

**THE DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE  
IN REFORMED PERSPECTIVE**

**BY**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Lord Jesus came not to call the righteous but rather to call the sinners to repentance (Lk. 5:32). And the first message of Jesus in Scripture was “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mt. 4:17).” Repentance was the basic requirement of the teachings of Jesus and his apostles to receive the forgiveness of sins in Scripture. And the doctrine of repentance was an important issue for the Reformers as well as in Scripture. The problem of repentance was to become one of the causes of Luther’s Reformation. For Reformers, repentance is produced by the Spirit of Christ in the regeneration and sanctification of a sinner and is absolutely essential to the character of a true Christian. The Christian Church has always preached repentance from sins as one of the main messages from her pulpits.

The doctrine of repentance in the Reformed perspective is a difficult issue but Calvin deemed it “not very complicated”<sup>1</sup> because although repentance is complicated with conversion and regeneration and even sanctification, we can easily come to know and understand this doctrine through the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore my starting point for the understanding of repentance is Scripture because only through Bible we can understand this doctrine obviously and easily.

However, since the time of the early medieval Church, the doctrine of repentance has been corrupted by the guise of nomism and by the medieval doctrine of penance. Berkouwer stated that this penance-nomism is a parasite on the true relationship

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Bk. 3. Ch. 4. 1; Hereafter, Inst.

between repentance and grace.<sup>2</sup> And since the time of Tertullianus,<sup>3</sup> the doctrine of repentance has degenerated into a sacrament of the Roman Church, which is what led to the Reformation.

I think that the restoration of true repentance was, in actuality, the very starting point of the Reformation because the main concern of Luther's 'Die 95 Thesen' was the restoration of true repentance, and the Reformation began as a debate over the meaning of the words "repentance or penitence."<sup>4</sup> In Art. 1 of 'Die 95 Thesen', Our Lord Jesus Christ, Luther said: "Repent you, *et cetera*, intending that the whole life of believers should be repentance."<sup>5</sup> He criticised the doctrine of penance preached by the Roman Catholic Church, thus showing that he wanted to establish the *Sola fide* on true repentance. He may have thought that the restoration of true repentance was the first step for the restoration of 'justification by faith alone.' And Luther's very first thesis touched on the central issue: Jesus Christ announced the imminent coming of

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2 G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 180; hereafter FJ

3 In the second century Tertullianus rejected the possibility of second repentance with Hebrews 6:4-6, and in rigorism Tertullianus believed that those who backslide may not be taken back again to repentance. But he believed in the possibility of divine forgiveness after lapses into sin only by the Church. Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* tr. Robert D. Knudsen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 119; hereafter, FP

4 David C. Steinmetz, "Reformation and Conversion," *Theology Today* 35(1978-79): 25; Anthony N.S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 100-107.

5 Henry Bettenson, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 185-91. Latin, Art. 1. *Dominus et magister noster Iesus Christus dicendo 'Penitentiam (Matt. 4, 17) agite &c.' omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit.* German, Art. 1. *Da unser Herr und Meister Jesus Christus spricht : Tut Busse usw.(Matt. 4, 17), hat er gewollt, dass alles Leben der Gläubigen Busse sein soll.*



the Kingdom of God and invited his listeners to repent.<sup>6</sup> Zwingli also expressly adopted the central thesis of Luther that “the whole of the Christian life must be penitence,”<sup>7</sup> and Calvin wrote, “repentance and forgiveness of sin are the sum of the Gospel”<sup>8</sup> and also “there is no faith in Christ without repentance, without regeneration.”<sup>9</sup> According to Calvin, “with good reason, the sum of the gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins. Any discussion of faith, therefore, that omitted these two topics would be barren and mutilated and well-nigh useless.”<sup>10</sup> The meaning of true repentance was thus a matter of the utmost importance to Calvin and the other Reformers.<sup>11</sup>

Steinmetz also looked at the necessity of repentance in the contemporary Church.<sup>12</sup> For him, debate over the meaning of repentance is basic to Protestantism. From the early and formative decades of the Protestant Reformation through the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century up to today, Protestants have

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6 David C. Steinmetz, op. cit., 26.

7 Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI/ Cambridge, U. K. : Wm B. Eerdmans, 1995), 100.

8 Inst, 3. 3. 1. Repentance is a very important idea in salvation. One can see that Calvin’s thought was based on the two pillars that are repentance and the forgiveness of sins, because Calvin believes that the Gospel consists of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. J. Calvin, *Commentary on Mt 3:2*; Hereafter, Comm.

9 Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom Vol. I* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 467-71; Art. 29 of Geneva Catechism.(1537) in *Theological Treatises*, The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XXII, ed. by J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 88-139.

10 Inst., 3.3.1.

11 Pete Wilcox, “Conversion in the Thought and Experience of John Calvin,” *ANVIL* 14, no. 2 (1997): 116.

12 David C. Steinmetz, op. cit., 25-26.

returned again and again to the themes of penitence and conversion.<sup>13</sup>

Repentance is necessary in our salvation because when God seeks to have fellowship with us in Christ, He hates our sinful way of life.<sup>14</sup> For this reason we must believe in the name of Jesus Christ, trust in His righteousness and repent of our sins. In order to fellowship with God, we must hate our sin and remove our trespasses from ourselves because the original corruption of nature is not entirely removed by regeneration and the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21).

Nevertheless, since the Reformation era, repentance has been dealt with unjustly as though it were merely a worthless part of faith or an unimportant aspect of soteriology in Reformed theology. It has been dealt with comparatively indifferent ideas up until now, even though Calvin called it the sum of the gospel.

The main ideas of the Reformation are, as all of Christianity agrees, ‘justification by faith alone’, the honour of God and the glory of God.<sup>15</sup> We know the main mottos of the Reformation: *Justus ex fide vivit* or *Sola fide, Sola gratia, Sola scriptura*. There is no doubt that they are important starting points of the Reformation.

In comparison with the emphasis of ‘justification by faith alone’ in Reformed soteriology, repentance was underestimated by Reformed theology and the only

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13 Ibid., 25.

14 Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, tr. Harold Knight (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 126.

15 Ibid., 11-12 ... “the whole edifice of Calvinistic theology rests upon a certain fundamental principle, This principle is certainly not anything formal but is something lived out in the depths of the soul: the honour of God”

interest of the modern Christian, especially in the Reformed Church, is justification and whether or not it is related to salvation. The doctrine of repentance has been treated as a mostly subjective element in the *Ordo Salutis*, whereas justification by faith in Christ is treated mostly as an objective element. It is true that only the Reformed Church has held to the doctrine of justification and the atonement of Christ, but they have held that repentance is no more than an ethical element of the Christian religion and it does not have an important role in soteriology.

But it is also true that the Reformed church has preached two main topics: the first being the idea of ‘justification by faith alone’ and forgiveness of sins, and the second being that of repentance. Both repentance and forgiveness of sins are inextricably related to hamartiology because repentance and forgiveness of sins starts from the problem of sin, and the problem of sin can be solved by repentance and forgiveness of sins in Christ. But modern Christians rarely experience the sense of guilt and do not even know what the genuine meaning of ‘sin’ is exactly, because since the Reformation, the Reformed Church has neglected the sense of sin and its fatality in her preachings.

The Reformed church has the signs of the true Church: baptism, the Holy Supper, correct preaching of the word of God and discipline. All of these require repentance as preliminary steps. But only ‘justification by faith alone’ has had its position of presupposition for the signs of the Church. Therefore, today we must consider the authentic role of repentance in Reformed theology and the biblical response to it. In this thesis I will argue that true repentance is urgently needed in the modern Reformed Christian because I think that the doctrine of repentance is one of the most important

aspects of the Reformed faith.

In the Bible, both the doctrine of repentance and ‘justification by faith alone’ are the heart of the Gospel. Nevertheless, the modern Reformed church has lost this heart because ‘justification by faith alone’ in the Reformed theology has covered up the position and role of repentance. In the Scripture, faith and repentance stand together, with the former growing out of the latter and the latter coming from the former. And the true doctrine of repentance helps one to understand the true ‘justification by faith alone’ because they are inseparable and indissoluble in soteriology and they are one gospel.

In the sense intended by Scripture, repentance is not merely a subjective change or a simple confession of sin by mouth, but a complete change of life, a gift of God and His ministry only to be found in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. According to this doctrine, God alone can initiate the change of the whole man. God changes not only the inward man and thoughts, but also the whole life of man. Therefore, through repentance of sins to God, man not only has good thoughts, but also does good works. True repentance precedes good works, therefore Christians do good works in repentance by the grace of God. So, Reformed theology sustains both the subjectivity and the objectivity of salvation; that is objectivity as a work of God and subjectivity as a response of man to God’s operation.

The Korean Church, as is the case with other Christian Churches, has many problems concerning the doctrine of repentance. The repentance movement in the Korean Church is related to group repentance rather than individual repentance, especially in Friday Prayer meetings. Korean Christians have hardly experienced the

complete change of life through repentance and they do not know that repentance is a ministry of God that comes from God Himself because, with the influence of revivalism and pietism, Korean Christians have tended to understand repentance as a personal and subjective experience concerning the forgiveness of sins, in contrast to Reformed theology.

My approach to the doctrine of repentance according to the Reformed perspective should be helpful to the Korean Presbyterian Church, which is made up of over half of all Korean Christians that have been touched by Reformed theology. Reformed theology overemphasises the objectivity in repentance, whereas the Korean Presbyterian Church overemphasises the subjectivity in repentance. Through this study, Korean Presbyterian Christians will be shown that the operator of repentance is God alone and that there is a balance between subjectivity and objectivity in soteriology.

I think that repentance is an important means in salvation (Ps. 7:12; Lk. 13:3, 5). And the Gospel is accompanied with not only ‘justification by faith alone’ but also ‘assurance of forgiveness of sins through repentance.’ Therefore, in my thesis I will deal with the relationship between sin and repentance, faith and repentance, sanctification and justification, repentance and Christ and the Holy Spirit for roles of God in repentance, repentance and the kingdom of God and the image of God, repentance and forgiveness of Sins and the unforgivable sin, repentance and conversion, the unique role of “Moment and Progression” repentance in salvation and finally, for the external proof and the human role in the doctrine of repentance, I will look at repentance and good works as evidence of it.

The reason why I deal with the doctrine of repentance of Calvin, K. Barth, G. C. Berkouwer and Hyung-Nong Park in this thesis is, first of all, that they have greatly contributed to Protestant theology, especially to Reformed theology. And I will deal first with Calvin's doctrine of repentance in order to investigate the position of the early Reformation and to know the position of traditional Reformed theology; second, Karl Barth's doctrine of repentance will be dealt with because in modern Reformed theology his influence is great and he fought against the subjectivism of nineteenth century liberal theology to protect Reformed theology from liberal theology; third, I will look at G. C. Berkouwer's doctrine of repentance and through it I will examine the process of change in Reformed theology because Berkouwer is an important theologian of Reformed theology who can present the modern context of Reformed theology; fourth, I will deal with the doctrine of penance in official Roman Catholicism; the Trent, the fourth Lateran, and the first and second Vatican Council, through it showing the history of penance and knowing the meaning of penance in the counter-Reformation and criticising the Roman Catholic Church's problems with penance; fifth, I will deal with Hyung-Nong Park, a representative systematic theologian and the greatest theologian to want to establish Reformed theology, separating it from liberal theology and religious subjectivism in the Korean Church. Through Hyung-Nong Park I will clarify the doctrine of repentance of the Korean Presbyterian Christian from where I stand.

Through this thesis I will compare the theology of four Reformed theologians, and Roman Catholic theology, with the biblical idea regarding the doctrine of repentance, and suggest a perspective relevant for twenty-first century Korean Christians in the position of Reformed theology.