

“Repentance”

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book III, 3.5-12, English updated and emphasis added.

In Acts 20:21, the apostle Paul mentions faith and repentance as two different things. He refers to his “testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What then? Can true repentance exist without faith? By no means. But although they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished. As there is no faith without hope, and yet faith and hope are different, so repentance and faith, though constantly linked together, are only to be united, not confounded.

I am not unaware that under the term repentance is comprehended the whole work of turning to God, of which not the least important part is faith; but in what sense this is done will be perfectly obvious, when its nature and power shall have been explained.

Repentance defined

The term ***repentance*** is derived from the Hebrew for **conversion**, or **turning again**; and in the Greek from **a change of mind and purpose**; nor is the thing meant inappropriate to both derivations, for it is substantially this, **that withdrawing from ourselves we turn to God, and laying aside the old, put on a new mind.**

Wherefore, it seems to me, that **repentance may be not inappropriately defined thus:** A real conversion of our life unto God, proceeding from sincere and serious fear of God; and consisting in the mortification of our flesh and the old man, and the quickening of the Spirit.

In this sense are to be understood all those addresses in which the prophets first, and the apostles afterwards, exhorted the people of their time to repentance. The great object for which they labored was, to fill them with confusion for their sins and dread of the divine judgment, that they might fall down and humble themselves before Him whom they had offended, and, with true repentance, retake themselves to the right path.

Accordingly, they use indiscriminately in the same sense, the expressions **turning**, or **returning to the Lord**; repenting, doing repentance. From which, also, the sacred history describes it as repentance towards God, when men who disregarded Him and wantoned in their lusts begin to obey His word, and are prepared to go wherever He may call them. And John the Baptist and Paul, under the expression, bringing forth fruits fitting for repentance, described a course of life exhibiting and bearing testimony, in all its actions, to such a repentance.

6. But before proceeding farther, it will be proper to give a clearer exposition of the definition which we have adopted. There are three things, then, principally to be considered in it.

First, **in the conversion of the life to God, we require a transformation not only in external works, but in the soul itself**, which is able only after it has put off its old habits to bring forth fruits conformable to its renovation. The prophet, intending to express this, enjoins those whom he calls to repentance to make them “a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 38:31). Hence Moses, on several occasions, when he would show how the

Israelites were to repent and turn to the Lord, tells them that it must be done with the whole heart, and the whole soul (a mode of expression of frequent recurrence in the prophets) and by terming it the circumcision of the heart, points to the internal affections.

But there is no passage better fitted to teach us the genuine nature of repentance than the following: "If you will return, O Israel, says the Lord, return unto Me." "Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart" (Jeremiah 4:1-4). See how He declares to them that it will be of no avail to commence the study of righteousness unless impiety shall first have been eradicated from their inmost heart. And to malice the deeper impression, He reminds them that they have to deal with God, and can gain nothing by deceit, because He hates a double heart.

For this reason Isaiah derides the preposterous attempts of hypocrites, who zealously aimed at an external repentance by the observance of ceremonies, but in the meanwhile cared not "to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free" (Isaiah 58:6). In these words he admirably shows wherein the acts of unfeigned repentance consist.

7. The **second** part of our definition is, that **repentance proceeds from a sincere fear of God**. Before the mind of the sinner can be inclined to repentance, he must be aroused by the thought of divine judgment; but when once the thought that God will one day ascend His tribunal to take an account of all words and actions has taken possession of his mind, it will not allow him to rest, or have one moment's peace, but will perpetually urge him to adopt a different plan of life, that he may be able to stand securely at that judgment-seat.

Hence the Scripture, when exhorting to repentance, often introduces the subject of judgment, as in Jeremiah, "Lest My fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings" (Jeremiah 4:4). Paul, in his discourse to the Athenians says, "The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commands all men everywhere to repent: because He has appointed a day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:30, 31). The same thing is repeated in several other passages. Sometimes God is declared to be a judge, from the punishments already inflicted, thus leading sinners to reflect that worse awaits them if they do not quickly repent. There is an example of this in the 29th chapter of Deuteronomy.

As repentance begins with dread and hatred of sin, the Apostle sets down godly sorrow as one of its causes (2 Corinthians 7:10). By **godly sorrow** he means when we not only tremble at the punishment, but **hate and abhor the sin, because we know it is displeasing to God**. It is not strange that this should be, for unless we are stung to the quick, the sluggishness of our carnal nature cannot be corrected; nay, no degree of pungency would suffice for our stupor and sloth, did not God lift the rod and strike deeper. There is, moreover, a rebellious spirit which must be broken as with hammers. The stern threatening which God employs are extorted from Him by our depraved dispositions. For while we are asleep it were in vain to allure us by soothing measures. Passages to this effect are everywhere to be met with, and I need not quote them.

But there is another reason why the fear of God lies at the root of repentance, namely, that though the life of man were possessed of all kinds of virtue, still if they do not bear reference to God, how much soever they may be lauded in the world, they are mere

abomination in heaven, inasmuch as it is the principal part of righteousness to render to God that service and honor of which He is impiously defrauded, whenever it is not our express purpose to submit to His authority.

8. We must now explain **the third part of the definition**, and show what is meant when we say that **repentance consists of two parts, namely, the mortification of the flesh and the quickening of the Spirit**. The prophets, in accommodation to a carnal people, express this in simple and homely terms, but clearly, when they say, "Depart from evil, and do good" (Psalm 34:14). "Wash yourself, make yourself clean, put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment; relieve the oppressed," etc. (Isaiah 1:16, 17).

In dissuading us from wickedness they demand the entire destruction of the flesh, which is full of perverseness and malice. It is a most difficult and arduous achievement to renounce ourselves, and lay aside our natural disposition. For the flesh must not be thought to be destroyed unless everything that we have of our own is abolished. But seeing that all the desires of the flesh are enmity against God (Romans 8:7), **the first step to the obedience of His law is the renouncement of our own nature**. Renovation is afterwards manifested by the fruits produced by it, namely, justice, judgment, and mercy.

Since it were not sufficient duly to perform such acts, were not the mind and heart previously endued with sentiments of justice, judgment, and mercy this is done when the Holy Spirit, instilling His holiness into our souls, so inspires them with new thoughts and affections, that they may justly be regarded as new. And, indeed, as **we are naturally averse to God, unless self-denial precede**, we shall never tend to that which is right. Hence we are so often enjoined **to put off the old man, to renounce the world and the flesh, to forsake our lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of our mind**.

Moreover, the very name **mortification** reminds us how difficult it is to forget our former nature, because we hence infer that we cannot be trained to the fear of God, and learn the first principles of piety, unless we are violently smitten with the sword of the Spirit and annihilated, as if God were declaring, that to be ranked among His sons there must be a destruction of our ordinary nature.

9. Both of these we obtain by **union with Christ**. For if we have true fellowship in His death, our old man is crucified by His power, and the body of sin becomes dead, so that the corruption of our original nature is never again in full vigor (Romans 6:5, 6). If we are partakers in His resurrection, we are raised up by means of it to newness of life, which conforms us to the righteousness of God.

In one word, then, by repentance I understand regeneration, the only aim of which is to form in us anew the image of God, which was sullied, and all but effaced by the transgression of Adam. So the Apostle teaches when he says, "We all with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord." Again, "Be renewed in the spirit of your minds" and "put ye on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." Again, "Put ye on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him."

Accordingly through the blessing of Christ we are renewed by that regeneration into the righteousness of God from which we had fallen through Adam, the Lord being pleased in this manner to restore the integrity of all whom He appoints to the inheritance of life. This

renewal, indeed, is not accomplished in a moment, a day, or a year, but by uninterrupted, sometimes even by slow progress God abolishes the remains of carnal corruption in His elect, cleanses them from pollution, and consecrates them as His temples, restoring all their inclinations to real purity, so that during their whole lives they may practice repentance, and know that death is the only termination to this warfare.

The greater is the effrontery of an impure raver and apostate, named Staphylus, who pretends that I confound the condition of the present life with the celestial glory, when, after Paul, I make the image of God to consist in righteousness and true holiness; as if in every definition it were not necessary to take the thing defined in its integrity and perfection. It is not denied that there is room for improvement; but what I maintain is, that **the nearer any one approaches in resemblance to God, the more does the image of God appear in him. That believers may attain to it, God assigns repentance as the goal towards which they must keep running during the whole course of their lives.**

10. By **regeneration** the children of God are delivered from the bondage of sin, but not as if they had already obtained full possession of freedom, and no longer felt any annoyance from the flesh. Materials for an unremitting contest remain, that they may be exercised, and not only exercised, but may better understand their weakness.

All writers of sound judgment agree in this, that, in the regenerate man, there is still a spring of evil which is perpetually sending forth desires that allure and stimulate him to sin. They also acknowledge that the saints are still so liable to the disease of concupiscence [sinful desires], that, though opposing it, they cannot avoid being ever and presently prompted and incited to lust, avarice [greed], ambition, or other vices.

It is unnecessary to spend much time in investigating the sentiments of ancient writers. Augustine alone may suffice, as he has collected all their opinions with great care and fidelity. Any reader who is desirous to know the sense of antiquity may obtain it from him. There is this difference apparently between him and us, that while he admits that believers, so long as they are in the body, are so liable to concupiscence [sinful desires] that they cannot but feel it, he does not venture to give this disease the name of sin. He is contented with giving it the name of infirmity, and says, that it only becomes sin when either external act or consent is added to conception or apprehension; that is, when the will yields to the first desire. **We again regard it as sin whenever man is influenced in any degree by any desire contrary to the law of God; no, we maintain that the very gravity which begets in us such desires is sin.** Accordingly, we hold that there is always sin in the saints until they are freed from their mortal frame, because depraved concupiscence [sinful desires] resides in their flesh, and is at variance with rectitude.

Augustine himself does not always refrain from using the name of sin, as when he says, "Paul gives the name of sin to that carnal concupiscence from which all sins arise. This in regard to the saints loses its dominion in this world, and is destroyed in heaven." In these words he admits that believers, insofar as they are liable to carnal concupiscence [sinful desires], are chargeable with sin.

11. When it is said that God purifies His Church, so as to be "holy and without blemish," (Ephesians 5:26, 27), that He promises this cleansing by means of baptism, and performs it in His elect, I understand that reference is made to the guilt rather than to the matter of sin. In regenerating His people God indeed accomplishes this much for them; He destroys the dominion of sin, by supplying the agency of the Spirit, which enables

them to come off victorious from the contest. **Sin, however, though it ceases to reign, ceases not to dwell in them.** Accordingly, though we say that the old man is crucified, and the law of sin is abolished in the children of God (Romans 6:6) **the remains of sin survive, not to have dominion, but to humble them under a consciousness of their infirmity.** We admit that these remains, just as if they had no existence, are not imputed, but we, at the same time, contend that it is owing to the mercy of God that the saints are not charged with the guilt which would otherwise make them sinners before God.

It will not be difficult for us to confirm this view, seeing we can support it by clear passages of Scripture. How can we express our view more plainly than Paul does in **Romans 7:6? We have elsewhere shown and Augustine by solid reasons proves, that Paul is there speaking in the person of a regenerated man.** I say nothing as to his use of the words evil and sin. However those who object to our view may quibble on these words, can any man deny that aversion to the law of God is an evil, and that hindrance to righteousness is sin? In short, who will not admit that there is guilt where there is spiritual misery? But all these things Paul affirms of this disease. Again, the law furnishes us with a clear demonstration by which the whole question may be quickly disposed of. We are enjoined to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength. Since all the faculties of our soul ought thus to be engrossed with the love of God, it is certain that the commandment is not fulfilled by those who receive the smallest desire into their heart, or admit into their minds any thought whatever which may lead them away from the love of God to vanity.

What then? Is it not through the faculties of mind that we are assailed with sudden motions, that we perceive sensual, or form conceptions of mental objects? Since these faculties give admission to vain and wicked thoughts, do they not show that to that extent they are devoid of the love of God? He, then, who admits not that all the desires of the flesh are sins, and that that disease of concupiscence [sinful desire], which they call a stimulus, is a fountain of sin, must of necessity deny that the transgression of the law is sin.

12. If anyone thinks it absurd thus to condemn all the desires by which man is naturally affected, seeing they have been implanted by God the author of nature, we answer, that we by no means condemn those appetites which God so implanted in the mind of man at his first creation, that they cannot be eradicated without destroying human nature itself, but only the violent lawless movements which war with the order of God.

But as, in consequence of the corruption of nature, all our faculties are so vitiated and corrupted, that a perpetual disorder and excess is apparent in all our actions, and as the appetites cannot be separated from this excess, we maintain that therefore they are vicious; or, to give the substance in fewer words, **we hold that all human desires are evil, and we charge them with sin not in as far as they are natural, but because they are inordinate [exceeding reasonable limits; immoderate], and inordinate because nothing pure and upright can proceed from a corrupt and polluted nature.**

Nor does Augustine depart from this doctrine in reality so much as in appearance. From an excessive dread of the invidious charge with which the Pelagians assailed him, he sometimes refrains from using the term sin in this sense; but when he says (ad Bonif.) that the law of sin remaining in the saints, the guilt only is taken away, he shows clearly enough that his view is not very different from ours.