

WCF 15: OF REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

Faith and repentance are the two most important responses that a believer must have to the work of salvation. Whether faith comes first or repentance comes first is a moot question. By the way in which the framers of our Confession put faith before repentance, it may appear that they believe that faith must come first. So suggest that until the sinner has a sight of the loveliness Christ, he shall not want to turn away from sin. However, others hold that a form of legal repentance must precede faith in that a person first turn away from sin and seek after the Lord for whatever reasons including self-preservation, if they are to experience regeneration and therefore faith and repentance unto life. Those who hold to the second opinion must be careful not to fall into the errors of Arminianism and suggest that somehow the sinner's seeking will contribute to their salvation. Those who insist on the first must be careful not to fall into the errors of antinomianism.

But whatever position is held, we must be careful not to fall into the error of modern parachurch Christianity that suggests that repentance and faith are concluded with a one-time act of 'praying to receive Christ.' This error has led to a most crass form of easy-believism as well as superstition in which is thought that all that is require for salvation is a sinner's prayer. No, no; faith and repentance are responses of conversion that every child of God, including the covenant child, must exercise throughout his life. It involves a conscious turning away from worldly ways and thinking, to follow after Christ.

On the Nature of Repentance

15.1 Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace,¹ the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.²

¹Zech 12:10; Acts 11:18; ²Lk 24:47; Mk 1:15; Acts 20:21.

- **Meaning of Repentance.** The Greek words translated 'repentance' (*metavnoia, metanoia*) and 'repent' (*metanoeww, metanoeo*) literally mean 'change of mind' or 'to change one's mind.' They are used in the New Testament particularly to refer to a change of mind concerning sin and so a turning away from sin. Thus the Lord commanded the people: "repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mk 1:15). *WSC 87* teaches us that "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience."

Our Confession calls it an "evangelical grace" or "saving grace" (*WSC 87*) because firstly, it is entirely gratuitous. It is a free gift of God: "When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18; cf. Jer 31:18–19). Secondly, it is inseparably connected with our enjoyment of eternal life. Thus ...

- It is to be distinguished from Legal Repentance. Paul was comparing evangelical repentance with legal repentance when he said: "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Cor 7:10). Legal repentance flows from a dread of God's wrath and the temporal consequence of sin such as a lost of wealth, status and reputation. After Judas Iscariot had betrayed the Lord, he regretted his action. We are told he "repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders" (Mt 27:3). His repentance was however not an evangelical repentance but of a legal sort. He was grieved for the consequence of his action, and perhaps even feared the punishment that would be due him for what he did. But he committed suicide as a graceless man.

Evangelical repentance, on the other hand, flows from hatred of one's sin arising out of both reverence and love for God as well as a sense of God's mercy in Christ. Evangelical or true repentance in other words is never separated from saving faith though it is to be distinguished from it.

- **The Necessity and Duty of Preaching Repentance.** The Antinomians insist that repentance ought not to be preached by any minister of the gospel as they believe that it leads us away from Christ, and proves hurtful and dangerous. However, this notion contradicts the Lord's own ministry, for He called for repentance and faith in the gospel (Mk 1:15). And He explained to His disciples "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47). Thus Paul testified that he spent his time in Ephesus "Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Act 20:21).

15.2 *By it a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God,¹ purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.²*

¹Ezk 18:30–31; 36:31; Isa 30:22; Ps 51:4; Jer 31:18–19; Joel 2:12–13; Amos 5:15; Ps 119:128; 2 Cor 7:11; ²Ps 119:6, 59, 106; Lk 1:6; 2 Kgs 23:25.

This beautiful paragraph on the doctrine of repentance, which should really be read together with the previous paragraph teaches us 3 important aspects of Repentance.

1. The Subject of Repentance: “a sinner.” The Lord said: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:32). This has a twofold significance. Firstly, since “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), repentance is universally necessary. Thus we read that God “now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30). Secondly, although the call is issued generally, and all men may ac-knowledge themselves to be sinners in general terms, only those who are quickened will have a clear sight and sense of their sins and thus regard themselves as sinners deserving damnation. Therefore the call to repent will only be obeyed by the elect.
2. Grounds of Evangelical Repentance:
 - a. It springs from a clear sight and sense of the filthiness and odiousness of one’s sins and sinfulness. We note that only a regenerate person will have such an apprehension of guilt and grief. This apprehension comes from the Holy Spirit, whose work is to convince of sin: “And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (Jn 16:8). He does so by means of the Law: “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20b). Thus, when the Law is preached, the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind and quickens the conscience to see the purity and the demands of the Law and to convince the sinner of his inability to meet the Law’s demands. And so he sees sin to be “exceeding sinful,” senses its danger and sees that it is contrary to the holy nature and righteous Law of God, and is therefore odious and abominable in the sight of God.
 - b. Flows from an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ to such as are penitent. Immediately as the (regenerate) sinner is given an apprehension the odiousness of sin and of the grave danger that his soul is in, he is given an apprehension that God is in Christ truly merciful to all such as are genuinely penitent. This comes through a careful preaching of the gospel which includes references to the fact that God is ever ready to forgive any sinner who would come to Him in genuine repentance. It is at this point that repentance logically becomes faith as the sinner embraces Christ for His forgiveness.

The Puritans used to call the preaching that is adapted to bring about the first aspect of repentance: *Law Works* or *Law Preaching*. This kind of preaching lays a heavy burden of the Law on the back of the sinner. The unregenerate are either hardened or may be brought to some form of legal repentance. The regenerate, on the other hand, will (irresistibly) be brought to evangelical repentance. The preaching that is adapted to the second aspect of repentance was frequently called: *Grace Works* or *Gospel Preaching*. Under such preaching, the mercy of God and the beauty of Christ are fervently emphasised.

The Gospel Preaching of the Puritans and Westminster divines must be carefully distinguished from the modern day ‘Gospel’ Preaching. The modern ‘Gospel Preaching’ emphasises the love of God for the world: “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for you.” This kind of preaching stirs up romantic feelings of the hearers with promises of happy life in heaven. The Puritans on the other hand emphasised the justice of God in condemning sin and sinners, and the mercy of God to forgive and receive those who are truly penitent. Thus, for the Puritans, the preaching of the Law must precede the preaching of the Gospel. Thus in the Shorter Catechism, for example, we find that the questions pertaining to repentance and faith comes after the exposition of the Law. This approach of preaching is patterned after the arrangement of the Law (Old Testament emphasises on the Law) and the Gospel (New Testament emphasises on Grace) in the Bible. It is also consistent with the way in which sinners are called to salvation in the Scriptures.

The prophet Ezekiel thus preached: “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions,

whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” (Ezk 18:30–31). Notice that the ‘invitation’ to life is not without a strong warning of the consequence of sin. Isaiah preached in the same way: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa 55:7). The modern evangelist would hardly call his unbelieving hearers wicked.

The preaching of the mercy and love of God must not be divorced from the doctrine of His holiness and justice. Thus the Lord Himself declares about Himself: “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation” (Ex 34:6–7).

3. Essence of Evangelical Repentance.

- a. Includes grief, or deep contrition and godly sorrow for sin. False sorrow may be easily mistaken for genuine godly sorrow. But the key difference is that false sorrow is as regards temporal personal losses and pains, whereas godly sorrow has to do with the fact of the grief that we have rebelled against God. Thus David, though he had sinned against Bathsheba, prayed to the Lord: “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest” (Ps 51:4)
- b. Includes a hatred for sin. While legal repentance may involve a hatred for the consequence of sin, true repentance involves a hatred for sin itself as something hateful and abominable to God. This hatred should not extend to some particular sin in our lives but to all sin and pollution of sin in ourselves and in others: “Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations” (Ezk 36:31). “Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). “Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way” (Ps 119:128). “Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law” (Ps 119:136).
- c. Includes a turning from sin unto God with a sincere purpose, and endeavour to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments. The child of God is not only converted from the love of sin, but the practice of sin. In place of such practice, they now do “works meet for repentance” (Acts 26:20), i.e., they resolve to walk after God in new obedience. This sounds like saving faith and does lead to saving faith, but note that faith is about “resting upon Christ alone for [salvation]” whereas the positive aspect of repentance is about obedience to Christ.

On the Necessity and Efficacy of Repentance

15.3 Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof,¹ which is the act of God’s free grace in Christ;² yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.³

¹Ezk 36:31–32; 16:61–63; ²Hos 14:2, 4; Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7; ³Lk 13:3, 5; Acts 17:30–31.

- While the Protestant church emphasises ‘repentance,’ the Roman Catholic church emphasises ‘penance.’ By this designation, the Romanist teaches that certain acts or penances performed by an offender constitute compensation or satisfaction for his transgressions (See *Catechism of the [Roman] Catholic Church*, § 1459). This doctrine totally contradicts Scriptures which not only teach us that “all our righteousness are as filthy rags” (Isa 64:6), but that our pardon for sin is entirely by the grace of God alone (Rom 3:22–28).
- However, it must be noted that true repentance and pardon are inseparably connected. No one can expect pardon who is not repentant. Thus the Lord admonished His disciples: “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Lk 13:3).

15.4 As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation;¹ so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.²

¹Rom 6:23; 5:12; Mt 12:36; ²Isa 55:7; Rom 8:1; Isa 1:16, 18.

- This section is again written in opposition to Rome which teaches that there are mortal sins deserving death, but there are venial sins (See *C/RJCC*, § 1863), which are so minor, they can be expiated by some temporary punishment in Purgatory.
- While we admit that there are varying degrees of severity of sinfulness so that some sins are more heinous in the sight of God than others (Lk 12:47; *WSC* 83), we must insist that every sin deserves eternal punishment. Paul teaches us that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). He does not distinguish the degree of sin. In fact, the Lord Himself teaches us that we shall be judged for every idle word that we utter (Mt 12:36).
- Nevertheless, even the greatest sin can be pardoned if there is genuine repentance. David sinned so grievously when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, yet he received pardon when he repented. Peter denied the Lord three times, and yet the Lord forgave him and restored him.

15.5 Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man’s duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins particularly.¹

¹*Ps 19:13; Lk 19:8; 1 Tim 1:13, 15.*

Although the corruption of nature has made it impossible for man to know all his sins, it is still the duty of man to strictly and honestly examine his heart so as to discover his particular sins, by which God is offended and dishonoured. David understood the need to confess his sins particularly and thus we see that in his confession he referred to the particular evil he has committed: “For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest” (Ps 51:3–4). David also recognised that though he may not have particular awareness of all his sin, yet he is responsible for them: “Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults” (Ps 19:12). Thus he also prays: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23–24).

On the Duty of Repentance

15.6 As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof;¹ upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy;² so he that scandalizeth his brother, or the Church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended;³ who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.⁴

¹*Ps 51:4–5, 7, 9, 14; Ps 32:5–6; ²Prov 28:13; 1 Jn 1:9; ³Jas 5:16; Lk 17:3–4; Josh 7:19; Ps 51; ⁴2 Cor 2:8.*

- Although repentance is an inward act, if it is genuine, it will manifest itself in outward expressions. This expression does not include confession to priest and acts of penance. Only God can forgive (Mt 9:2–6). But it does include:
 - a. Private confession to God: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9; cf. Ps 51:4–7).
 - b. Confession to the parties offended or injured. This is to be done privately if the offence is committed privately. But if the offence is committed publicly, then the confession must be made publicly. Though much neglected today, this aspect of repentance is scriptural: “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas 5:16). “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (Lk 17:3–4).
- Interestingly, the Confession also insists that those who received apologies or confessions must forgive. This is again scriptural. When Peter asked the Lord how many times he should forgive his brother who sin against him, He replied: “Until seventy times seven” (Mt 18:21–22). The immediate context (vv. 15–17) instructs us that Christ is referring to the forgiveness of one who comes confessing his fault and indicating his repentance. When this happens, we are always to take the confession at face value and forgive. Note (of course) that this forgiveness does not absolve the person of guilt. Only God can thus forgive. Our forgiveness only says: “I accept your apology. I forgive you. I will not pursue the matter, it

will not hinder our relationship with each other. I undertake not to gossip about what wrong you did to me.”

