

Repenting Always

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Modern Reformation, March/April 1999, page 40

At one of the recent "Here We Stand" seminars sponsored by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals someone submitted the following for our question and answer period: "I have witnessed in some churches which call themselves Reformed, a tendency to teach salvation by grace but sanctification by works. The result is a theology that looks no different than the works-based salvation of the world. What is the true biblical view of sanctification as it relates to our salvation?"

One way to answer such a question is by explaining that growing in grace is a fruit of our regeneration and that it encompasses a desire for and practical use of all the means of grace: the Sacraments, Bible study, prayer and Christian fellowship. One of the speakers probably did answer along such lines. But as I have thought about the question it strikes me that it raises a far deeper issue than a mere theology of sanctification. The words are actually asking, "Why do people who believe in grace so often seem to be self-righteous? Why do we who stand for the doctrines of grace, and even fight for them, allow the reality of grace to fade into the background of our daily living? Why do we appear to be not very different religiously from those who live around us in the world?"

I think the real problem is that we have forgotten that we are sinners. We know we have been sinners. We rejoice that God has saved us from our sin through the atoning death of Christ. But now we suppose that we are living on a higher level and easily slip into the conviction that we are continuing to live on that level by our own efforts.

What we need is to go back to our Reformation roots and remember what Martin Luther wrote as the first of the Ninety-Five Theses posted on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg. "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'repent,' he meant that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance." This means that we never cease being sinners, that we must honestly and constantly confess that we are sinners, and that we must rely unceasingly on the sustaining grace of God to obey God, live for God, and serve others. Even then we must confess that at the best "we are unworthy servants" (Luke 17:10).

We need a confession that is something like the line repeated by each participant at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous: "My name is . . . and I am an alcoholic." Never mind that the speaker may not have had a drink for ten years. His past is always before him, and the only way he is able to stay sober is by remembering not merely what he was but what he is.

I have a good friend with whom I meet most weeks, and one thing he has shared with me is that he never begins a prayer without saying something like this: "Lord, I am a sinner. I sin all the time in my thoughts and in what I do. I need your forgiveness always, and I ask for it now." Whenever we have talked about that prayer it has always struck me that it is a genuine prayer since the very act of coming before the holy God and living our lives in his sight reminds us that we are not holy and that we stand before him only by his grace.

That is how we know that the prayer of the tax collector was a true prayer and the prayer of the Pharisee was not. Both men prayed to "God." But the Pharisee's prayer was about himself and his own righteousness. The tax collector prayed, "God, have mercy to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

Another friend of mine says that the trouble with Christians is that they do not believe that they are sinners. But we are! And unless we know it and confess it we will never be much use to a world that needs not so much the evidence of righteousness in us, which they can copy by their own fleshly efforts, as living demonstrations of God's grace, which they need but cannot copy. People who know they are sinners, who confess it and who depend on God's grace will live increasingly holy lives. But they will hardly be aware of it and will certainly not be talking about it all the time. They will be too busy marveling at the mercies of our God and concerned that others might come to know him also.

The late Dr. James Montgomery Boice was the president of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and senior minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.