

Lesson 19: 2LCF Chapter 15: Of Repentance Unto Life and Salvation

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Acts 17:30-31

On Wednesday, October 31, 1517, the protestant reformer Martin Luther nailed his "95 Theses" to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. These 95 points were a series of propositions and questions posted for debate with the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. Strategically, Luther posted these prior to "All Saints' Day (November 1) to ensure that his document would widely read by those who would attend the Castle Church the following day.

Leading up to this event, Pope Leo X ordered the sale of "indulgences," likely to fund the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. If this wasn't offensive enough, Luther was further instigated by the actions of one Dominican friar, Johann Tetzel, who famously summarized the supposed efficacy of indulgences with this jingle: "*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.*" In Luther's 95 Theses, he contended against such a practice, stating: "*Why does not the Pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the Basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?*"

Today, many Reformed Christians gleefully tell the story of Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the Castle Church door, but few know the contents of this earth-shaking document. Even fewer appreciate that many of Luther's initial points of contention had to deal explicitly with the nature of true repentance. In these 1, 2, 3, 4, and 36, Luther stated the following:

- 1) *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*
- 2) *This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.*
- 3) *Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortification of the flesh.*
- 4) *The penalty of sin remains as long as the hatred of self (that is, true inner repentance), namely till our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.*
- 36) *Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.*

As it turns out, the issue of repentance was central to a right understanding the nature of true conversion and biblical Christianity. Moreover, as we will see in this study, this has always been the case—from the time of the Old and New Testament saints, all through the history of the church, and even today.



Martin Luther nails the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church (Wittenberg, October 31, 1517)

The following outline has been offered for Chapter 15 of the Confession:

Outline

- I. The Recipients of Repentance (paragraphs 1-2)
 - A. Those Converted at Riper Years Especially (paragraph 1)
 - B. All Believers Generally (paragraph 2)
- II. The Nature of Repentance (paragraph 3)
- III. The Continuance of Repentance (paragraph 4)
- IV. The Provision of Repentance (paragraph 5)²⁰⁴

At the outset, it is necessary that we define repentance. How would you define repentance?

The Baptist Catechism echoes the Westminster Shorter Catechism when it defines repentance in these terms:

Q. What is repentance unto life?

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace (Acts 11:28), whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin (Acts 2:37, 38), and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ (Joel 2:12; Jer 3:22), doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God (Jer 31:18, 19; Ez. 36:3 1), with full purpose of and endeavour after new obedience (2 Cor. 7: 1 1; Is. 1: 16, 17).

James Ussher defined repentance as: “An inward and true sorrow for sin, especially that we have offended so gracious a God, and so loving a Father; together with a settled purpose of heart, and a

²⁰⁴ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 232-33.

careful endeavor to leave all our sins, and to live a Christian life, according to all God's commandments."²⁰⁵

Beeke and Smalley provide this robust definition:

True repentance is a saving grace, given freely by God to sinners by his effectual calling and regeneration. Repentance is both turning from sin (1 Kings 8:35; Isa. 59:20) and turning to God (2 Chron. 15:4; 36:13), turning "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God" (Acts 26:18)... Repentance constitutes the willing movement of the soul toward God's gracious purpose to restore his image in fallen man.²⁰⁶

Calvin wrote in his Institutes, "Repentance can thus well be defined: it is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him; and it consists of the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit."²⁰⁷

Paragraph 1.

Such of the elect that are converted at riper years, having sometime lived in the state of nature, and therein served divers pleasures, God in their effectual calling gives them repentance to life.
Titus 3:2-5

Paragraph 2.

Whereas there is none that does good and does not sin, and the best of men may, through the power and deceitfulness of their corruption dwelling in them, with the prevalency of temptation, fall in to great sins and provocations; God has, in the covenant of grace, mercifully provided that believers so sinning and falling be renewed through repentance unto salvation.
Eccles. 7:20; Luke 22:31,32

Exposition

When reading paragraph one of the Confession, some have asked the question, "Are only those 'converted at riper years' granted true repentance?" At first glance, this may appear to be the Confession's claim; however, paragraph two clearly conveys that repentance is not only granted to some in 'riper years' particularly, but to all believers generally.

Furthermore paragraphs 1 and 2, when held in contrast to the rest of the chapter, provide helpful context. Here repentance is seen in two lights: as a 'crisis experience' and/or as an 'ordinary grace'. Waldron writes:

The Confession makes this distinction out of a desire to distinguish repentance as a crisis experience from repentance as an ordinary grace. All believers are marked by the ordinary grace, but not all believers will know, or need to know, repentance as a crisis experience. In this chapter two types of such a crisis experience are mentioned. The Confession first refers to such of the elect as are converted at riper years having sometime lived in the state of nature. Scriptural examples of this are Manasseh, Paul and the Philippian jailor. Secondly, it

²⁰⁵ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 31st head (299).

²⁰⁶ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Spirit and Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021), 453.

²⁰⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.3.5.

refers to 'believers [who] ... fall into great sins and provocations. The scriptural examples here are David and Peter.

I believe our Baptist forefathers had several practical concerns in making this distinction. Chiefly, they wanted to make sure that no one could accuse them of believing that all Christians must have a crisis conversion like that of the Philippian jailor. They were saying, Though we insist emphatically on personal conversion, we understand that the experience of a child raised in a Christian home may be quite different from that of one who is converted without the benefit of Christian nurture as a child? Both converts will experience repentance, but both may not have a crisis conversion experience.

The practical applications of this are various and important. Do not doubt your salvation merely because you lack a crisis experience like that of some respected brother or sister in the Lord. Do not demand of others a certain type of conversion experience as a necessary mark of true grace. An emotional earthquake, radical, external changes in one's life-style, knowing the exact time of one's rebirth, an extended work of conviction by the law, immediate sudden joy—all of these may accompany conversion, but none are necessary marks of true repentance.

Paragraph one should be appreciated for the hope that it offers to those who have lived in rebellion against God for decades. Moreover, it provides great encouragement to those who would seek to herald the gospel to such men and women and call them to repentance and faith in Christ. Jeremy Walker writes:

The encouragement of this paragraph lies in the fact that those who have been spiritually dead in trespasses and sins for many years—including the most heinous transgression and appalling iniquity—are not beyond the saving power of God in Christ. Paul was saved as a very pattern of divine longsuffering (1 Tim. 1:16): old sinners, seemingly set in their sinful ways, can and should be preached to, warned, and exhorted to flee from the wrath to come, in the confidence that God can and will call them, and that Christ is willing and able to save all who come to Him for salvation.²⁰⁸

Here the Confession reminds readers that there is hope for those who are advanced in years and for great sinners alike! The hymn “At Calvary” (William R. Newell, 1868-1956) summarizes this well:

*1 Years I spent in vanity and pride,
Caring not my Lord was crucified,
Knowing not it was for me He died on Calvary.*

Refrain:

*Mercy there was great and grace was free,
Pardon there was multiplied to me,
There my burdened soul found liberty—
At Calvary.*

*2 By God's Word at last my sin I learned—
Then I trembled at the Law I'd spurned,
Till my guilty soul imploring turned to Calvary. [Refrain]*

²⁰⁸ Jeremy Walker, “Chapter Fifteen: Of Repentance unto Life and Salvation,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 284-85.

*3 Now I've giv'n to Jesus ev'rything,
Now I gladly own Him as my King,
Now my raptured soul can only sing of Calvary. [Refrain]*

*O the love that drew salvation's plan!
O the grace that brought it down to man!
O the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary. [Refrain]*

Paragraph 3.

This saving repentance is an evangelical grace, whereby a person, being by the Holy Spirit made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin, does, by faith in Christ, humble himself for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-abhorrancy, praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose and endeavor, by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things.

Zech. 12:10; Acts 11:18; Ezek. 36:31; 2 Cor. 7:11; Ps. 119:6,128

Exposition

Paragraphs three deals with the nature and continuance of true repentance in the believer.

The nature of true repentance is described with several key phrases:

Evangelical Grace

Repentance is both a response to the gospel and is empowered by the Spirit in the gospel. Jeremy Walker comments:

Repentance is a grace given by God... When God, in sovereign mercy, creates the heart of man anew, the Spirit of God invariably works both faith and repentance in the heart of that man. So, although we are saved through faith in Christ's glorious person and finished work and not because of repentance as the effective cause of our salvation, we are not saved apart from both faith in Christ and repentance unto life.²⁰⁹

Godly Sorrow, Detestation, and Self-Abhorrancy

True repentance will always be accompanied by a Godly sorrow for sins. The repentant sinner understands that he has sinned against a good and holy God and feels genuine grief and sorrow for offending his Master.

2 Corinthians 7:8-11

8 For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. 9 As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. 10 For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. 11 For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter.

Speaking on this godly grief, Richard Baxter wrote:

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 283.

I am truly angry with my heart that has so often and foolishly offended Thee. Methinks I hate that heart that is so cold and backward in Thy love and almost grudge it a dwelling in my breast. Alas, when love should be the life of prayer, the life of meditation, the life of sermons, and of holy conference, and my soul in them should long to meet Thee and delight to mention Thee, I wander, Lord, I know not whither!²¹⁰

Similarly, Thomas Brooks once commented on the supernatural origin of such grief:

[True repentance] is a sorrow or grief that is spiritual, that is supernatural; no man is born with godly sorrow in his heart as he is born with a tongue in his mouth. Godly sorrow is a plant of God's own planting, it is a seed of His own sowing, it is a flower of His own setting, it is of a heavenly offspring, it is from God and God alone. The spirit of mourning is from above; it is from a supernatural power and principle. There is nothing that can turn a heart of stone into flesh but the Spirit of God (Ezek. 36:25-26). Godly sorrow is a gift from God.²¹¹

Biblical Examples

Psalms 130:1-4

Luke 15:17

Acts 2:36-38

Psalms 51:1-6

Praying for Pardon and Strength

It is not enough to feel grief and sorrow for one's sin. Godly sorrow leads a man or woman to lay hold of the mercy of God found in Jesus Christ.

Waldron comments:

True repentance is nourished by, and grows out of, two great convictions in a soul. Two things must become realities, vivid aspects of a man's consciousness, if we are to repent. These two realities are called by the Shorter Catechism 'a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ.'²¹²

Once a man apprehends the mercy of God in Christ, he must come to God while he may be found.

Isaiah 55:6-7

"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;
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.

Biblical Examples

Proverbs 28:13

Psalms 32:3-5

Isaiah 1:16-18

²¹⁰ Richard Baxter, *Converse with God in Solitude*, 124.

²¹¹ Thomas Brooks, *Cabinet of Choice Jewels*, 218.

²¹² Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 237.

Walk Before God unto All Well-Pleasing in All Things

True repentance is characterized by a turning away from sin, a turning to God, and a progressive increase in obedience rendered to God. The repentant Christian no longer desires to please himself or other men, but God alone. His repentance is imperfect, but it is a true repentance.

In one of his symbolics lectures, Samuel Waldron asked this question: "Is confession, renunciation of sin, and turning from it with grief and hatred, your experience? If you are a true Christian, it is.

Psalm 119:57-60

The Lord is my portion; I promise to keep your words.

I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

When I think on my ways, I turn my feet to your testimonies;

I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments.

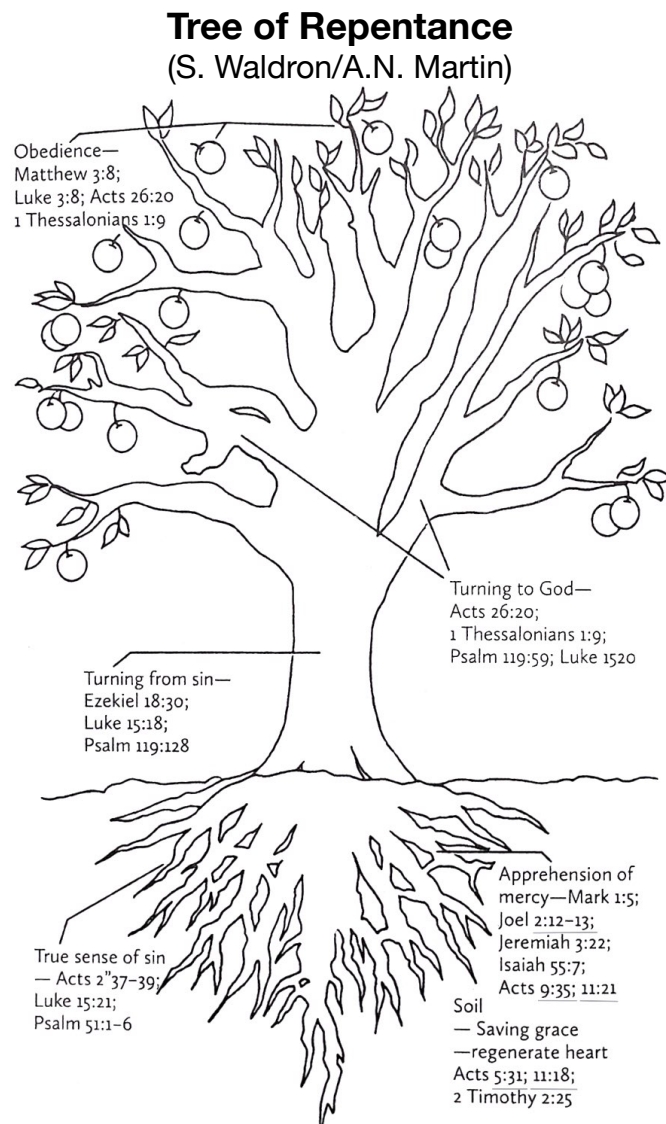
Biblical Examples

Ezekiel 18:30

Acts 26:19-20

1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

Matthew 3:8



Paragraph 4.

As repentance is to be continued through the whole course of our lives, upon the account of the body of death, and the motions thereof, so it is every man's duty to repent of his particular known sins particularly.

Luke 19:8; 1 Tim. 1:13,15

Paragraph 5.

Such is the provision which God has made through Christ in the covenant of grace for the preservation of believers unto salvation, that although there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation, yet there is no sin so great that it shall bring damnation to them that repent, which makes the constant preaching of repentance necessary.

Rom. 6:23; Isa. 1:16-18, 55:7

Exposition

Paragraphs four and five deal with the continuance and provision of repentance.

Speaking on paragraph four, Walker comments:

Repentance... is a lifelong task.

On the one hand, the Confession seeks to steer us clear of self-deception: there must be an ongoing forsaking of sin in the life of a true Saint of God. Someone who is consistently unwilling to acknowledge, confess, and forsake sin shows few indications of walking in newness of life (Mark 1:4-5; Ps. 51:1-4; Matt. 3:8; 1 Thess. 1:9-10). On the other hand, we are steered away from unbiblical and unreasonable expectations of perfection in this life. Forsaking sin is not the same as *perfect obedience*: it is the pursuit of and desire after *full obedience*, out of love for God with all one's heart and mind and soul and strength, with repentance over our failings and shortcomings.

A wise Christian once said, "There's nobody perfect—that's the believer's bed of thorns; that's the hypocrite's couch of ease." The Christian is not perfect, but would be if he could, and mourns over his imperfections. Hypocrites do not care about full and heartfelt obedience. A Christian is concerned not to sin at all, rather than not to sin too much... Charles Hodge writes that "no man has any right to presume that he hates sin in general unless he practically hates every sin in particular; and no man has any right to presume that he is sorry for and ready to renounce his sins in general unless he is conscious of practically renouncing and grieving for each particular sin into which he falls."²¹³

Thomas Brooks adds:

The work of repentance is not the work of an hour, a day, or a year, but the work of a life. A sincere penitent makes as much conscience of repenting daily as he does of believing daily; and he can as easily content himself with one act of faith, or love, or joy as he can content himself with one act of repentance.²¹⁴

²¹³ Jeremy Walker, "Chapter Fifteen: Of Repentance unto Life and Salvation," in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 290.

²¹⁴ Thomas Brooks, *Smooth Stones*, 99.