

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

I have been continuing to think about Calvin's extended treatment (*Institutes*, Book III, chapters 4–5) of the medieval church's promotion of the idea that we humans can somehow make satisfaction to God for our sins. Calvin rejected this vehemently, of course, as an affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Either Christ is our savior or not. Either Christ makes complete satisfaction for our sins or not. If either we or even the apostles and martyrs in our place contribute satisfaction for our sins to God, then Christ is reduced to being little if any better than the rest of us.

The sufficiency and exclusivity of the gospel of Jesus Christ has other implications. We humans do not and cannot make satisfaction to God for our own or each other's sins; if we were good enough to do that, we wouldn't need to! Therefore, the whole idea of purgatory—a place beyond this world where withdrawals are made from the treasury of merit of the apostles and saints and applied to “purge” the remaining sin from deceased sinners [i.e., again, as if the work of Christ were inadequate, insufficient, and incomplete!]*—collapses. Along with it, the whole practice of praying for the dead is abolished: there is no purgatory within which deceased souls could received any benefit, those in heaven need none, and those in hell are beyond help. And, of course, the whole practice of the church selling indulgences, by which for a fee people could purchase satisfaction for themselves or others, even the deceased, is eradicated.*

Calvin's project of reforming the worship of the church to accord with the Word of God shines forth clearly as he applies these insights to eliminate abuses associated with funerals.

Moreover, the larger system of penitence, of which our making satisfaction for our sins was part and parcel, is challenged and destroyed. Of course Calvin believed in repentance. He understood repentance to be based upon faith, to be a lifetime of regeneration, to be the very work of God within us, and to be an expression of gratitude for the work of God for us. And precisely for that reason, the whole notion that we could incrementally earn our way back into God's good graces by little acts of supposed satisfaction is vigorously and decisively rejected.

Indeed, they try to extricate themselves, but "the water," as the proverb goes, "clings to them." They fashion a distinction between penalty and guilt. They admit that guilt is remitted by God's mercy, but after guilt has been remitted there remains the penalty that God's justice demands to be paid. Therefore, they hold that satisfactions properly are concerned with the remission of the penalty.

Good God, what flitting levity is this! They admit that forgiveness of guilt is freely available, yet repeatedly teach men to deserve it through prayers and tears, and all sorts of other preparations. And yet all that we are taught in Scripture concerning forgiveness of sins directly opposes this distinction. But even though I believe I have already more than fully confirmed this, I shall add certain other testimonies by which these wriggling snakes may be so held fast that after this they will be unable to coil up even the tip of their tail. *This is the new covenant that God in Christ has made with us, that he will remember our sins no more.* What he meant by these words we learn from another prophet, where the Lord says: "If a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, . . . I will not remember

his righteous deeds"; "if a wicked man turns away from his impiety, I will not remember all his sins." His statement that he will not remember their righteous acts means virtually this: he will not keep an account of them to reward them. The statement that he will not remember their sins therefore means that he will not demand the penalty for them. The same thing is said elsewhere: "Cast . . . behind my back"; "swept away like a cloud"; "cast . . . into the depths of the sea"; "not to reckon it to his account and to keep it hidden." By such expressions the Holy Spirit clearly would have explained his meaning to us, if we had listened to them attentively. Surely, if God punishes sins, he charges them to our account; if he takes vengeance, he remembers them; if he calls to judgment, he does not hide them; if he weighs them, he has not cast them behind his back; if he scrutinizes them, he has not blotted them out like a cloud; if he airs them, he has not cast them into the depths of the sea. And Augustine explains it in clear words as follows: "If God has covered sins, he has willed not to look upon them; if he has willed not to pay attention to them, he has willed not to punish them; he has willed not to recognize them, and he has preferred to overlook them. Why, then, does he say, 'Sins are covered'? That they may not be seen. Why was it that God saw sins, except to punish them?"

But let us hear from another passage of the prophet by what laws the Lord forgives sins: "Though your sins," he says, "are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool." In Jeremiah we read as follows: "In that day iniquity shall be sought in Jacob, and it shall not be found; sin in Judah, and there shall be none; for I shall be propitiated by those whom I leave as a remnant." Would you like briefly to understand what these words mean? Ponder what, on the other hand, he means by these expressions: the Lord "gathers up my iniquities in a bag"; "binds them up and stores them in a bundle"; "with a pen of iron engraves them upon a diamond." Now if these passages mean that vengeance shall be repaid—which is beyond doubt—we also must not doubt that by contrary statements the Lord affirms that he remits all penalty of vengeance. Here I must adjure my readers not to heed my glosses, but only to yield some place to the Word of God. (III.4.29, emphasis added)

Surely all Protestant Christians concur with his elevation of the clear sufficiency of the gospel of Jesus Christ and therefore with his rejection of indulgences, prayers for the dead, purgatory, human satisfaction for sin, and penitence.

My question is—and I have saved it for those of you who have read this far—how in the world have Protestant and Reformed churches erred so badly as to continue to include in their calendars and worship practices the liturgical seasons of penitence, Advent and Lent?! Why do we still act as if we can somehow prepare for, earn, and merit the grace of God? Why do we want thus to teach people that the work of Christ is insufficient and inadequate, so that we have to add our own puny works to it? Can we not see with Calvin that such does not comfort the wounded conscience but instead terrifies it?

As we continue to study Reformed theology, let us also advance in applying it to the faith and life of the church of Jesus Christ, reforming our worship of God to conform with the gospel.

Grace and Peace,

Jim

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