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Systematic and Polemic Theology

LECTURE LV

Repentance

SYLLABUS

1. What two kinds of Repentance in Scripture; and distinguished by what two terms? Are these ever used interchangeably? Conf. of Faith, ch. 15. Sampson on Heb. xii.17, Hill, bk. v, ch. 4. §1 Calvin. Inst. bk. iii. ch 3. Knapp, §126. Watson Theol. Inst. ch. 24, §1. Breckinridge, Theol. Subjective, bk. iii., ch. 14.

2. What do divines mean by legal; and what by evangelical Repentance? Of what must we repent? Ridgley, Qu. 76. Calvin as above.

3. Who is the Author of Repentance; and does it precede or follow Regeneration. Calvin, as above, Ridgley, Qu. 76. Watson as above. Knapp, §127, 128.

4. What are the relations of Faith and Repentance; and which is prior in the order of Production? Calvin, as above, 1, 2. Fuller on Sandeman, Letter 5. Watson as above.

5. Is Repentance Atoning? Calvin, bk. 12, ch. 4. Dick, Lecture 70. Knapp §128. Watson, ch. 19.

6. What are the "fruits meet for Repentance"?

Ridgley and Calvin, as above.

I. "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." Conf. xv, 1. The brevity, and in some cases neglect, with which this prominent subject is treated by many systems, is surprising and reprehensible.

In the New Testament there are two classes of words, used for two exercises, both of which, in the English version are called "repentance", "repent". One class is μεταμέλομαι, μεταμέλεια the other, μετανοέω, μετάνοια. The one means, etymologically, after regret, a merely natural feeling; the other, change of mind after conduct. The two classes are used in the New Testament with general, or, as I would assert, universal discrimination. The only alleged cases of confusion are (Matt. xi. 32); (Luke xvii. 3, 4); (Heb. xii. 17). In the first, the verb is μεταμελήθητε with accurate and proper reference to the relation between carnal conviction and sorrow, and turning to Christ, as a preparation for the result. Those expositors who will have it to be used here for evangelical repentance, urge that this alone is vitally connected with saving faith. The chief priests "repented not that they might believe". But, give the verb its ordinary meaning: Christ charges on them such obduracy, and self-sufficiency, that they felt not even that carnal sorrow, which is the preliminary step towards true repentance, faith, and conversion. Thus, so far is the ordinary sense from being difficult here, it adds great force to our Saviour's meaning. So in the next case. (Luke xvii. 3, 4). In this μετάνοια is used for the professed repentance of an erring, and even a very unstable brother, to show that his profession (so long as it is not absolutely discredited by his bad conduct) is to be taken by the judgment of charity (1 Cor. xiii. 7), as evidence of genuine, Christian sorrow, so far as to secure forgiveness. A profession of mere carnal sorrow would not entitle to it. In the third, the best commentators are agreed that Τοπον μετάνοιας" refers to a change in Isaac, which the historian indicates, must have been (whatever profane Esau may have hoped) Christian conviction of and sorrow for error (otherwise He would not have changed His prophecy). Now, when we see that μετανοέω is used in the New Testament 34, and μετάνοια 24 times (=58), and μεταμέλομαι and family 7 times, the demarcation made by the sacred writers is very broad.

See this distinction carried out with instructive accuracy in (2 Cor. vii. 8-10) (original). In verse 8 the Apostle says that he had regretted, but now no longer regretted (μεταμέλομαι) the writing of the 1st Epistle. He is too accurate to speak of repenting the performance of a duty, though painful. Verse 9, Now he is glad that the Corinthians sorrowed unto metanoian . See how accurately he distinguishes sorrow (λίπη) from gracious repentance. Verse 10 tells us that gracious sorrow works "repentance unto salvation," which is not to be "regretted" (αμεταμελητον). Paul is too discriminating to intimate, as the English version does; that true repentance can ever, by any possibility, be subject of repentance. No; folly might perchance deem it subject of regret, but, to repent truly of true repentance, would be a contradiction too glaring even for the sinner to entertain.

In the Old Testament two families of words are used for those acts promiscuously expressed in our English version by Repent; [Hebrew word] and its derivatives, and [Hebrew word]: with its derivatives. The latter is used to express both regret and repentance proper, (variously translated by Sept.); the former I believe, in its theological uses, always expresses true repentance.

The Latin Vulgate has lent us a mischievous legacy, in giving us the word "repent" as the rendering of μετάνοιας. "Repentance" is from *poenitet, paena*; and that from the Greek word ποινη. Its English progeny is seen in the word pain; and its original idea is penalty. See the use of ποινη; Iphigenia in Aulide, for expiatory penalty. No wonder the Latin Church, in the dark ages, slid into the error of regarding penance, as a satisfaction for the guilt of sin; when it had been taught to call μετάνοιαν by such a misnomer as *poenitentia*. Lactantius, (the most elegant in his Latinity, of the Christian fathers), proposes to render it by *Resipiscentia* (from *resapio*). "*Ideoque Graeci melius et significantius metanoian dicunt, quam nos possumus resipiscentiam dicere.*"

I wish that the English tongue had enabled our version to distinguish the two exercises uniformly by two distinct words.

Μεταμελεια is the natural pain consequent on sin, arising in the carnal mind, either with or without the common, convincing influences of the Holy Spirit, and contains three elements, fear and dread of the danger incurred, shame, and remorse or involuntary self-condemnation of conscience denouncing the sin. It is a purely selfish emotion. It is still the emotion of a moral nature, and implies a conscience; though compatible with an entire preference of will for sin.

For μετάνοια, (See Shorter Cat., qu. 87; Conf., xv,2). It involves the two elements of the former; but it includes chiefly another; viz: "a sight and sense of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God." There is not only that painful sense of wrong\~doing inflicted by conscience on the sinner; conscience, which a depraved will, although fully set on transgression, cannot corrupt nor wholly silence. But there is the pain arising from a true hatred of sin, now existing in the will, as a moral disposition and principle, and from the preference for and love of conformity to God, arising out of a thorough approval of and complacency in His moral perfection. Of course, this hatred of sinfulness and appetency of holiness, are not two principles, but one, expressing its spontaneous nature as to two opposite objects-sin and righteousness. And last, that view of the odiousness of sin, and attractiveness of godliness, proceeds chiefly in the believer's experiences, from the Cross; from the exhibitions of mercy, purity, goodness, and hope there made. True repentance may be defined as the moral emotion and act of the regenerate nature towards its personal sinfulness, and towards godliness, especially as the two are exhibited in the Cross.

The terms Legal and Evangelical Repentance have been used by divines with a mischievous uncertainty. By some, legal repentance is defined as though identical with μεταμελεια. If this were really the distinction, the terms would be unnecessary. Paul gives us better ones in (2 Cor.

vii. 10) The "sorrow of the world", and "godly sorrow". But other divines, perceiving a truer and more accurate distinction in the actings of godly sorrow itself, have employed the phrases in a useful sense. These, by legal repentance, mean a genuine sorrow for sin, including both fear of its dangers, and conscience of its wrongness, and also loathing of its odiousness, with a thorough justifying and approving of God's holy law; a sorrow wrought by the Holy Spirit, but wrought by Him only through the instrumentality of the convincing Law, and unaccompanied with conscious hopes of mercy in Christ. By Evangelical Repentance they mean that godly sorrow for sin, which is wrought by the renewing Spirit, including the above actings, but also, and chiefly, the tender sorrow combined with hopes of mercy proceeding from appropriating faith, when the believer "looks on Him whom he hath pierced," and sees there at once a blessed way of deliverance, and a new illustration of God's love, and his own aggravated vileness. This, in a word, is the repentance of the Catechism, Qu. 87.

In completing our view of the nature of repentance, the question presents itself: Of what should man repent? The general answer, of course, must be: Of all sin. Is it man's duty, then, to repent of original sin? If we say, no, the Arminian will press us with this consequence: "If it is not your personal duty to repent of it, you imply that you are not in earnest in saying that it is truly and properly sin". Yet, how can a man feel personally blameworthy (an essential element of repentance) for an act committed by another, without his consent, and before he was born! We reply: "The sinfulness of that estate into which man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin". The Christian will, of course, regret the guilt of Adam's first sin, but not repent of it. But of the corruption of nature, of the concupiscence and inordinate desire of our hearts, it is our duty to repent, to feel blameworthy for them, to sorrow for, and to strive against them, just as of actual transgression; for this is not only our guilt, (imputed), but our proper sin.

Again, Conf., xv, § 5, men ought not only to repent of their sinfulness, both of heart and life, as a general quality, but also of particular sins, so far as they are known, with a particular repentance. Repentance is the medium of sanctification, and sin is only conquered by us in detail. There is no other way for a finite creature to fight the good fight of faith. Hence, it is obvious, every conscious, and especially every known recent transgression should be made the subject of particular repentance. The impenitent man cannot be forgiven. What, then, shall we answer concerning those unconscious and forgotten transgressions (probably the "secret sins" of (Ps. xix.12), to which the attention and recollection of even the honest penitent never advert, in consequence of the limitation of his faculties and powers? We answer, that each Christian is aware of his guilt of these forgotten faults, and grieves over the general fact that he has them. And this general repentance is accepted; so that the atonement of Christ blots them out of God's book of remembrance.

After this definition of repentance, it need hardly be added, that it is not only an act, to be performed at the beginning of conversion, and then to be dismissed as complete; but also a life-long work, proceeding from an abiding temper of soul. The saint is a penitent, until he reaches heaven.

If we confound worldly with godly sorrow, or if we take a Pelagic view of human nature, we may indeed ascribe true repentance to the unaided workings of the natural heart. But if repentance is understood as above, we shall see that while it is a duty for man to exercise, it is still one to which he must be moved by the supernatural grace of God. Hence, the Scriptures always represent it as God's gift or work. See New Testament first, as plainest: (Acts v. 31; xi. 18) (2 Tim. ii. 25). In Old Testament: (Ps. lxxx. 3, 7, 19; lxxxv. 4) (Jer. xxxi. 18) (Ezek. xi. 19). Nor can these texts be evaded by saying that God is the Author of repentance only mediately, by teaching that Gospel which inculcates and prompts repentance. In several of them, those who are already possessed of the Gospel means, pray to God to work repentance in them; and in (2 Tim. ii. 25), there is a "peradventure" whether God will give a heart to repent, to those to whom Timothy was to give the light; showing that the grace of repentance is a separate and divine gift.

But let any one look at the Scriptural definition of Repentance, and he will be convinced that none but a regenerate heart is competent to the exercise. The true penitent not only feels the danger of his sins, and the involuntary sting of a conscience which he would disarm if he could, but an ingenuous sorrow for; the sinfulness of his sin, and a sincere desire for godliness. Can anyone feel this but a regenerate soul? Can he who hates God thus grieve for having wounded His holy law; can he who loves sin as the native food of his soul, thus loathe it for its own sake! No one feels godly sorrow, but he who is passed from death unto life.

But the Arminians, while avowing that repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit, assert that it must be held to begin before regeneration in the order of production, as they also hold concerning faith and justification. Their reasons are two. First: we are taught e.g., (Ps. li. 10), to pray for regeneration. But prayer, to be acceptable, must be sincere; and a sincere request for a holy heart implies, or presupposes, repentance for ungodliness. And second: repentance must be presupposed in faith, because to fly to Christ as a refuge from sin presupposes a sense of sin. But justification, secured by faith, must precede regeneration; because God cannot be supposed to bestow the beginning of communion in the Holy Spirit, and what is substantially eternal life, on a rebel before he is reconciled to Him. Thus, they suppose Rom. vii. to describe repentance Rom. vii. 24, 25, the dawning of saving faith; Rom. viii. 1, first clause, the justification consequent thereon; and Rom. viii. 1, last clause, the beginning of spiritual life. Now, to both objections, we reply that their plausibility is chiefly due to the oversight of this fact, that the priority of one over another of these several steps, is only one of production, or causation, and not of time. Practically, every one who is regenerate is then, in principle, penitent, and believing, and justified. And since all parts are of God's grace, is it not foolish to say that His righteousness or His wrath forbids Him to bestow this before that, seeing His grace permits neither to precede in time, and none to

be lacking? But on the first objection we remark, farther, if we must need rationalize about it, it is at least as great an anomaly, that a man should feel a sincere desire for godliness, while his nature remained prevalently ungodly, as it is that an ungodly prayer for a new heart should be answered by the heart-searching God. The objection derives its seeming force from a synergistic theory of regeneration. But, in truth, no true spiritual desire can exist till God has actually renewed the will. God must do the work, not man. And God must savingly begin it, unasked by man. This is sovereign grace. That a man should hold this theory, and yet pray for a new heart, is no greater paradox than that the hope our sins are pardoned should encourage us to pray for pardon. The truth is, the instincts of a pre-existent spiritual life find their natural expression in a breathing after spiritual life. To the second objection we reply: if it seems anomalous that God should anticipate His reconciliation to the condemned sinner, by bestowing that gift of a new heart, which virtually constitutes eternal life, it would be equally anomalous that He should anticipate the bestowal of peace, by bestowing those essential gifts of faith and repentance, to which eternal blessedness is inevitably tied by the Gospel. Must not the Arminian, just as much as the Calvinist, fall back, for his solution of these difficulties, upon the glorious fact, that Christ has deserved all these saving gifts for His people? To him who believes an unconditional election, there is no difficulty here; because he believes that these saving gifts are all pledged to the believing sinner, not only before he fulfills any instrumental conditions, but before he is born. There is no difficulty in it all to God; because all is of grace.

The relations of faith and repentance *inter se*, as to the order of production, are important to an understanding of conversion. Both these graces are the exercises of a regenerate heart alone; they presuppose the new birth. Now, Calvin, with perhaps the current of Calvinistic divines, says, that "repentance not only immediately follows faith, but is produced by it." Again: "When we speak of faith as the origin of repentance, we dream not of any space of time which it employs in producing it; but we intend to signify that a man cannot truly devote himself to repentance, unless he knows himself to be of God." And this, he adds, only becomes known by appropriating faith. The view usually urged is, that the convicted sinner cannot exercise that tender and affectionate sorrow for sin, which involves a true love to God, until he entertains some hope that God loves him, in Christ. They quote such passages as (Ps. cxxx. 4); (1 John iv. 19). Before hope of mercy dawns, they argue there can be nothing but stubborn remorse and despair, after the example of Jer. xviii. 12. Now there is a fair sense in which all this is true; and that, no doubt, the sense in which it commended itself to the minds of those great and good men. But there is also a great danger of holding it in an erroneous and mischievous sense. In what we have to say, guarding these views, let us premise that we make no priority of time in the order of repentance and faith; and no gap of duration between the birth of the one or the other. Either implies the other, in that sense. Nor do we dream of the existence of such a thing as a penitent unbeliever, nor suppose that there is any other means of producing repentance than the preaching of the gospel. Repentance can exist nowhere except where God works it. In rational adults He works it only by means, and that means is the gospel revelation; none other. Nor do we retract one word of what we said as to the prime efficiency of the doctrine of the cross, and of the hope, gratitude,

love, tenderness, and humiliation, which faith draws therefrom, as means for cultivating repentance. But in our view it is erroneous to represent faith as existing irrespective of penitence, in its very first acting, and as begetting penitence through the medium of hope. On the contrary, we believe that the very first acting of faith implies some repentance, as the prompter thereof. True, the two twin graces ever after stimulate each other reciprocally; but the man begins to believe because he has also begun to repent.

The reasons are: first, that the other view gives a degrading and mercenary character to repentance; as though the sinner selfishly conditioned his willingness to feel aright concerning his sin, on the previous assurance of impunity. It is as though the condemned felon should say: "Let me go free, and I will sincerely avow that I have done very wrong. But if I am to swing for it, I will neither acknowledge guilt, nor say, "God bless my country." Is this ingenuous repentance? Is this the experience of the contrite heart? No; its language always is: (Ps. li. 1-5).

"Should sudden vengeance seize my breath,

I must pronounce Thee just in death;

And if my soul is sent to hell,

Thy righteous law approves it well."

Second. Godly sorrow for sin must be presupposed or implied in the first actings of faith, because faith embraces Christ as a Saviour from sin. See Cat., que. 86, last clause especially. Surely the Scriptures do not present Christ to our faith only, or even mainly, as a way of impunity. See (Matt. i. 21); (Acts iii. 26); (Titus ii. 14). As we have pointed out, the most characteristic defect of a dead faith, is, that it would quite heartily embrace Christ as God's provision for immunity in sin. But God offers Him to faith for a very different purpose, viz: for restoration to holiness, including immunity from wrath as one of the secondary consequences thereof (Hence, we must demur at Owen's declaration, that the special object of saving faith is only Christ in His priestly, and not in His kingly and prophetic offices.) But now, a man does not flee from an evil, except as a consequence of feeling it an evil. Hence, there can be no embracing of Christ with the heart, as a whole present Saviour, unless sin be felt to be in itself a present evil; and there be a genuine desire to avoid it as well as its penalty. But does not such a desire imply a renewal of the will? This view has appeared so unavoidable to many who go with Calvin, that they have admitted, "Legal repentance precedes, but Evangelical repentance follows faith and hope." But does not such a legal repentance imply the new birth? Does any man thus justify and revere the very law which condemns him, and regard the Divine character, while devoid, as he

supposes, of hope in its favour, with new and adoring approbation, while yet his carnal mind is enmity against God? Surely not. The error of their argument is in supposing that this legal repentance was the exercise of an unrenewed heart.

Third: Some passages of Scripture imply the order I have assigned, and I am not aware of any which contradict it. See Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 20:21; 2 Tim. 2:25, especially the last.

In a word, Repentance and Faith are twin graces, both implicitly contained in the gift of the new heart; and they cannot but co-exist. Repentance is the right sense and volition which the renewed heart has of its sin; faith is the turning of that heart from its sin to Christ. Repentance feels the disease, faith embraces the remedy. But when we inquire for the first conscious acting of faith or repentance after the instant of the new birth, the result is decided by the object to which the soul happens to be first directed. If the object of its first regenerate look be its own ungodliness, the first conscious exercise will be one of repentance; but just so surely as the volition is, potentially, in the preponderating motive, so surely does that soul look from its ungodliness to Christ, the remedy of it; it may be unconsciously at first, but in due time, consciously. Or if Christ be the first object to which the new-born soul looks, its first act may be one of trust and joy in Him. Yet that trust implies a sense of the evil of sin, as the thing for deliverance from which Christ is trusted.

The exercise of repentance, while absolutely necessary in all who are saved, creates no atoning merit; and constitutes no ground whatever in justice, why the penitent should have remission of his sins. See Conf., xv: 3. The carnal mind here labours under an obstinate delusion; and how often are pastors told, even by those who desire to profess themselves Christians, "That they hope their sins are pardoned, because they have repented"? Hence, importance. Argument.

A moral fitness which demands that no impenitent person shall be pardoned, is here mistaken for another thing. Now, the ground of that moral fitness is this: that, pardon having otherwise been made just, God's holiness and majesty may have some practical assurance, in the state of the sinner's own feelings, against his repetition of his sins. But this end does not express the whole intent of God's law; if it did, the law would be a mere expediency, unworthy of God. Its true object is, to express and sustain His immutable holiness. It demands perfect and perpetual obedience. Repentance is not obedience. This leads, Second, to the remark, that repentance is no reparation whatever for past disobedience. It cannot place the sinner, in the eye of the law, in the position of Him who has never sinned. It has in itself no relevancy to repairing the mischiefs the sin has inflicted. Thus men judge. To the man who had injured you, you would say: Your repentance is very proper; but it cannot recall the past, or undo that which is done. Third: Indeed, what is a repentance but a feeling of ill-desert, and consequent guilt? Confession is its language. Now, can a man pay a just debt by his acknowledgments of its justice? It is a contradiction,

which would lead us to this absurdity; that the more thoroughly unworthy a man felt, the more worthy he would thereby become.

Fourth: Repentance after transgression is a work (Acts xvii. 30). So that justification by repentance would be a justification by works; and all the principles of Luke xvii. 10; Rom. iii. 28 apply to it.

But last: Repentance is as much a gift of God (Acts v. 31), as the remission which it is supposed to purchase. This settles the matter. While, therefore, the impenitent cannot be justified, yet the sole ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

The Scriptures command us to "bring forth fruits meet for repentance." These fruits will, in general, include all holy living; for repentance is a "turning unto God from sin, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience." But there are certain acts which are essentially dictated by repentance and which proceed immediately from the attitude of penitence.

Sincere penitence must lead to confession. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." (Prov. xxviii. 13). The highest form of this duty is the confession of all our sins to God, in secret prayer. True repentance will always thus utter itself to Him. Then, if our sins have scandalized the Church, we must also make public confession of the particular sins which have produced this result. Again, if our sin is immediately aimed at our fellow-man, and known to him, repentance must lead to confession to him.

2. The next consequence of repentance will be to prompt us to make reparation of our sin, wherever it is practicable. He who truly repents, wishes his sin undone. But if he truly wishes it undone, he will, of course, undo it if in his power.

3. The next fruit of repentance must be holy watchfulness against its recurrence. This is too obvious to need proof. See (2 Cor. 7:11), as admirably expounded by Calvin, Institutes, Bk. 3, ch. 3, 15.

The worthless distinction of Rome between attrition and contrition, and the assigning of a religious value to the former, are sufficiently refuted by what precedes. Nor does the duty of auricular confession, so called, find any Scriptural support plausible enough to demand discussion. As to her ascetical exercises of penitence, they are the inventions of fanaticism and spiritual pride. The mortification which Scripture enjoins, is that of the sins, and not of the unreasoning members.