

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 3 – Part 1

OUR REGENERATION BY FAITH; REPENTANCE

In this chapter Calvin offers us a thorough examination of repentance; what it means, how it works, and where it comes from being among the topics. You will find a definition of repentance about midway through this article.

Summary: Calvin begins by stating that repentance is a byproduct of faith. *“Now both repentance and forgiveness of sins - that is, newness of life...are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith...now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is born of faith”* (pg. 592-3). This belief is one which sets Calvin apart from most Baptist traditions. In those traditions, a person repents (turns to God) and only then does God create faith. Calvin rejects this view because he believes that a person *“cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God”* (pg. 594). In other words, it is God who loves us, calls us, gives us faith and only then causes us to turn to God (repentance). Otherwise, Calvin believes that our repentance would only be temporary because it does not have God as its foundation.

Repentance, for Calvin, consists of two parts, mortification and vivification. Mortification is what happens when we realize that many of our choices are sinful; that they violate God’s desires for our lives. This realization causes us to become *“displeased”* with ourselves and then to desire to become new people (pg. 595). Vivification on the other hand occurs when a person *“...looks to the goodness of God - to his mercy, grace, salvation which is through Christ (and then) ...raises himself up, takes heart, recovers courage, and as it were, returns from death to life”* (pg. 595). Vivification then, is both the process of becoming a new person and the experiencing of the joy one feels in that transformational process.

Next, Calvin offers a definition of repentance. He explains that the Hebrew word for repentance can mean *“conversion”* or *“return”* (pg. 597). The Greek word for repentance means *“a change of mind or intention”* (pg. 597). Calvin puts these concepts together such that repentance occurs when *“...departing from ourselves, we turn to God...”* and lead *“...a life that demonstrates and testifies in all actions a repentance of this sort”* (pg. 597-8). Repentance then is both a change of life orientation (away from self-centeredness and toward God) and a change of actions (doing those things that please God rather than those things that please only ourselves).

This definition can be expanded in three areas. First when Calvin speaks of turning to God he states that *“We require a transformation, not only in outward work, but in the soul itself”* (pg. 598). The inner transformation is required because it is only when our hearts have been made new/reoriented that we can truly connect with God and become new people. Second, repentance proceeds *“...from an earnest fear of God”* (pg. 599). Calvin was a firm believer that all persons will one day be judged by God. Therefore, human beings will want to orient their lives (repent) in such a way that the judgment of God will be in their favor. Third, Calvin reminds us that mortification is of the flesh and vivification is of the Spirit. The flesh Calvin refers to is not the body, but an attitude of self-centeredness; so mortification reminds us that our self-centeredness displeases God. The work of the Spirit *“...so imbues our souls, steeped in his holiness, with both new thoughts and feelings, that we can rightly be considered new”* (pg. 600). Vivification causes us to become renewed people through fully experiencing the love of God.

Reflections: Any of us who have played sports know when we have a good coach. We know we have a good coach when that coach is willing to point out our weaknesses and then help us work to correct them; all without kicking us off the team. This is what God does for us. God points out to us where we have left the road to life and then helps us get back on it.

Questions:

1. What is your understanding of repentance?
2. Have you ever had an experience of turning away from self and toward God; What was that like?
3. What role, if any, does the “fear of God” play in your spiritual life?