

April 13-15, 2010 Reformed Congregational Fellowship Conference

Repentance, Faith and Church Discipline

THESIS

The thesis of this paper is that in a very basic sense, faith and repentance – the topics of our 2010 Conference on the Confessions - as continually exercised in an on-going harmony in the life of the true Christian are not only the best means of growth in grace and usefulness individually for that person, but that these same two elements comprise the essence of what is needed for a healthy church; and therefore both are involved at every level of church discipline.

Whatsoever is not from faith is sin, wrote the apostle Paul¹, to be sure in a context of matters not sinful in themselves – such as food and drink, but if applied to indifferent things, are not his words all the more relevant to the weightier matters of the Christian life? To live even for a moment in ignorance or defiance of the content and experience of saving faith and its complementary grace, daily repentance, is to live in sin. Those outside of Christ *are condemned already*² precisely because they have not believed, because they do not have saving faith in Christ, because they are unrepentant toward God. Such faith and repentance are the vital ingredients in a life that maintains close communion with and pleases God and therefore delights in God above all other beings or considerations. These gifts remind us of the vital signs that help demonstrate that we are united to Christ. And since nothing we do is completely free from sin in this life, they apply to every aspect and moment of our lives.

Thus while seeking to avoid over-simplification and in light of the considerable complexities that compounded sin can and does bring when given its head, what follows will seek to encourage the position that by adhering to biblical faith and repentance, many of sin's toxic fruits and vines may be effectively restrained, if not cut off. The Christian so exercised is strengthened for the war against sin and for the exercise of righteousness within and outside himself. Individuals under such self-discipline are focused upward and, if they slip or fall, they may return to the simplicity that is in Christ³ through faith and repentance. These mainstays will be the means of granting believers

¹ Romans 14:23

² John 3:18

³ 2 Corinthians 11:3

future protection or deliverance from the power of the noise, sights, snares, thorns and pits of sin, self and Satan.

WORKING DEFINITION OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

For our purposes *church discipline* is defined as follows:

The use and application of wise, pointed but kind words, normally spoken by one or more fellow church members to another who needs encouragement, instruction, rebuke or correction. These words are primarily intended for the preservation of the holiness and godly witness to the gospel of such person and his church, but at the same time they are the normal means of the maintenance and extension, or the recovery and restoration, of godly inclinations, speech and actions of all members and attendees of a particular church. In the face of persistent sin and the absence of repentance, such discipline may include as a final resort the end of an individual's membership and/or of any involvement in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in that particular church.

Every congregation of believers functioning with godly⁴ elders and deacons and possessing the Scriptures in their language has, along with the other means of grace, all that is needed to maintain spiritual health and to *grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*.⁵

Such growth is not to be measured by the wit and innate capacities of church members or leaders nor by the level of their biblical or theological knowledge, but by the experiential evidence that what members profess is being put into practice. In other words there ought to be a direct proportion--indeed a beautiful and beautifying proportion -- between the degree of Christian *faith and content professed* and the Holy Spirit's fruit of Christian *love and other graces exhibited* in speech and behavior.

The acquisition of knowledge is relatively easy, granted the availability of resources. The consistent, daily, persevering demonstration of the fruit of Christian grace in the

⁴ i.e. themselves believing and repenting

⁵ 2 Peter 3:18

lives of every professing believer in a particular church, and especially of every one of its members, is quite another matter.

Surely, however, this demonstration should be the highest of priorities for every church and its leadership.⁶ Stated simply, this priority equates to a striving after obedience to God's command in Old and New Testaments to everyone to *be holy, for I the Lord your God, am holy.*⁷ In the manner and to the degree in which we demonstrate Christ's love one to another is the measure of how confident we may be that others will see what we profess is genuine.⁸

To be sure, no two things ought to be more compatible than knowledge of the doctrine of Christ and its practice. These are in no way naturally averse to one another; but it illustrates the need of admonition at precisely this point that in the process of writing one of the most doctrinally important sections of any of his epistles, the apostle Paul put the goal in these words: *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*⁹ The very language of warning and struggle reveals the issue: sin has wrought great damage in even those where its poisons may be least seen or known. Even in the most mature saints, the utmost vigilance is required in the use of the means of grace to preserve the gospel deposit.

Thus self-discipline applied to a particular church as a whole is essential to the good health and testimony of that church. This is achieved by the efforts and comportment of individual believers comprising a particular congregation. They provide the model for the maintenance of a church's health, vitality and effectiveness. Both individual and congregation are utterly dependent on the vigorous exercise of these two precious divine gifts on which we are focused. When their practice by one or more individuals goes limping or is absent, the brethren must tend to one another¹⁰ or their church will begin to have its foundation undermined and if unchecked, all will be overrun by thorns and nettles.

⁶ Certainly every *reformed* church and its leadership.

⁷ Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15-16.

⁸ John 13:35 *By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another.*

⁹ Colossians 1:28-29

¹⁰ This mutuality and the necessity of vigilance at this point are too prevalent in the New Testament letters to require citations. We need only start from the beginning and think of the context of Cain's words, "Am I my brother's keeper?" and the implied answer (Genesis 4:9).

As in the physical realm, so it is in the spiritual: food and drink without exercise produce unwanted girth, sluggishness, laziness and a seedbed for illness. Improper or insufficient diet, even with regular exercise, defines a collision course for a breakdown. So it is in the individual and within a congregation: balance is needed, and the lofty criterion and compliment the apostle gave the church at Rome is surely a desired goal for every believer and for every church: *For I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you are full of goodness, having been fully furnished with all knowledge, and are also able to admonish one another.*¹¹ Thus if a congregation is properly taught, has officers who conform in greater rather than lesser degree to NT standards and demonstrate that all love God and love one another, the means are present and there is great hope for such an assembly to care for itself and be a fragrant and beautiful garden of the Lord's graces.

It will be enlightening in regard to the topic of this paper to compare the confessions on the subject of repentance before proceeding further.

COMPARING THE SAVOY AND WESTMINSTER ON CHAPTER 15

Chapters fourteen and fifteen of the *Savoy Declaration* well define both initial and on-going faith in our Lord Jesus and repentance unto life. Both are necessary for eternal salvation and each is enabled as a result of Holy Spirit-engendered regeneration.¹² These chapters are careful to delineate the buds and flowers of faith and repentance as well as the fruits that are to follow.

On this point and others chapter 15 of the SD differs strikingly from its parent, *The Westminster Confession* (WC). It will be seen that these differences are pertinent to our subject. The chapter is posted below. Enclosed within these brackets [] is material omitted from the WC, while what is underlined is unique to the WC. Enclosed with these brackets { } is material omitted from the *1689 London Baptist Confession*, which otherwise reads as the SD in this chapter.

¹¹ Romans 14:15

¹² "The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts..." "This saving repentance is an evangelical grace, whereby a person being by the Holy Ghost made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin... praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose, and endeavour by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things. From *Savoy Declaration* (hereafter SD) 14:1 & 15:3

Chapter 15
Of Repentance unto Life [and Salvation]

1. Such of the elect as are converted at riper years, having sometime lived in the state of nature, and therein served divers {lusts and} pleasures, God in their effectual calling giveth them repentance unto life.
2. Whereas there is none that doth good, and sinneth not, and the best of men may through the power and deceitfulness of their corruption{s} dwelling in them, with the prevalency of temptation, fall into great sins and provocations; God hath in the covenant of grace mercifully provided, that believers so sinning and falling, be renewed through repentance unto salvation.
3. This saving r] 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.

II. 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.

III. 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.

[whereby a person being by the Holy Ghost made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin, doth by faith in Christ humble himself for it with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-abhorrence, praying for pardon and strength of grace, with a purpose, and endeavour by supplies of the Spirit, to walk before God unto all well-pleasing in all things.

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.
5. Such is the provision which God hath made through Christ in the covenant of grace, for the preservation of believers unto salvation, that although]

IV. As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; [yet] so there is no sin so great, that it shall bring damnation on them who {truly} repent[; which makes the constant preaching of repentance necessary].

V. 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.

VI. 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 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.

There appears to be little or no commentary available as to the reasoning behind the SD's changes in this chapter from the WC. Almost all of the written attention given to the differences between these two confessions centers on matters concerning church government, the relation of the church to the state and the SD's addition of an entire chapter devoted solely to the gospel.¹³ The congregational men gathered at the Savoy palace to make this revision did their work in fewer than three weeks (late September into early October of 1658).¹⁴ As the majority of the SD is verbatim WC, we may safely assume that changes were made to the WC only where it was deemed critical to their theology and biblical understanding.

Though there is nothing to guide us as to the reasons in the redactors' minds for the changes in Chapter Fifteen, the differences are rather extensive and some are significant. We review them at this point to see what may be relevant to our subject of faith and repentance in relationship to church discipline.

It is a fair generalization to assert that seventeenth century Congregationalists, followed by Calvinistic Baptists, pursued a stronger desire for insuring a regenerate church membership of "visible saints" than did the established church or even Presbyterianism, with the former's inclusive local parish structure and the latter's emphasis on the presbytery level as that which defines the church – at least as far as ministers are concerned – and the requirement only of a "credible profession" by individuals seeking membership. Thus these two acts – faith and repentance – would be understood by Baptists and Congregationalists to be more critical to the evidence of a credible profession – and certainly for the qualification as visible saints - before being received into membership and, in the case of the Congregationalists, having their child(ren) baptized.

So then these observations on the differences:

1)First, we note that the SD begins the chapter by the addition of two paragraphs to the WC. The first emphasizes the need of repentance for the unconverted but suggests that there will be

¹³ Chapter 20.

¹⁴ In the preface to the finished product these men defend the grounds for omitting Scripture proofs: it would have made the confession many times larger – and no doubt required them to work much longer!

those converted as children who are spared years of living long periods in a “state of nature” in which they “served divers lusts and pleasures”. Such may not recall when they first believed and repented unto life. If they continue exercising saving faith and repentance from the time of regeneration while very young, the habit will be established, so that both faith and repentance continue to flourish in their tender consciences. The second new paragraph addresses the need of repentance for believers, even those who have fallen into sin and stayed there for some period, as opposed to having sinned and repented more quickly – either in response to conscience or admonition from outside themselves.

The point is that repentance is approached as belonging to both the converted and unconverted; it is vital for initiation into the covenant of grace and vital for continuing in it thereafter.

2) Secondly, we note by its omission from the third paragraph of the SD (the first of the WC) that the duty to preach repentance is moved to paragraph 5. This paragraph speaks of comfort for the believer with a heavy conscience because of grievous sins. Thus the *preaching* of repentance in SD may be said to be more closely linked to believers and their sins than to the unconverted.

This suggests that the Savoy redactors felt the preaching of repentance was a major means of awakening the consciences of regenerate church members who may have dozed, gone to sleep or even been hardened in their sins. The SD here seems to have deemed such preaching appropriate for recovering the backslidden or for giving assurance to those whose conviction of their sins may have brought them to the point of despair of ever being forgiven – something all too rare today where many lawless professors glibly claim conversion, though it is neither clear from what nor to what they are converted. Offering and urging all such to repentance are vital means, the SD seems to urge, of returning individuals to good church order by their becoming right with God and then with one another.

3) A third distinction merits mentioning. In light of the importance of repentance for both entry and continued life among the people of God, it is strange that the SD omits the final paragraph of the WC. The language there is specifically directed to those needing to repent publicly where and to what extent necessary when brethren have been publicly offended. And equally

necessary is the exercise of grace in those offended to heartily receive with full reconciliation and love any and all repentant offender(s) among them.

Indeed, we can say by observing this closing paragraph of the WC that its words were deemed important enough, and surely the experience of the need and difficulty of such repentance and subsequent acceptance in love abound to the degree, that it must be included as illustrating a happy fruit of church discipline. Without such public repentance when a sin is known and persons have been grieved or hurt by the words or deeds of someone, the wound created by the sin(s) involved will surely fester and may become a stumbling block against the advancement of the gospel in the life of that particular church or beyond – not to mention the ill effects on all the parties directly involved in the situation.

Conversely, where proper repentance has been made and there a full acceptance and welcoming of the repentant person(s) back into the church's fellowship, with all the vulnerability of the future possibility that such sins could again be committed and even by the same person(s), the atmosphere between and among the parties involved will have the best prospects of clearing and there be a return to love among the brethren, joy in Christ and his name and mercy be exalted.

Thus we may conclude from comparing the confessions on the subject of repentance that it is necessary for and therefore to be preached to all, both for the conversion of unbelievers and the maintenance of a holy character in the saints, individually and as a church body.

As one side of the priceless gospel coin, saving faith accesses the incomparable gifts of *justification, adoption, sanctification and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.*¹⁵ On the other side of this coin is repentance unto life and salvation. Such repentance includes

- 1)a holy revulsion of and turning away from all known sin as sin, with its dulling and scarring effects on the sinner's conscience, other people when known and above all else because every sin is primarily an offense against God himself;
- 2)a turning unto God for his mercy in Christ because of his promise of complete forgiveness;
- and
- 3)a hearty determination from love to God and to Christ to desert this and all other sins.

¹⁵ *Westminster Shorter Catechism #32*

The fact that the exercise of faith and repentance are not once-for-all acts is also made clear in these chapters and their regular practice is emphasized by the need to repent of individual sins individually – one at a time.

Such discipline as described above – exercised by individuals and over a congregation by its officers - will truly make for a beautiful church if three things are continually true:

- 1) every member and each attendee is truly converted and practices these graces vigorously and regularly;
- 2) every member is aware of his or her every sin that needs confessing and forsaking, especially those involving others in the congregation; and
- 3) all continually keep in mind and heart the apostle's words to Timothy¹⁶ that *the goal of the commandment – every commandment – is love, from a pure heart, a good conscience and faith without hypocrisy.*

However, these are true in this degree of almost no church. Hence the need for church discipline, for mutual admonition, for vigilance on the part of church officers – over themselves individually with frequent and honest accountability--and over their families and fellow members. This would seem to be what the apostle meant when he addressed the Ephesian elders in these words: *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."*¹⁷

FACTORS IN CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Consider, then, in the composition of our churches several factors relevant to church discipline and specifically how they relate to faith and repentance.

- 1) There are two broad categories of persons in any church: members and non-members and the households of each.
- 2) Both these groups may include unconverted persons - adults and/or children. The eternal state of their individual souls is ultimately known only to God. In overseeing the flock church officers have the duty to take note of those who give evidence of conversion by their speech and behavior and those whose words and deeds, wholly or in part, may seem to contradict their

¹⁶ 1 Timothy 1:5

¹⁷ Acts 20:28 (NKJV)

profession of faith – if they make a profession.¹⁸ This means church officers need to spend time with their people, formally and informally, publicly and house-house to house,¹⁹ listening, speaking and observing in such a way as to advance their knowledge of the flock's welfare. Such times also give a congregation the opportunity to see the behavior of their officers, who are to be examples of holy, compassionate living. These would appear to be minimal standards in fulfilling the apostolic directives to elders.²⁰

All too often church officers with even the best of intentions tend to be either overbearing and unbiblically intrusive or overly passive, waiting until someone approaches them or an unavoidable problem arises before seeking to diagnose the health of individuals and their church.²¹ As in the medical realm, prevention is worth many hours, days and months of treatment, not to mention the expense involved in a cure. This leads to perhaps the most important but often most neglected critical factor in church discipline: *prayer*.

3) Prayer ought to be continual, both in private and at regular, gathered meetings, for the welfare of individuals and of the congregation as a whole. Throughout all evangelical and reformed history and its various traditions, the times and seasons were doubtless very few in which a church, especially its officers, spent too much time in prayer, and particularly for its holiness and mutual love and care. As evangelicals and confessionally reformed in theology, we acknowledge the Gospel record and surely give at least lip service to the extent of our Lord's prayer life and to the frequency of this subject in the NT epistles; but the reality is that without the whole church being actively encouraged to engage in regular, earnest prayer, congregational operations easily come to be seen as actions of an organism that functions on its own and attitudes and actions become rote.

The result of this sooner or later is that if the Lord is not sought for his wisdom, presence and power in all things, *formalism* develops or, worse, *hypocrisy*. The latter has arrived when words and motions of worship and the Christian life occur but because of sin in the camp, there is no power. God is known to be absent though the motions of worship may continue. *Formalism* occurs, on the other hand, where worship proceeds and is deemed to be acceptable to God

¹⁸ Some will come to worship services, even regularly, who are known to be unbelievers.

¹⁹ Acts 20:20 & 31

²⁰ See Acts 20:28; First Peter 5:2-3

²¹ This is assuming elders are focused on the *spiritual* health of their church and not just businessmen reviewing physical issues – the realm of the deacons but sometimes preoccupying elders.

regardless of the fact that spiritual power is absent and is not even missed by the participants. In such a situation it would probably not be recognized if present or not welcome if recognized.

As Scripture and our confessions teach with great clarity, a proper view of God's sovereignty applied to those in our churches means that people who come to a service, and particularly those who return, are there by divine appointment. They should, therefore, be welcomed by all the saints and in the eyes of the officers be objects of observation and then concern: Are they members elsewhere? Have they received covenant baptism by their parent(s) or upon professing the Christian faith? How did they find out about our church? What are their expectations? The effect of the preaching and a congregation's interaction with visitors should soon reveal, at least in broad areas, the visitors' professed interest and response to Christ, to the gospel and to that particular church's understanding of both.

Again, such visitors or attendees are either converted or not. If converted, using the language of the SD chapters 14 and 15, they have received the grace of faith whereby they have been enabled by the Holy Spirit to believe and repent to the saving of their souls. If not converted, faith and repentance are their primary need, though it may be some time before they realize it or there is evidence they have believed and repented when and if they do.

Also among those in attendance in our services may be both those *biblically knowledgeable but unconverted* and the *weak and/or ignorant but converted*. Distinguishing these may be difficult and in some cases quite impossible. How should a church relate to these individuals?

Following the model of all Scripture, we ought to proceed on the basis of the profession of the individual and respond to the appearance of evident fruit – either of righteousness that deserves commendation and encouragement or of its absence and/or of the presence of known sin. The latter especially should occasion questions, assessment and, if true, admonition or confrontation or rebuke; repentance should be urged. This is true whether the persons are members of our church or not. Those continuing to attend who refuse to join, should have the dangers of being unattached to a local body explained to them and that such persistence will cost them privileges of fellowship at the Lord's Supper, at least in *this* assembly of believers.

If the officers or others discover that repentance is in order for a particular sin or sins, the repentance should be made known as widely as the particular sin(s) affected other persons or was known, but as much as possible no further.

Needless to say, any acts liable to charges of civil misdemeanor or felony not exonerated by Holy Scripture²² are to be reported to the proper legal authorities, regardless of professed repentance or the degree of contrition shown by the perpetrator.

THE NEED FOR CONTINUAL REPENTANCE AS EVIDENCE OF TRUE AND VITAL GODLINESS

The SD at 15:4 makes clear, as noted above, that repentance is not only an initial act leading to salvation, but is something we need to exercise every day. These words, written at the dawn of the Reformation in Germany from Martin Luther *Ninety-Five Theses*, are pertinent:²³

#1 When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "Repent", He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

#2 The word [repentance] cannot be properly understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, i.e. confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.

#3 Yet its meaning is not restricted to repentance in one's heart; for such repentance is null unless it produces outward signs in various mortifications of the flesh.

#7 God never remits guilt to anyone without, at the same time, making him humbly submissive to the priest, His representative [i.e., poor in spirit toward his fellow member, elder and/or pastor].

Though *the sacrament of penance* sounds like a less-reformed Luther than he would become, nevertheless *restitution* to one's fellow man for any injustice committed for which a fitting restitution is possible is certainly one manifestation of true repentance.²⁴

²² Such requirement could include mandatory abortion of a child for whatever reason, or the requirement of ministers to unite two individuals of the same sex in marriage.

²³ That is except for what goes beyond Scripture and was not yet conformed to or remained in non-conformity to the Word of God.

²⁴ Cf. the repentance of Zaccheus (Luke 19:2-9).

Where restitution is not possible, the elders/congregation and individual(s) involved will need to seek wisdom from God as to what is fitting evidence of genuine repentance in such a situation.

In every person and in the church that desires to be characterized by a continual, vigorous manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit, the exercise of lively faith in Christ and his word is critical. All the other virtues of grace flow out of saving faith in the heart. Chapter 14 of the SD makes this clear when it states that by the power of saving faith, a person is not only justified, sanctified and receives eternal life by virtue of the covenant of grace but that such a person's faith *acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come.*

Here is the tender conscience before the word of God, trembling at the word with a devout love for its author and for the Christ who embodied it over his brief earthly life while fulfilling everything that was written of him, even to the dregs of the cup prescribed for him—that cup which was the only remedy for human sin and misery.

Therefore the apostle gives us all exhortation and fair warning: *If we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.*²⁵

Luther's last words in the *Ninety-Five Theses* are a fitting final admonition:

#92 Away, then, with those prophets who say to Christ's people, "Peace, peace," where in there is no peace.

#93 Hail, hail to all those prophets who say to Christ's people, "The cross, the cross," where there is no cross.

#94 Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells.

#95 And let them thus be more confident of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance of peace.

²⁵ 1Cor 11:31-32

May God almighty be pleased to grant that each of us may have a fresh and renewed gratitude for his gifts of *saving faith* and *repentance unto life and salvation*! May the Spirit of Christ enable us to encourage the lively and enlivening exercise of these gifts in all our people, especially in our families and fellow elders! Thus will our churches be stronger, in root and branch, the testimony of the power of the gospel be magnified to the glory of Christ, the kingdom of grace be advanced in the world and the kingdom of glory be hastened.

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