

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 4 – Part 1

DISCUSSION OF CONFESSION AND SATISFACTION

In this chapter Calvin offers us a thorough examination of confession; what it is and how it ought to work. What we need to note here is that Calvin is dealing with the Medieval and not the modern Roman Catholic Church. Even so, the discussion helps us understand confession more fully.

Summary: Calvin begins this chapter by noting how the Medieval Roman Church scholastics (official church scholars) looked at repentance. He states that repentance in their literature consists of “...*contrition of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction of works*” (pg. 623). While this appears to be a rather benign definition, Calvin reminds his readers that there are two serious drawbacks with this view. The first is that its focus is on outward actions and not inward transformation. “*They are wonderfully silent concerning the inward renewal of the mind, which bears with it true correction of life*” (pg. 623). In other words, confession becomes a ritual with no real power or intent to change a person’s inner orientation which then changes their outward actions.

The second problem with the scholastic view is that there is no guarantee of forgiveness. “*They make contrition the first step in obtaining pardon, and they require it to be due contrition, that is just and full. But at the same time they do not determine when a man can have assurance that he has in just measure carried out his contrition*” (pg. 625). For Calvin this is an even more serious concern than the first because followers of Jesus ought to be able to live with the full assurance that their sins are forgiven and that they are renewed people. “*Therefore when consciences have a long time wrestled with themselves...in long struggles, they still do not find a haven in which to rest*” (pg. 625). Instead of worrying about perfection in contrition, he writes, we are to “...*fix our eyes upon the Lord’s mercy alone*” (pg. 626). God forgives, Calvin argues, because of God’s mercy and not because of our actions.

The next issue Calvin takes up is to whom confession is to be made. In the Roman Church then and now, confession was and is to be made to a priest. Calvin argues that this is not Biblical. Instead the only “priest” to whom one ought to confess is Jesus Christ. “*All priestly offices have been transferred to Christ and fulfilled and completed in him*” (pg. 627). While priests and pastors have roles to play, forgiving sins is not one of them. Even so, there are times when confession should be made to another person, in corporate worship or to a minister.

In terms of confessing to another person, Calvin references the Book of James which reads, “*Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another*” (James 5:46), Calvin states that this allows us to “...*lay our infirmities on one another’s breasts, to receive among ourselves mutual counsel, mutual compassion, and mutual consolation. Then as we are made aware of our brother’s infirmities, let us pray to God for these*” (pg. 630). Confessing to one another then, while not gaining us forgiveness, allows us to be supported by those around us.

In terms of confessing communally, Calvin writes, “*Now this sort of confession ought to be ordinary in the church and be used extraordinarily in a special way, whenever it happens that the people are guilty of some transgression in common...you will agree with me that it would be a beneficial regulation if the Christian people were to practice humbling themselves through some public rite of confession*” (pg. 635). This is why we offer both a corporate prayer of confession each Sunday. We confess together because we are one family; one body of Christ.

Reflections: Many of us carry with us a host of sins past and present. We may have said or done something for which we know that we cannot be forgiven; that will carry with us forever. The gift of God is that we are to let go of those sins. We are to lay them down and leave them behind. We are to allow God to wipe them away and set us free; free to be God’s new and ever renewing people.

Questions:

1. What is your understanding of confession?
2. What sorts of things do you confess and why?
3. What sorts of things ought we confess as a community?