

May 25, 2009

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

After Calvin sets forth his understanding of faith in Book III, chapter two, he turns to repentance in Book III, chapter three. Note carefully this order of events. Calvin does not say that repentance is necessary before faith. Quite the opposite, he says that repentance is possible only afterwards and as a consequence of faith. This stands against the teaching of the medieval church which urged people to turn toward God and then to aspire to faith. This stands against the revivalism of America which urges people to repent and then to be saved.

Again, if I were good enough to repent, to turn toward God, and to seek God's grace, I would not need God's grace. If I knew enough to repent, to turn toward God, and to seek faith, I would not need faith. Thus those proposals do not address the depths of the human predicament. But Calvin understood that it was only by the grace of God that we could be given the gift of faith and only on the basis of that faith that we could begin to repent and turn toward God, the giver of all good gifts.

Another way of saying this is that repentance is not a prerequisite for justification. It is, instead, the content and substance of sanctification. And it, too, is the work of God in us, not merely our own work. Repentance is not done once and for all before the beginning of Christian life. It is done continuously as the very living of the Christian life. Thus while some traditions have lifted up justification or conversion as the high point of Christian life, Reformed Christians and Calvinist Presbyterians have understood it to be the beginning of a life time of increasing obedience. Calvin summarizes this by writing:

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. . . . Accordingly, we are restored by this regeneration through the benefit of Christ into the righteousness of God. . . . 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. (III.3.9)

Grace and Peace,

Jim

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