

THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF
FAITH
XV. OF REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

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I. AN EVANGELICAL GRACE

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

- Acts 11:18 – “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted *repentance that leads to life.*’”
- Repentance “is called *repentance unto life*, because it is inseparably connected with the enjoyment of eternal life, and to distinguish it from the sorrow of the world, which works death” (Shaw).

I. AN EVANGELICAL GRACE

- An “evangelical grace”
 - “It is styled a *grace*, because it is the free gift of God, and is wrought in the heart by the operations of his Spirit” (Shaw).
 - 2 Cor. 7:10 – “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.”
 - Zech. 12:10 – “I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him.”
 - Whereas legal and unsaving repentance is directed in fear towards God’s wrath, evangelical and saving repentance is directed in faith toward God’s mercy.
 - Unsaving repentance mourns for *punishment*; saving repentance mourns for *sin*.

I. AN EVANGELICAL GRACE

- Repentance is to be preached!
 - John the Baptist: “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin” (Mk. 1:4).
 - Jesus’ first preaching: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:15).
 - The result of a new heart and the outpoured Spirit: “Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations” (Eze. 36:31).
 - Contrary to the Antinomians, “who maintain that repentance ought not to be preached, . . . Alleging that it leads us away from Christ, and proves most hurtful” (Shaw).

II. TURNING FROM SIN

By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.

- Repentance has in mind the “holy nature” and “righteous law” of God.
 - Repentance views sin as “a dirty affair” because it is contrary to God’s nature and “a personal affair” that gives offense to God (van Dixhoorn).
 - Repentance hates sin as violating God’s righteous law so that he is proved right in judging us.
“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Ps. 51:4)

II. TURNING FROM SIN

- Repentance not only turns *from sin* but also *to Christ* and his grace.
 - “True repentance not only sorrows for sin but sees a Saviour.” (van Dixhoorn).

“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity” (Joel 2:12-13).

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).
 - “It is an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, by faith, that melts the heart into penitential sorrow for sin.” (Shaw).
 - The aim of such repentance is therefore a restored and renewed relationship with God – the opposite of Adam’s response to sin in the garden!

II. TURNING FROM SIN

- Grieving for sin, trusting in Christ's mercy, and longing for renewal with God, repentance “grieves for and hates sin,” purposing and endeavoring to walk in godliness.
 - True repentance is seen in its fruits
 - “they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance” (Acts 26:20).
 - “you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).
 - The true penitent will “particularly guard against those sins to which they were formerly most addicted and before whose influence they are most ready to fall.” (Shaw).
 - Thus conversion and repentance are spoken of synonymously in Scripture:
 - “that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Lk. 24:47).
 - “By these marks it may be seen that repentance unto life can only be exercised by a soul after, and in consequence of, its regeneration by the Holy Spirit. . . . Conversion is generally used to designate only the first actings of the new nature. . . ; while repentance is a daily experience of the Christian as long as the struggle with sin continues in his heart and life.” (A.A. Hodge).

III. NECESSITY OF REPENTANCE

Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

- We are not justified or forgiven *because* we have repented.
 - Contra Roman Catholicism, which makes penance a compensation for sin.
 - The discharge of a duty can never remit past offenses.
 - Our pardon rests in the finished work of Christ for our atonement, in accordance with God's promises in the gospel.
- Those who are justified and forgiven *must* repent.
 - Therefore, forgiveness and repentance are *inseparable*: “an impenitent sinner cannot be a pardoned sinner.” (Shaw).
 - Forgiveness is never sanction to sin!
 - “Repentance is the natural and instant sequence of the grace of regeneration. It also embraces an element of faith in Christ, . . . (i.e.) He that repents believes.” (Hodge).

IV - VI. BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF REPENTANCE

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.

As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so that he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.

IV - VI. BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF REPENTANCE

- Penitent believers are not to be tormented over their guilt from heinous sins.
 - Contra Rome's doctrine of mortal vs. venial sins.
 - Since "the blood of Jesus God's Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7), believers in Christ are to rest in his finished work.
- We must confess and repent of sin "particularly."
 - Repentance is more than admitting that we are not perfect! We must confess not only *sinfulness* but actual *sins* from which we repent.

"I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy" (1 Tim. 1:13).
- Christians therefore admit that we have been wrong and have done wrong – particularly.

IV - VI. BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF REPENTANCE

- Christians take practical steps to repent of sins – particularly.
 - Includes making redress for damage, as feasible.

“Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” (Lk. 19:8)
 - With this in mind, every Christian should have an active and particular program of sanctification and mortification (Col. 3:5-9).
- There are occasions when sin should be repented publicly.
 - Ordinarily and regularly, our sins should be confessed to God – generally and particularly.
 - There is no biblical precedent for regularly confessing sins to a priest or minister. It is God who gives mercy for sin.
 - In some instances, our sin has “scandalized” or particularly wounded another person. In these cases, repentance should be verbalized to that person/people.
 - Some sins are rendered scandalous by the office and responsibility of the offender, so that, for instance, pastors and elders should publicly repent of scandalous sins to the church. Fathers and mothers have a similar obligation to their family.

IV - VI. BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF REPENTANCE

- When sins have been confessed and repented, the sinner should be forgiven and reconciled.
 - The penitent excommunicant of Corinth: “so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:7-8).
 - How many times? “Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Mt. 18:21-22).
 - Will sometimes require care in assessing repentance, and involves the practical need to restore trust.
 - Fallen pastors? More complicated (1 Tim. 3:1-6).
- Forgiveness includes restoration to love and relationship
 - “We need to reaffirm our love to those who repent. And in doing so, we will be showing the same mercy to others that our Father in heaven has shown to us in Christ.” (van Dixhoorn).