

Calvin's Institutes, Book Three, *The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ* [cont'd]

CHAPTER III OUR REGENERATION BY FAITH: REPENTANCE, PART 2

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Sections</u>	<u>Class</u>
Repentance, the fruit of faith	3, 5-9	Feb 3

The notes for section 3 of this chapter were scheduled for last week, but we ran out of time in the class presentation. Therefore, we begin this week with section 3. The material is repeated here, and is clarified and expanded.

Chapter III, "Repentance"Review: Repentance is a consequence of faith in the gospel

Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith. For since pardon and forgiveness are offered through the preaching of the gospel in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the Kingdom of God, surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance.

3. Mortification and vivification

Calvin now takes up the terminology describing repentance, which was originally used by the Lutherans: "mortification" and "vivification."¹

But, certain men well versed in penance, even long before these times, meaning to speak simply and sincerely according to the rule of Scripture, said that it consists of two parts: mortification and vivification. Mortification they explain as sorrow of soul and dread conceived from the recognition of sin and the awareness of divine judgment. For when anyone has been brought into a true knowledge of sin, he then begins truly to hate and abhor sin; then he is heartily displeased with himself, he confesses himself miserable and lost and wishes to be another man. Furthermore, when he is touched by any sense of the judgment of God (for the one straightway follows the other) he then lies stricken and overthrown; humbled and cast down he trembles; he becomes discouraged and despairs. This is the first part of repentance, commonly called "contrition." "Vivification" they understand as the consolation that arises out of faith.² That is, when a man is laid low by the consciousness of sin and stricken by the fear of God, and afterward looks to the goodness of God – to his mercy, grace, salvation, which is through Christ – he raises himself up, he takes heart, he recovers courage, and as it were, returns from death to life. Now

¹ "Mortification" is "putting to death," and refers to putting to death the sinful desires of the flesh. "Vivification" is "making alive," and refers to the getting of spiritual life and righteousness through Christ and his Spirit. These terms are taken from Philipp Melancthon in his *Loci Communes* (1521, 1543), the first Protestant "Institutes."

² We should notice at this point that "repentance" is not just the "bad" part about being "frightened to death" about our sins, but also includes the "good" part – the relief provided by the Gospel.

these words, if only they have a right interpretation, express well enough the force of repentance; but when they understand vivification as the happiness that the mind receives after its perturbation and fear have been quieted, I do not agree. It means, rather, the desire to live in a holy and devoted manner, a desire arising from rebirth; as if it were said that man dies to himself that he may begin to live to God.

Calvin is willing to use the terms “mortification” and “vivification,” but would like to take “vivification” as more than the emotional sense of freedom from doom which comes with faith in the gospel. It must also be a positive desire for holiness arising from new birth. Put another way, an overall spiritual move away from sin and toward righteousness is concerned with putting sins to death (mortification) and bringing righteousness to life (vivification). The state of mind which is “repentance” is a state which begins to hate sin and to desire righteousness.

Perhaps, in his critique of the Lutheran teaching, Calvin may be thinking that the terms mortification and vivification need to be moved away from describing emotional states, and moved toward the objective process of killing off sin and coming alive to holiness. But, let me make these two points:

1. It's clear from Calvin's many statements about God's judgment and grace that he knows personally the feelings of doom and feelings of relief that are spoken of by the Lutherans. Calvin is not objecting to what is said about these states of mind. But, it seems to me that Calvin may think that he attaches a more objective meaning to the terms mortification and vivification. Mortification and vivification, for Calvin, refer not just to states of mind, which are reactions to sin and grace, but to a lifelong process of renewal in the Christian life.
2. Now, lest we leave the Lutheran position unexplained, that position is given in Melancthon's Loci Communes (1543 edition):

After we have explained the doctrine of reconciliation and faith [he means, justification by faith] it is necessary to add the doctrine concerning good works or the new obedience. Therefore I want to say clearly and plainly that our obedience, that is, the righteousness of a good conscience or of the good works which God has commanded us, must necessarily follow our reconciliation. For Christ clearly gives command regarding repentance, and Paul says, “We are debtors not to live after the flesh,” Rom 8:12. Also 1 Cor 6:9, “Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor adulterers, nor idolaters, nor thieves ... will inherit the kingdom of God.” 1 John 3:7-8, “Let no man deceive you. He who does righteousness is righteous. He who commits sin is of the devil ... For this purpose the Son of God came that He might destroy the works of the devil.” Thus we are born again in reconciliation [when our sins are forgiven] so that the new obedience might be begun in us. Likewise it is written to the Ephesians, 2:10, “We are His workmanship created through Christ Jesus unto good works which God has prepared that we should walk in them.” This statement contains the teaching and the comfort which we need, for regarding the necessity of this teaching, it first says that we “have been created unto good works.” Then there is comfort in the fact that he says that God has prepared beforehand those good works in the church, just as He prepared beforehand in Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others the marvelous works through which He both calls, governs, and preserves His church; and as He says in another place, “Strengthen, O God, that which You have wrought in us,” Ps 68:28. Likewise Paul

says that these good works have been prepared by God, that is, not only commanded, ordained, and begun by Him, but also aided and established. ...

So, authoritative Lutheran teaching in Calvin's day definitely takes an objective position on the issue of repentance, referring to the objective progress of sanctification in the Christian life, and not only to the emotions of fear and gladness.

Commentary on this difference of opinion between Calvin and Melanchthon

1. First: There is less difference between these men than one thinks.

Calvin and Melanchthon wrote back and forth to one another for years, even maintaining their theological fellowship through thick and thin during various disagreements and theological fights that took place in their respective camps. They did not always agree, but they did respect and love one another.

2. Second: There is a difference.

The difference should not be overstated, but does need to be understood, since the Lutherans are our closest companions in Reformation.

Therefore, let me try to explain this difference of opinion we saw before us in the Calvin text. I should note also that this difference of emphasis is not a confessional matter, yet it is a statistically significant difference of opinion between Reformed teachers and Lutheran teachers, and does generally indicate a difference in the spiritual demeanor of the two groups.

The problem:

In the spiritual warfare between flesh and spirit, one seeks for the power to live worthily according to the call of grace. What, then, is the source of this power? What is the balance between mourning our sins, the joy of forgiveness, and the earnest pursuit of obedience?

The answer:

Based on some years of reading both Lutheran and Reformed sources on the doctrine of faith, assurance, and sanctification, I believe it is legitimate to compare our difference of opinion this way:

1. For the spiritually alive, evangelical Lutherans the joy of forgiveness, especially as received in corporate worship through Word and Sacrament, is the objective motivator and source of power for sanctification. At the same time, this perceived blessing must, and does, lead to earnest pursuit of obedience to the law of God. There is a kind of simple faith that:

Gospel joy motivates Obedience;

and, obedience follows.

2. For the spiritually alive, evangelical Reformed, also sincerely attempting to maintain a high standard of corporate worship in Word and Sacrament, perhaps there is less trust that simple faith and the gospel joy of deliverance will be quite enough to motivate the required level of obedience in the Christian life. Therefore it sometimes appears that the earnest pursuit of obedience may take precedence over the joy (without at all denying the joy).

Gospel joy motivates obedience, at least in part;

but, **obedience is necessary, and must follow.**

The point is that both sides believe the same thing concerning the connection between joy and obedience, and the necessity of obedience. But, the balance of emphasis is different.

Now, such comparisons can be dangerous. I am told that one can find grim Lutherans. It is certainly the case that we can find joyful Reformed. There is a full spectrum of spiritual demeanor to be found in the group of Lutheran teachers and in the group of Reformed teachers, and these spectrums overlap. However, I believe that, at this point, we Reformed need to listen carefully to the best Lutheran writers. It is the confession of our sins, the forgiveness of our sins, and the offering of Christ through Word and Sacrament during corporate worship, which is the main source of spiritual power to live the Christian life. It is my sincere belief, with gratitude to God, that we see this in our own church.

Now, do I think that Calvin is “off base”? Misleading? Dangerous? Absolutely not!

Considering Calvin’s heavy emphasis on the goodness of God, the centrality of Christ and his atonement, and the life of faith which produces the Christian life as fruit from a tree, I say this: Calvin comes down fully on the side of God’s grace. An important Lutheran writer said that Calvin was “Luther’s best disciple.” This may be true. I have learned much from Calvin, and am grateful for the opportunity to present his teaching. But, when it comes to the question of the fountain of zeal for the Christian life, I agree that the impact of grace as spiritual deliverance is the mother of zeal for holiness. Therefore, the sense of deliverance, as reflected (not centered) in the emotions, must take the lead when it comes to “vivification.” And, yet I fully agree, with both Calvin and Melancthon that earnest pursuit of righteousness is a necessity of our calling.

5. Definition of Repentance

Calvin remarks that up to this point he has been discussing alternative views of repentance which, in his opinion, do not fully measure up to his own definition. He gives his own definition in this section.

Calvin begins by carefully distinguishing faith and repentance [sanctification], while assuring us that they must be joined. He also objects to including faith under repentance, in the order of thought. He has previously taught that faith is the mother of repentance, not the other way around. We are also very familiar by now with the central importance he gives to faith as rest on the promise of the gospel. Yet, intimately connected with faith, though not identical to it, is repentance.

These distinctions are required by the evangelical doctrine of the Reformation. If justification, or reconciliation with God, is brought to pass through faith apart from works, and yet if the fruit of faith is good works, then justification and sanctification must be distinguished in the order of thought. Yet, as the common fruit of grace which is received through faith alone, they can by no means be disjoined. So, there is a rest – the rest of faith, which rests on the divine promise of the gospel; and, there is righteousness – faith working through love, as it is spurred on by the grace of God.

Let us now look at Calvin's definition of repentance:

The meaning [of "repentance"] is that, departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new.

On this account, in my judgment, repentance can thus be well defined: it is [1] the true turning of our life to God, [2] a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him; and [3] it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.

Calvin explains each of these three points below. But, before we get into this, let me quote from an earlier passage in the Institutes (Book II, Chap XVI, Sec 2), where Calvin explains why we need to understand the wrath of God, even though we never experience it if we become Christians:

The Spirit usually speaks in this way in the Scriptures: "God was men's enemy until they were reconciled to grace by the death of Christ" [Rom 5:10]. "They were under a curse until their iniquity was atoned for by his sacrifice." [Gal 3:10, 13]. "They were estranged from God until through his body they were reconciled." [Col 1:21-2]. Expressions of this sort have been accommodated to our capacity that we may better understand how miserable and ruinous our condition is apart from Christ. For if it had not been clearly stated that the wrath and vengeance of God and eternal death rested upon us, we would scarcely have recognized how miserable we would have been without God's mercy, and we would have underestimated the benefit of liberation.

Likewise, I say, Calvin explains the terms of repentance in such a way that we understand the spiritual revolution which repentance entails, but also see the impossibility of it without the grace of Christ. Keep this mind as we go through the following sections.

6. Repentance as turning to God

Calvin now addresses point [1] of his definition, the true turning to God:

But before we go farther, it will be useful to explain more clearly the definition that we have laid down. We must examine repentance mainly under three heads. First, when we call it a “turning of life to God,” we require a transformation, not only in outward works, but in the soul itself. Only when it puts off its old nature does it bring forth the fruits of works in harmony with its renewal. The prophet, wishing to express this change, bids whom he calls to repentance to get themselves a new heart [Ezek 18:31]. Moses, therefore, intending to show how the Israelites might repent and be duly turned to the Lord, often teaches that it be done with “all the heart” and “all the soul” [Deut 6:5; 10:12; 30:2, 6, 10]. This expression we see frequently repeated by the prophets [Jer 24:7]. Moses also, in calling it “circumcision of heart,” searches the inmost emotions [Deut 10:16; 30:6]. No passage, however, better reveals the true character of repentance than Jer 4: “If you return, O Israel,” says the Lord, “return to me. ... Plow up your arable land and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and remove the foreskin of your hearts.” See how he declares that they will achieve nothing in taking up the pursuit of righteousness unless wickedness be first of all cast out from their inmost heart.³ And to move them thoroughly he warns them that it is with God that they have to deal, with whom shifts⁴ avail nothing, for He hates a double heart [Jas 1:8]. Isaiah for this reason satirizes the gauche⁵ efforts of hypocrites who were actively striving after outward repentance in ceremonies while they made no effort to undo the burden of injustice with which they bound the poor [Isa 58:6]. There he also beautifully shows in what duties unfeigned repentance properly consists.⁶

7. Repentance as induced by the fear of God

Calvin now addresses point [2] of his definition, the place of (godly) fear. We remember from previous lessons that Calvin divides fear into two categories. Ungodly, fleshly fear of God, a manifestation of unbelief, drives a person away from trust in God, whereas godly fear causes a person to flee what God hates, and to flee to God, who is always ready to forgive the repentant.

The second point was our statement that repentance proceeds from an earnest fear of God. For, before the mind of the sinner inclines to repentance, it must be aroused by thinking upon divine judgment. When this thought is deeply and thoroughly fixed in mind – that God will someday mount his judgment seat to demand a reckoning of all words and deeds – it will not permit the miserable man to rest nor to breathe freely even for a moment without stirring him continually to reflect upon another mode of life whereby he may be able to stand firm in that judgment.

³ We need to remember that Calvin is not a “perfectionist.” He means that the dominion of sin is broken in the innermost part of the man, though the sin still haunts him.

⁴ A “shift,” in this spiritual context, is an outward change in behavior or policy which is supposed to look better, but does not impress God, because it is not based in a genuine inward spiritual change.

⁵ “Gauche” is a French word which, in high language means “left,” as in the Left Bank of the River Seine; or left-handed; or clumsy. Colloquially, in English, it means “lacking social experience or grace; not tactful; crude; inept, clumsy, maladroit, coarse, gross, uncouth.”

⁶ Any reformation of character, or even social policy, can be merely outward. What God is looking for is the inward transformation, which is rewarded by him, and is not always seen or appreciated by the world.

The way to understand this passage is to notice the use of the word sinner – which, to Calvin, in this context, means a person who is not repentant. Such a person is brought to repentance through understanding the implications of divine judgment, and how it will go with him, if his mode of life is not changed. This does not mean that as believers we have no need of this fear ourselves. Calvin has spent much time, as we saw in the lessons on the Atonement, that we really do need to clearly understand what would have become of us in the judgment, had we not come to faith in Christ.

For this reason, Scripture often mentions judgment when it urges to repentance, as in the prophecy of Jeremiah: “Lest perchance my wrath go forth like fire ..., and there be no one to quench it, because of the evil of your doings” [Jer 4:4]. In Paul’s sermon to the Athenians: “Although God has hitherto overlooked the times of this ignorance, he now calls upon all men everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in equity” [Acts 17:30-31]. ...

In showing how the judgments and punishments of God described in Scripture serve to call some to repentance, Calvin defends this severity, saying,

For if we were not sharply pricked, the slothfulness of our flesh could not be corrected. Indeed, these prickings would not have sufficed against its dullness and blockishness had God not penetrated more deeply in unsheathing his rods. There is, besides, an obstinacy that must be beaten down as if with hammers. Therefore, the depravity of our nature compels God to use severity in threatening us. For it would be vain for him gently to allure those who are asleep.

And, Calvin goes on to say, the call is not just to fear punishment, but also to hate sin. And, more than that, most of all to worship God as God, and to accept his Lordship.

8. Mortification and vivification as component parts of repentance

Calvin now goes on to part [3] of his original 3-part definition of repentance.

The prophets express it clearly ... when they say: “Cease to do evil, and do good” [Ps 36:8, 3, 27]. Likewise, “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek judgment; help the oppressed” [Isa 1:16, 17]. For when they recall man from evil, they demand the destruction of the whole flesh, which is full of evil and of perversity. It is a very hard and difficult thing to put off ourselves and to depart from our inborn disposition. Nor can we think of the flesh as completely destroyed unless we have wiped out whatever we have from ourselves.⁷ But since all emotions of the flesh are hostility against God [Rom 8:7], the first step toward obeying his law is to deny our own nature. Afterward, they [the prophets] designate the renewal by the fruits that follow from it – namely, righteousness, judgment, and mercy. It would not be enough duly to discharge such duties unless the mind itself and the heart first put on the inclination to righteousness, judgment and mercy. That comes to pass when the Spirit of God so imbues our souls, steeped in his holiness, with both new thoughts and feelings, that they can be rightly considered new. Surely, as we are

⁷ Because, by inheritance of Adam, we are totally depraved.

naturally turned away from God, unless self-denial precedes, we shall never approach that which is right.

What Calvin is getting at here is not that Christians do not sin, but that repentance involves a true, hidden inner revolution of heart away from sin and toward God. This revolution is brought about by the Spirit giving his holiness, and it purifies the inmost heart and soul, making the wellsprings of behavior fundamentally oriented toward righteousness – even though our sins continue to beset us daily.

Therefore, we are very often enjoined to put off the old man, to renounce the world and the flesh, to bid our evil desires farewell, to be renewed in the spirit of our mind [Eph 4:22-23]. Indeed, the very word “mortification” warns us how difficult it is to forget our previous nature. For from “mortification” we infer that we are not conformed to the fear of God and do not learn the rudiments of piety, unless we are violently slain by the sword of the Spirit and brought to nought. As if God had declared that for us to be reckoned among his children our common nature must die!

It must be made clear from the language Calvin is using that this spiritual revolution, this “mortification” is beyond our capacity. Even though we do, and must, follow the lead of the Spirit striving to implement this drastic renewal, we have to depend utterly on the grace of God for its implementation.

This is Calvin’s next topic.

9. Rebirth in Christ!

Both things [mortification and vivification] happen to us by participation in Christ. For if we truly partake in his death, “our old man is crucified by his power, and the body of sin perishes” [Rom 6:6], that the corruption of original nature may no longer thrive. If we share in his resurrection, through it we are raised up into newness of life to correspond with the righteousness of God. Therefore, in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression. So the apostle teaches when he says: “Now we, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from glory to glory even as from the Spirit of the Lord” [2 Cor 3:18]. Likewise, another passage: “Be ye renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man which is after God created in righteousness and holiness of truth” [Eph 4:23]. “Putting on the new man ... who is being renewed into the knowledge and the image of him who created him” [Col 3:10]. Accordingly, we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God; from which we had fallen through Adam. In this way it pleases the Lord fully to restore whomsoever he adopts into the inheritance of life. And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death.

Romans 6:11 “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In Christ, triumph is ours!