

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 3 – Part 2

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.

**Summary:** in the last article we learned that for Calvin, faith is the foundation of repentance, that repentance is turning from self-centeredness to God, that repentance requires an inner transformation and that repentance has two parts, mortification (we see that we need repentance) and vivification (we are transformed).

We pick up the discussion as Calvin explains that both mortification and vivification take place because of our *“participation in Christ”* (pg. 600). Calvin explains that because of our faith in Christ our old self has been crucified by Christ’s power and our self-centeredness begins to perish. In addition, because we share in Christ’s resurrection, we have been *“...raised up into the newness of life...”* (pg. 601). Thus repentance can also be referred to as regeneration *“...whose sole end is to restore in us the image God that has been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression”* (pg. 601). He reminds us however that this regeneration is not complete in an instant but continues through a slow and steady progression in which God renews *“...minds to true purity that they may practice repentance...throughout their lives”* (pg. 601). Calvin concludes this section with this wonderful statement. *“In order that believers might reach this goal (having the image of Christ shine in them), God assigns to them a race of repentance, which they are to run throughout their lives”* (pg. 601-2).

The reason for having a lifelong race of repentance is that even when believers repent and are changed more and more into the likeness of God in Christ, they still remain sinners (meaning we can never be perfect). Calvin puts it this way. *“Thus, then, are the children of God freed through regeneration from bondage to sin. Yet they do not obtain full possession of freedom so as to feel no more annoyance from their flesh, but there still remains in them a continuing occasion for struggle...”* (pg. 602). While this may seem a bit depressing, that we have to continually struggle to do what is right, Calvin reminds us that sin has lost its dominion within us so that progress is possible.

Within the church, both in Calvin’s time and our own, there have been and continue to be those who claim that perfection is possible; that if we simply allow the Spirit to guide us we will always do what is right. As noted above, Calvin doesn’t agree with this. He doesn’t agree with it because all around him he watches as Christians continue to do what is evil, even though he believes the Spirit to be in them. The Spirit, for Calvin, while it helps us to leave behind those sins that hold us back from following God, cannot keep us on the right path by itself (pg. 607). Instead, it is our task, working with the Spirit, to *“...watch with intent minds...”* for those things that will move us away from and not toward God (pg. 607). And along the way we are to continually examine ourselves to see how well we are following.

At this point Calvin walks a fine line. On the one hand he asserts that when we examine ourselves we will experience *“...shame, confusion, groaning, displeasure with self and other emotions that arise out of a lively recognition of sin”* (pg. 608). On the other hand, he warns his readers that they are to examine themselves with *“...restraint, lest sorrow engulf...”* them (pg. 609). In other words, we are to regularly examine our lives in order to see where we are falling short of God’s desires for us, and yet we are to always do so remembering that we are beloved of and chosen by God.

**Reflections:** In some ways God faces the same difficulties as parents. We want our children to makes good choices, and to correct them when they don’t. When we correct them, we want them to know the serious nature of their poor choices, but at the same time, we do not want crush their spirits so that they lose all hope of being better. This is what God does with us. God, because God loves us, wants us to see where we are failing, only so that we can correct our ways and return to the right way, to the way of life.

**Questions:**

1. In what ways have you struggled in trying to do what you believe God desires you to do?
2. Where have you seen the Spirit helping you in your life of faith?
3. What practices do you use to examine how well you are doing as a Jesus’ follower?