

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

FROM CHAPTER IV, SECTIONS 12 AND 14: PRIVATE CONFESSION OF SIN

Introduction

There are several important sections in Chapter IV concerning the Scriptural teaching on the confession of sins. Calvin enumerates many circumstances in which confession of sin is to be used, and suggests appropriate Scriptural process for various types of individual and corporate situations.¹ However, the only topic in Chapter IV that will be covered in class is a subject that might seem unusual for us "evangelicals:" Calvin's strong emphasis on the value of private confession of sins to the pastor.

Therefore, we are temporarily interrupting our investigation of Chapter III of Book Three of the Institutes (Repentance), in order to have Pastor Cassidy come and speak to us on this topic. The following quotations from the Institutes will help set the stage.

12. Private confession in the cure of souls.

Calvin: For, while the duty of mutual admonition and rebuke is entrusted to all Christians, it is especially enjoined upon ministers. Thus, although all of us ought to console one another and confirm one another in assurance of divine mercy, we see that the ministers themselves have been ordained witnesses and sponsors of it to assure our consciences of forgiveness of sins, to the extent that they are said to forgive sins and to loose souls. When you hear that this is attributed to them, recognize that it is for your benefit.

Therefore, let every believer remember that, if he be privately troubled and afflicted with a sense of sins, so that without outside help he is unable to free himself from them, it is a part of his duty not to neglect what the Lord has offered to him by way of remedy. Namely, that, for his relief, he should use private confession to his own pastor; and for his solace, he should beg the private help of him whose duty it is, both publicly and privately, to comfort the people of God by the gospel teaching.

But he should always observe this rule: that where God prescribes nothing definite, consciences be not bound with a definite yoke. Hence, it follows that confession of this sort ought to be free so as not to be required of all, but to be commended only to those who know that they have need of it. Then, that those who use it according to their need neither be forced by any rule nor be induced by any trick to recount all their sins. But let them do this [private confession] so far as they consider it expedient, that they may receive the perfect fruit of consolation. Faithful pastors ought not only to leave this freedom [in the use of private confession] to the churches but also to protect it and stoutly defend it if they want to avoid tyranny in their ministry and superstition in the people.

The "tyranny" spoken against is the reintroduction of the abuses of the Roman confessional, in particular, the requirement to confess all sins. The "superstition" is the corresponding attitude of

¹ Calvin probably thinks through this so thoroughly because he is a graduate of the best law schools in his day.

spiritual bondage among the people, who think that their sins are not forgiven unless they are confessed to the pastor. Calvin wishes to maintain our freedom to use the pastor's instruction and consolation when we need it.

14. Nature and value of the power of the keys.²

Calvin: ... And private absolution is of no less efficacy or benefit, when it is sought by those who need to remove their weakness by a singular remedy. For it often happens that one who hears general promises that are intended for the whole congregation of believers remains nonetheless in some doubt, and as if he had not yet attained forgiveness, still has a troubled mind. Likewise, if he lays open his heart's secret to his pastor, and from his pastor hears that message of the gospel specially directed to himself, "Your sins are forgiven, take heart," he will be reassured in mind and be set free from the anxiety that formerly tormented him.

But when it is a question of the keys, we must always beware lest we dream up some power separate from the preaching of the gospel. I shall explain this matter again more fully in another place, where I shall deal with the government of the church. There we shall see that any right of binding or loosing which Christ conferred upon his church is bound to the Word. This is especially true in the ministry of the keys, whose entire power rests in the fact that, through those whom the Lord had ordained, the grace of the gospel is publicly and privately sealed in the hearts of the believers. This can come about only through preaching.

Calvin must be referring to the preaching of the gospel even in the context of private confession. His emphasis overall, then, is that private confession is for comfort, not for bondage.

A Caution about Private Confession:

The following cautions seem appropriate to me:

Discretion should always be used when certain sins, or the details of them, are confessed to another person. Concerning private confession to one's pastor, one first needs to be confident that the pastor knows and adheres to historic principles of pastoral confidentiality. Also, there are special provisions and immunities in the law of the state protecting this "privileged communication." There are also limits to those immunities. This needs to be understood when confessing sins with significant social or legal implications.

In the latter case, you ought to have your pastor explain to you the boundaries and limits of what he believes he ought to hear from you before you go ahead.

Note: Pastor Cassidy's comments and answers to class questions should be heard on the audio recording of this class.

² The power of the "keys" is the authority to "bind and loose" in the church, an authority which is given to church leadership, within the confines of the teaching of Scripture.