

Metanoia in the Main Message of Jesus

— The worst translated word in the New Testament?

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1. What is Metanoia?

The Greek word *metanoia* (μετάνοια) shows up all through the Gospels. Most English Bibles translate it as “repentance”, perhaps suggesting remorse and revision of behaviour. But here’s the thing: scholars have long pointed out that this translation doesn’t really get at the heart of the word. Literally, it leans much more toward “changing one’s mind” or a “transformation of outlook.”

The mistranslation is attributed to Jerome in his late 4th-century Latin translation of the Bible, commissioned by Pope Damasus I. It became the standard text for the Western Church for over a thousand years

Take Mark’s Gospel. Many think it records the very first words Jesus spoke in his public ministry:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. *Metanoiēte* and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).

That single line shows how central *metanoia* is to Jesus’ message. And here’s where it gets more interesting. Leading biblical scholars have been pretty blunt about how badly “repentance” misses the mark:

- A.T. Robertson once called it “a linguistic and theological tragedy.”
- John Broadus said it was “the worst translation in the New Testament.”
- Herbert George Marsh went so far as to say it was flat-out “unsuitable.”
- James Hastings and others simply labelled it “totally inadequate.”

Their consensus? Words like “change of mind” or “transformation of outlook” capture things far better—especially if we want to hear Jesus’ radical, grace-based call when he announced, “The kingdom of God has come near. *Metanoiēte* [change your minds] and believe the good news!”

Matthew backs this up. His Gospel also tells us Jesus began preaching with almost the same words:

“Repent [*metanoiēte*], for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17).

So right from the start, *metanoia* is placed at the centre of Jesus’ proclamation.

Luke runs with the theme, too. Between the Gospel of Luke and Acts we get about 25 of the 58 New Testament uses of the words *metanoeo* and *metanoia*. For example, Jesus says in Luke 5:32:

“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance [*metanoia*].”

So what does that prefix *meta-* really add? In the Greek of the time, *meta-* could mean “with,” or “after,” or sometimes “by means of.” But when it gets hooked onto a verb, it often carries this sense of movement—of a shift from one state to another. Almost like going *beyond* something, or *seeing it differently once you’ve looked again*.

Here’s a way to picture it: imagine wearing glasses that you don’t even realise are smudged. You see the world a certain way until one day you wipe the lenses clean. Suddenly, everything looks different—clearer, truer. That’s what happens when ‘*meta-*’ pairs with *nous* (mind, understanding) to form *metanoia*. It isn’t just “with the mind.” It’s “beyond the mind you currently have”—a perspective change, a new way of seeing.

Another analogy: it’s like following a map you later discover has been printed upside down. *Metanoia* is the moment you turn it the right way up. The landscape hasn’t changed, but your orientation to it has—and suddenly you can travel in a new direction. And that’s why early Christian writers leaned into *metanoia* as something far deeper than regret. It wasn’t “feel sorry with your mind.” It was an invitation to go beyond the way you’ve been thinking—step out of your old framework and into the radically new orientation that God’s kingdom demands.

The Gospels present *metanoia* not as simply being sorry for sin, but as something much deeper—a shift of perspective, a reorientation of the whole self. It’s what allows someone to grasp what God’s kingdom is about. When salvation is in view, *metanoia* is almost interchangeable with faith: “a change of mind about oneself and Christ.”

The scholarly consensus suggests that *metanoia* in the Gospels calls for going beyond one’s current frame of reference to embrace the radical reorientation required by the kingdom of God, rather than simply feeling remorse for past actions. That’s why the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) keep coming back to it. Even John the Baptist was preaching “a baptism of *metanoia*” to prepare the way for Jesus. The term becomes a bridge—from the prophets of Israel to the new covenant message of Jesus.

In the end, the consensus is clear: *metanoia* in the Gospels is not about wallowing in regret or sorrow for the past. It’s about stepping out of our old frame of reference and into the radical new orientation demanded by God’s kingdom.

It seems to me that this word is an invitation to adopt the widest perspective. A divine perspective. A similar meaning, in other words, to Paul’s “Put on the mind of Christ.” Implied here are the humility, negation of self, and trust in God that make such a shift possible.

So the mistranslated concept of *metanoia*, apparently the first word Jesus uttered as part of this ministry, is not just any word. It is the foundation and summary of the Christian faith.

2. Metanoia Delayed

This poem shows the internal tension of a person who, knowing the true meaning of the word, painfully hesitates to make the required leap.

Metanoia Delayed

Just give me time!
I cannot omit
my estimates.
I have to say my prayers
In fear—fully clothed,
just as I ought,
and calculate
my costs and benefits
before I get too wet.

After all, whoever heard
of a baptism
by total immersion?
My toes are very wet –
at least for me, that's
the edge of the deep.

And when you tell, with awe,
of a man you saw
who jumped right in
as if he could,
with never a splash, then, well
it would, it should, have been
a dream.

So leave me alone to...
... contemplate the waters,
to estimate, appraise, perform
ablutions as I ought to,
with rationed water

But yet,
I still have dreams of the one
who jumped right in
with never a splash
morphing then into a
radiant fish much larger than
the sea

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