

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XV

(Reading: Luke 13:1-5; 18:9-14; 19:1-10)

When Converted I See - It's Not Me!

We come to the other side of the coin of our conversion. For having seen how faith is the grace whereby we come to see it's Christ who's saved us, now, in repentance, we realise it definitely wasn't us!

The word 'repentance' itself is clear about this. It comes from a Greek word meaning "a turning of the mind". This means not just a change of mind but a change of heart.

So there cannot be true faith without repentance. For faith means you are joined to Christ in such a way that there cannot be anything else. Whether that's called "sin" or "self".

Like faith, repentance is described here as a 'grace'. That means it is a divine gift. This is what the early church recognised when the apostle Peter had explained his action regarding the conversion of gentiles in Acts 11. In verse 18 there they praised God, saying, "So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Repentance Is Next To Faith

This brings us right into the first aspect to considering this 15th Chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. For REPENTANCE IS NEXT TO FAITH.

When the Lord Jesus began His public ministry He declared, as we read in Mark 1 verse 15, "Repent and believe the good news." The two things are inseparable. They have to go together. But how often would you actually notice that in much of the preaching done in churches today? Or, for that matter, how much has it been a part of the church's teaching through the ages? It's no wonder that Article 1 says that this is a doctrine which is to be preached by every minister of the gospel.

The apostle Paul was specific about this in his parting words to the Ephesians elders in Acts 20. Verse 21 there has these words of his: "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus."

If that's not done there's the danger that we're preaching an easy-believism. You know, "Just believe in Jesus." Because then faith in Christ becomes faith in ourselves. Or it can become faith in a political system - even faith in money!

The gospel message is not 'both-and' - it's 'either-or'! The call of Christ is clear in Matthew 16 verse 24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." If any church is not preaching the cost of discipleship it's not being truly attractive. In the words of Rowland Ward commenting on this, "The weakness of much Christianity is due to weakness in preaching the doctrine of repentance."

This was illustrated by what happened once in the laboratory of the great chemist Faraday. One day a workman accidentally dropped a very valuable silver cup into a tank of strong acid. Well, he and the other workmen look despairingly into that tank, watching as that precious thing so quickly disintegrated.

But Faraday, seeing what happened, poured a chemical into the tank. The silver was precipitated to the bottom and recovered. The shapeless mass was sent off again to the silversmith to be remade into what it was before.

You know that's what both sides of this coin of conversion show us. The grace of repentance and of faith can recover what has been lost and restore it to its former usefulness and beauty.

Repentance Is Where We Are

And, so, having briefly stated its essential part in gospel preaching along with faith, our Confession next turns to considering that REPENTANCE IS WHERE WE ARE. This is what Article 2 teaches.

And where are we? Well, we are seeing repentance in our lives in two ways. Because it convicts us of our sin and it also turns us from sin.

Repentance convicts us of our sin in the realisation that sin is bad - in this life and the next. But if that's all that happened we would soon find a way to carefully avoid sin. Rather, repentance goes much deeper. It actually makes us realise the sinfulness of sin. As Article 2 says, it's not only seeing and sensing the danger but especially the filthiness and hatefulness of our sins.

We're confronted by how right God is and how wrong we are. As Simon Peter in Luke 5 verse 8 says, falling on his knees before Jesus, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

All the while this is a grace. To realise God's holy nature and his righteous law is a gift. This is the presence of the holy love of God in Christ.

And that's further seen in the second factor involved in true repentance. Because once convicted of sin men are turning away from sin. The believer turns away from all his sins conscious that God promises mercy in Christ to those who repent. He is so sorry about his sin he's resolutely fixed on following the Lord. As John Bunyan wrote in his hymn, "His one avowed intent - to be a pilgrim!"

This is what David in Psalm 119 expresses a number of times. In verses 5 and 6 he says, "Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees! Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands." In verse 59 he says, "I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes." And in verse 106, "I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws."

This was well illustrated by an incident from the second century. Celsus, a noted adversary of Christianity, distorted our Lord's expression in Matthew 9 verse 13 about having come into the world to save sinners not the righteous. He complained that Jesus had come into the world to create the most horrible and dreadful society for He called sinners and not the righteous. So the body He came to assemble is a bunch of no-hopers, separated from the good people, which they were a part of before. He said Jesus has rejected all the good and collected all the bad.

The early Church Father, Origen replied. "True," he said, "our Jesus came to call sinners; but to repentance. He assembles the wicked; but to convert them into new men, or rather to change them into angels. We come to Him greedy, He makes us generous; we come to him dirty sexually, He makes us pure morally; we come to Him violent, He makes us gentle; we come to Him disrespectfully, He makes us act politely."

How true are the words of 2nd Corinthians 5 verse 17! "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Repentance Is Needed To Get From Here

REPENTANCE IS WHERE WE ARE. But, in the third place, REPENTANCE IS NEEDED TO GET FROM HERE.

Here we consider Articles 3 and 4. For there we see that repentance is an on-going part of the Christian life. Without it you're not truly alive in Christ.

There was a woman who was again guilty of a sin which brought her under the discipline of the church. She was brought before the session that she might be taken under discipline. She expected that, as had happened before, she would have to stand in the church and then she would be restored to church privileges.

The minister and the elders, though, found her to be a person who had no just sense of the evil of her sin. She showed no signs of repentance. So she was told that she couldn't properly be admitted to the privilege of the discipline and the censure. They said to her that that could only be applied to someone who was truly sorry, and she wasn't.

Well, she went away quite disappointed. She wasn't going to be rebuked as she expected. And yet she was, in effect, excommunicated. She had been cut off from something.

That really bugged her. She has no peace in her conscience. What the session had done made her seriously think about her own character and conduct. She realised that she was a terrible sinner to the extent that she could not even be given public satisfaction for her sin. She repented and she was restored to full communion. A fellowship she kept up for the rest of her life.

That's an example of someone in church who thought saying sorry was enough. But, as that woman realised, it has to go much deeper and further than that. It has to be your whole life! No day should go by without you confessing your sin to the Lord. And the more you grow in Him the greater should be the repentance of your sin. Because God's Word is exposing you to His holiness more and more!

That's what Article 3 means when it says that while we can't rest in repentance we yet must always live in it. And Article 4 confirms this as it tells us of what's happening along the way when we live out this repentance.

I'm sure you have heard of some people say, "But the Lord could never forgive me for that." Perhaps you have thought that yourself. And then we wonder about the sin against the Holy Spirit. This is the sin outlined in Matthew 12 verse 32. Because Christians do think about whether they might not have gone too far in their sin - some have even said to me that their sin was so terrible they don't think they'll ever be forgiven.

You can see that in their lives. They are haunted. Everywhere they go its ghost looms before them.

This is the reason why the Roman Catholic Church has its "penance". This sacrament of theirs - which consists of contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution - tries to make up for that. All it means, however, is that on their death-beds they can only "hope" they'll get into heaven. Or, failing that, they will get at least into purgatory, where the prayers and work of others might get them through into heaven. But true repentance confronts your sin head on. Instead of side-stepping it and so not really dealing with it, you confess that the favour of God can never be won at all!

It's the same with the Arminian view of repentance. There the idea is that we still have something that makes us able to confess. So out of the good still in us we come to God and He, seeing that good, blesses us with conversion.

Well, then repentance is no grace. It's not a gift from Him. Romans 3 verse 24 has got it seriously wrong to say that we're justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

And to say that it's up to us means there could well be sins we can't get over. Then Romans 8 verse 1 is mistaken to say that there's now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But the good news is that since it is of God, through and through, He is making you new! That's how He is using repentance. And that's why the sin against the Holy Spirit doesn't apply here. For that's a situation of rejecting the gospel - here, though, the gospel's taken root and is bearing fruit.

Repentance Is How We're Going There

This means the Lord is so using repentance that it's getting to grips with every part of our lives. And, so, we see, in the fourth place, REPENTANCE IS HOW WE'RE GOING THERE.

Article 5 points to the way God's grace in repentance needs to be through us. For it has to be right through us!

The story of Zaccheus is a good example. There was a man who was the chief of tax collectors - the leader of the crooks! And when conversion struck him in the very person of the Lord Jesus he certainly detailed his repentance. He instantly gave half his possessions to the poor and vowed to follow God's law for those he had cheated.

That's why one must wonder about much of what passes today for conversions. While they are said to be decisions for Christ you don't see that many lives being changed at all by Him. It's nothing like the Belfast revival of 1904 where so much stuff that the wharf workers had stolen off the harbour was returned they had to build an extra storage shed!

Repentance means change. Nothing God touches stays the same. And when someone is thus changed so everything else he touches cannot stay the same either.

This is shown in the story of two brothers convicted of sheep stealing. According to the brutal law of that day, they were branded on their heads with the letters *ST* - Sheep Thief!

One of the brothers couldn't handle it. The stigma was too much. He tried to get away from it in a foreign country. But people would always be asking him about the letters on his brow, and what they meant. And so he wandered from place to place. Finally, full of bitterness, he died and was buried in a forgotten grave.

The other brother, though, who repented of his misdeed, didn't go away from home. He said to himself: 'I can't run away from the fact that I stole sheep, and here I'll stay until I win back the respect of my neighbours and myself.'

As the years passed by he established a reputation for respectability and integrity. One day a stranger in the town saw the old man with the letters *ST* branded on his forehead. He asked a local what it meant. After thinking for a while the villager said, "It all happened a long time ago, and I can't remember the details. But I think the letters are the abbreviation of 'Saint'."

Do you see it, congregation? The wonderful grace of God in the penitent and believing heart is able to change and transform the filthiness and hatefulness of sin into a badge of honour and beauty. We hear that every Sunday in true gospel ministry. There we hear the Word. Words like that of Proverbs 28 verses 13 - words that say, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

Is there a sin which remains in you, dear friend? Are you like the prodigal son far away, feeding the pigs? Come to your senses and come home. Acknowledge to God that you have sinned against Him. Do what Article 6 urges upon you!

Whether that involves you privately confesses your sins to the Lord, or confessing what you have done against your brother - privately or publicly - do it. If you're truly sorry you'll be reconciled. Because then it's through the Holy Spirit working in your heart you know He's the loving Father.