

John Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion The Importance of Repentance - #2

Christ and John, it is said, in their discourses first exhort the people to repentance, and then add, that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, (Matt. 3: 2; 4: 17.) Such too, is the message which the Apostles received and such the course which Paul followed, as is narrated by Luke, (Acts 20: 21.) But clinging superstitiously to the juxtaposition of the syllables, they attend not to the coherence of meaning in the words. For when our Lord and John begin their preaching thus "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (Matt. 3: 2,) do they not deduce repentance as a consequence of the offer of grace and promise of salvation? The force of the words, therefore, is the same as if it were said, As the kingdom of heaven is at hand, for that reason repent. For Matthew, after relating that John so preached, says that therein was fulfilled the prophecy concerning the voice of one crying in the desert, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God," (Isaiah 40: 3.) But in the Prophet that voice is ordered to commence with consolation and glad tidings. Still, when we attribute the origin of repentance to faith, we do not dream of some period of time in which faith is to give birth to it: we only wish to show that a man cannot seriously engage in repentance unless he know that he is of God. But no man is truly persuaded that he is of God until he have embraced his offered favor. These things will be more clearly explained as we proceed.

Some are perhaps misled by this, that not a few are subdued by terror of conscience, or disposed to obedience before they have been imbued with a knowledge, nay, before they have had any taste of the divine favor, (Acts 20: 21.) This is that initial fear which some writers class among the virtues, because they think it approximates to true and genuine obedience. But we are not here considering the various modes in which Christ draws us to himself, or prepares us for the study of piety: All I say is, that no righteousness can be found where the Spirit, whom Christ received in order to communicate it to his members, reigns not. Then, according to the passage in the Psalms, "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared," (Psalm 130: 4) no man will ever reverence God who does not trust that God is propitious to him, no man will ever willingly set himself to observe the Law who is not persuaded that his services are pleasing to God. The indulgence of God in tolerating and pardoning our iniquities is a sign of paternal favor. This is also clear from the exhortation in Hosea, "Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he has torn, and he will heal us; he has smitten, and he will bind us up," (Hos. 6: 1) the hope of pardon is employed as a stimulus to prevent us from becoming reckless in sin.

But there is no semblance of reason in the absurd procedure of those who, that they may begin with repentance, prescribe to their neophytes certain days during which they are to exercise themselves in repentance, and after these are elapsed, admit them to communion in Gospel grace. I allude to great numbers of Anabaptists, those of them especially who plume themselves on being spiritual, and their associates the Jesuits, and others of the same stamp. Such are the fruits which their giddy spirit produces, that repentance, which in every Christian man lasts as long as life, is with them completed in a few short days."

(Underlining is for enhancement by the Project Director)