-righteousness. How we speak about faith does have serious implications and is well worth examining.

"To believe" is presented as an action verb denoting man's activity or accomplishment when it is demanded, ordered, commanded, required, prescribed or enjoined. Expressions like "faith is the only thing for you to do," "faith is all that is needed," "the only requirement," "the only contribution," "all God wants is faith," "you *must* believe," or any statement expressing constraint, duty, task, or obligation, imply that faith is an "act." The theological literature often labels faith as "the act of faith."<sup>10</sup> *Thompson's Chain Reference Bible* betrays the same attitude about faith when the references to faith are listed under such topics as "Faith Enjoined" and "A Fundamental Duty."

Faith is represented as man's act when it is made the condition for salvation. Conditional clauses, like "if you would only believe," "if you believe, you will be saved," make faith a stipulation man must meet. Note, however, that not all if-clauses fall into the same category. Conditionality must not be confused with statements expressing existing circumstances as in "if you have a fever, take two aspirins." Thus, "if you trust the Lord, you have salvation and all the promises which go with it," correctly identifies faith as the tool by which all of God's promises are appropriated; it states what has been expressed technically by the phrase, *sola fide*. Conditions are also expressed through restrictive clauses and have the same effect of stipulating something for man to achieve. Thus, the newer formulas of absolution add a relative clause to identify the beneficiary of the forgiveness: "There is forgiveness for all *who turn to Christ*."<sup>11</sup> Such a clause restricts forgiveness to those who can meet the stated condition of repentance and faith, and will be interpreted as man's contribution to his salvation.

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Finally faith appears as man's activity when it is made the cause of justification. Thus, when faith takes precedence over, is glorified over, or is preached with scant references to God's grace and Christ's atonement, the impression is given that man contributes to his salvation. It is a misrepresentation when faith rather than God's grace is the motivating force for sanctification. When faith appears at the heart and center of justification, man's salvation is reduced to the question, "What must I *do* to obtain justification?" rather than, "What has God done for me?" The Gospel has been changed into a law.

How does faith develop and grow? If the one who trusts is not the agent producing faith, under what conditions does it evolve? Common sense tells us that trust, like love, cannot be forced. It results from, and is strengthened by kindness, compassion, love, benevolence, favor, warmth, good will, consideration, etc. In the right context it can be elicited by an exhortation: "Trust me, because I have only the best intentions for you." Recent research into the question of how trust evolves between human beings is of considerable interest to theology.<sup>12</sup> Trust in another person occurs under certain conditions: There is a cognitive dimension which favors its development. The trusting person must perceive that the trusted person's behavior affects him in non-trivial ways; that he is well-intentioned towards him; that his is able and willing to conduct himself in such a way as to prevent harm to him. He must have some basis for predicting how that other person will behave towards him. Sometimes increasing communication may produce better relations, that is, a greater degree of trust. Another interesting observation concerns a subjective dimension, namely, the fact that individuals vary in their response when trust is offered to them. The way one feels about oneself seems to be an important factor. People who are self-confident are more likely to trust than those plagued by self-doubt. The research presents trust as a function of communication, which serves as an instrument for its evolution and growth.

Scripture has always taught what is stated above. The research was adduced to make explicit what is subsumed in the Scriptural statements, not to validate Scripture. (Note that modern research has finally progressed to the point where it has discovered what the holy writers knew two thousand years ago.) "Faith cometh by hearing," i.e., as the result of hearing the great deeds God has done to rescue us from our plight (Rom. 10:17). The Lord Himself mentions those who believe through the words of the Apostles (John 17:20). Christ's witness and John's Gospel have faith as



their objective (John 1:7, 20:31). The Samaritans believe because they have heard the words of life which the Lord told them (John 4:42). Thus, Scripture underscores the role of communication in the development of trust and stresses that the news of His grace and mercy are the means by which faith is created and strengthened.

Certain conclusions can be drawn for Christ's ambassadors. Note that it is the Holy Spirit who produces faith in an individual with the pastor acting as His messenger. But a messenger can do much harm and impede the effectiveness of the message. The cognitive aspect, as mentioned, is instrumental in the development of trust. The pastor must show how kind, compassionate, gracious, loving, and full of good will God is towards us; he must depict His unbounding grace and mercy to rebellious sinners and His eagerness to help us. As he proclaims the Gospel of Christ's atonement, he also affects the self-view of the listener, a second condition mentioned in the research. He assures the listener of how precious he is in the sight of God, how much God values him and everyone of His creation.

Only the message of what God has done for man produces faith. The pastor must put into prominence the Word of Reconciliation, convince his audience of God's immeasurable love and must not talk about faith primarily, or make faith the principal topic of his communication. When he proclaims the objective justification and the reconciliation of sinners through the cross, trust and confidence in such a God develops without even mentioning the word "faith" or explaining what faith is.<sup>13</sup> In such a context exhortations to trust God are in place. In this sense Paul answered the jailer at Philippi who had asked, "What must I do?" (Acts 16:30). The jailer meant: "What acts of penance must I do to obtain forgiveness?" Paul's reply is the antithesis of the verb to *do*: "You are not to do anything; on the contrary, trust the Lord." Believing is the opposite of doing, as is so clearly taught in Galatians. Paul consistently sets faith up as the direct opposite to good works or to keeping the demands of the Law.

This discussion has attempted to clarify the role which the individual assumes in repentance and faith. The question of man's involvement arises out of a linguistic confusion which treats the verbs *repent* and *believe* as action verbs rather than stative verbs. Since the subject of a stative verb is an *experiencer* who undergoes a sensation or a state of mind, he cannot be viewed as an *agent* performing the turning to God or the believing in the Lord. Thus, linguistics vindicates the Lutheran position. This fact goes to

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show that the Lord is a better linguist than human beings. Likewise, our fathers who drafted the Lutheran Confessions had a clear understanding of what the Lord says in Holy Scripture, even without the help of modern linguistics.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. William Bright, *How to Experience God's Love and Forgiveness* (Arrow Springs, California: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1971), p. 26.
2. Collin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, I (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1978), p. 358.
3. Apol. XII, 53; Theodore G. Tappert, tr. and ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 189.
4. SD II, 5; Tappert, p. 520.
5. SD II, 25; Tappert, p. 526.
6. SD II, 71; Tappert, p. 535.
7. Brown, I, p. 357.
8. Brown, III, p. 1213.
9. Charles Rossiter and Barnett Pearce, *Communicating Personally* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill Educational Publishing Co., 1977), p. 136.
10. Brown, I, p. 605.
11. *Worship Supplement* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), p. 63.
12. Rossiter and Pearce, pp. 120-145.
13. Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), p. 479.