

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 3

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Sections</u>	<u>Class</u>
Repentance, the fruit of faith	7-9	Feb 17
Remaining Points of Interest	11,15,19	"

The notes for sections 7-9 of Chapter III were included in the notes for the previous class on repentance (class 17). However, we ran out of time in that class presentation. Therefore, that material is repeated here, and is clarified and expanded.

Review: Basic Principle: Repentance is a consequence of faith in the gospel

Calvin: Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith.

Review: 5. Definition of Repentance

Calvin's definition of repentance:

The meaning 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.

Review: 6. Repentance as turning to God

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

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.

This transformation, which must occur, is completely impossible for us in our own power, but it is truly and actually produced by the Holy Spirit through our union with Christ by faith, with the result that we intelligently cooperate (or concur) with the work of the Spirit in us.

7. Repentance as induced by the fear of God

Calvin now addresses point [2] of his definition, the earnest fear of God. 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.

Calvin: 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 aroused¹ 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. 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]. ...

The way to understand this passage is to notice that Calvin is speaking of sinners who have not yet inclined to repentance. Such a person may be 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. For accuracy’s sake notice that the state of mind – in great turmoil – is not exactly called repentance by Calvin. He has already complained in previous sections that some people mistakenly call this state of mind repentance. Calvin does not believe that this is repentance, but that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it may lead to repentance. True repentance is the change of life that takes place under the ministry of the Holy Spirit after a man comes to faith. I think the whole point of the passage, therefore, is that understanding what we were liable to, had we not repented, is crucial to maintaining the Scriptural quality of both our faith and our repentance. We remember that Calvin has spent much time, as we saw in the lessons on the Atonement, that even as believers we really do need to clearly understand what would have become of us in the judgment, had we not come to faith in Christ. This understanding is of continuing importance throughout the Christian life.

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 most of all to worship God as God, and to accept his Lordship. Again, it has to be said that this arousal to the point of true repentance is impossible in our own power. But, the Spirit having begun the work in us, we begin to consciously concur in our hearts and minds.

¹ Calvin will later describe these people as “asleep.”

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.² 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.³ 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 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, a revolution which has a true view of the divine judgment that awaits sinners. 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!

Therefore, we must have ...

9. Rebirth in Christ!

Calvin: 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.⁴ If we share in his re-

² Because, by inheritance of Adam, we are totally depraved.

³ This is not a Buddhist-like denial of personality or dissociation from the joys and tribulations of real life. It is, rather, the reversal of the attitude inherited from Adam, where all things were oriented away from God – sometimes blatantly, most often, subtly.

⁴ The idea here is that the dominating power of sin, by which our minds were closed off from God, is broken by our incorporation into Christ. The presence of sin, however, is not eliminated in this life.

surrection, 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,⁵ whose sole end is to re-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].⁶ 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].⁷ 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." Therefore, in Christ, triumph is ours!

Points of Interest in the Remainder of Chapter III

11. In believers sin has lost its dominion; but it still dwells in them.

Calvin: God is said to purge his church of all sin, in that through baptism he promises that grace of deliverance, and fulfills it in his elect [Eph 5:26-27]. This statement we refer to the guilt of sin, rather than to the very substance of sin. God truly carries this out by regenerating his own people, so that the sway of sin is abolished in them. ... But, sin ceases only to reign; it does not also cease to dwell in them. ... And, we, indeed, admit that these traces are not imputed, as if they did not exist; but at the same time we contend that this comes to pass through the mercy of God, so that the saints – otherwise deservedly sinners and guilty before God – are freed from this guilt.

This latter comment also makes it clear that Calvin sees that the non-imputation of sin is vital at the final judgment. None of the works upon which we are judged will be any cleaner than they are today – and they are only "clean" today because of the free imputation of the righteousness of Christ to his people, through faith alone.

15. On zealous repentance.

After giving a fairly long section on the zeal with which we ought to practice repentance, and recognizing, too, that this can go too far, Calvin concludes by quoting St. Bernard: "Sorrow for sins

⁵ Again, the word "regeneration," as used at this point in Calvin, includes not only the spiritual new birth when we are converted to Christ, but the life of repentance (sanctification) that follows.

⁶ This text refers to our passivity in this spiritual transformation.

⁷ The latter two Scripture texts refer to our intelligent concurrence in the Spirit's work.

is necessary if it be not unremitting. I beg you to turn your steps back sometimes from troubled and anxious remembering of your ways, and to go forth to the tableland of serene remembrance of God's benefits. Let us mingle honey with wormwood that its wholesome bitterness may bring health when it is drunk tempered with sweetness. If you take thought upon yourselves in your humility, take thought likewise upon the Lord in his goodness."

19. The relationship of repentance and forgiveness.

Calvin: Repentance is preached in the name of Christ when, through the teaching of the gospel, men hear that all their thoughts, all their inclinations, all their efforts, are corrupt and vicious. Accordingly, they must be reborn if they would enter the Kingdom of heaven.

Forgiveness of sins is preached when men are taught that for them Christ became redemption, righteousness, salvation, and life, by whose name they are freely accounted righteous and innocent in God's sight.

Since both kinds of grace are received by faith, as I have elsewhere proved, still, because the proper object of faith is God's goodness, by which sins are forgiven, it was expedient that it [faith] should be carefully distinguished from repentance.

The point of Calvin's teaching about distinguishing faith from repentance is this: We need to understand that our progress in spirituality, seen as the fruit of the Spirit, "love, joy, peace, patience, ...," comes to us the way the Spirit comes, through the hearing of faith, and not by the works of the Law. [Gal 3:2]. Our sincere repentance bears fruit, growing through faith in the gospel and the gift of the Spirit, as fruit grows on a good tree. We persevere in the Christian walk, through all tribulations, just as Christ did in his, "Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." So, the certain joy set before us, the certain assurance of salvation, is the foundation of our repentance – and not the other way around. We do not repent better, by not knowing where we are headed.