

Ps 25:9,10
 Ps 34:7
 Ps 26:2,3,4
 Ps 35:1,2,4
 Ps 32:1,2,3
 Col 3:1-17
 LD 33

Yarrow, September 12, 2010

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

It's a rule of thumb that action from God demands reaction from God's people; that's what the covenant is all about. Last week, with LD 32, we made confession of the fact that Jesus Christ not only redeemed us by His blood, but also renews us by His Holy Spirit. As a result, we're not only His possession, purchased by His blood, and so no longer Satan's property; we're also, we added, restored – like an old car made new. Christ's work is so far-reaching!

In LD 33, now, we confess what *response* the Lord wants from us to His renewing work. God's renewing work in our hearts means that we need to make it our business to *be renewed*, and that's what the true repentance or conversion of man is all about.¹

Having said that, I need to make very plain for each of us that repentance or conversion (the two terms mean essentially the same thing) is required of every sinner. The material of our Lord's Day –and therefore this sermon this afternoon– is not first of all for the unbeliever who needs to repent and come to faith. Nor is it for the person in the next pew who has fallen into sin and needs to repent of that sin. Rather, the material of our Lord's Day –and therefore this sermon– pertains to each and every one of us. We all have need of repentance, day by day. Please, then, do not let your thoughts this afternoon travel to the person in the next pew; let your thoughts stay with *yourself*.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE REGENERATED CHILD OF GOD MUST REPENT OF HIS EVERY SIN.

1. Repentance requires sorrow for specific sins.
2. Repentance requires battle against all sin.

1. Repentance requires sorrow for specific sins

What, congregation, is true repentance or conversion? We confess in Q & A 88 that it involves two aspects, viz, “the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new.” I hope to say more about these two aspects in our second point. First, though, we need a clear understanding in our minds as to what this repentance really is.

As a result of our fall into sin, we have become depraved and so –in the words of LD 3– “inclined to all evil”. That's to say: our faces are pointed away from God, are pointed towards sin & Satan. At the same time, there is a drive deep within us that urges us further away from God, that urges us to do the sin before us. Not only, then, do we readily do what is evil; within us is a overwhelming *urge* to sin.

As it is, though, the God to whom we've turned our backs has reached into our sin-filled heart by His Holy Spirit and *renewed* that heart – regeneration, that restoring work we spoke

¹ See vanGenderen, *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), pg 547f.

about last week. How, now, shall we respond to this renewing work the Spirit has done in our hearts? Shall we keep our faces pointed away from God and toward sin? Shall we continue to answer the urges within us to give ourselves to sin and not to God? This, now, is repentance, that we do a 180 degree turn, that we turn our backs to sin and turn our faces to God.

Note it well: there are, then, two aspects to repentance. The first is that we turn away from sin. The second is that we turn to God. Those two aspects we find back in Q & A 88: repentance involves “the dying of the old nature” (that involves this turning away from sin); it involves also “the coming to life of the new nature” – and part of that is turning your face to God.

To give an example. I read in I Sam 7 of Samuel’s words to Israel after the ark had been returned from the land of the Philistines. The passage says this:

“Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, ‘If you return to the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines’ (vs 3).

Note: Samuel speaks of turning to the Lord, and describes this repentance in two-fold terms. It involves first of all, he says, that the Israelites “put away the foreign gods”; it involves in the second place that the Israelites “serve Him only”. That’s repentance or conversion: turning away from sin and turning to God.

How often, then, is one to repent? How often is one to turn from sin and turn to God? One would wish that this would be a once off thing, like when the apostle Paul repented on the road to Damascus; instead of persecuting the church of Jesus Christ, he from now on gave himself to preaching the gospel of Christ. But repentance, congregation, is not a once-only thing. Certainly, there will be a first time that one repents, when one first comes to faith in Jesus Christ. And that first-time repentance may or may not be dramatic. Paul experienced that repentance in a most profound manner, but those born and raised with the gospel have been taught from childhood to repent of sins and so numerous of us in church today cannot recall the first time we repented. And that’s fine.

No, brothers and sisters, repentance is not a once-only thing. For the renewing work of the Holy Spirit is not perfected in this broken life. Though the child of God is restored, the sin within is not stamped out altogether. The result is, says Paul to the Galatians, that there’s a struggle going on inside the Christian. I quote:

“... the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Gal 5:17).

The result of the flesh lusting against the Spirit is that the child of God gives Himself repeatedly to sin. That’s why Paul says of himself as a Christian that he can will what is right but can’t do it (Rom 7), is still in fact the foremost of sinners (I Tim 1:15). That is why in turn the church confesses in LD 23 that even the righteous person “is still inclined to all evil”. Let us make no mistake, brothers and sisters: we speak here of *you and me*. None of us is above sin; in fact, each of us gives himself to sin day by day, whether the sin be big or small (in our eyes), whether the sin be performed consciously or unconsciously. *And that is why we all need to repent of sin, repent day by day*. That is why I say that this sermon is not for the person in the next pew; this sermon is for each one of us. We all need day by day to repent of sin, need day by day to turn away with shame from the evil we’ve committed in our deeds, in our words, in our thoughts – or even the evil we’re committed in our attitudes. We all need day by day to turn again to God to seek His will for our actions, our words, our thoughts – and even our attitudes. Repentance is for *each of us*, is for each of us *daily*.

How? The Lord commanded Israel to set aside one day per year as the Day of Atonement. On that day the people (be it through the priest) had to confess their sins before God. That confession had to be accompanied, said God, by particular action. Said God: "... you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all" (NKJV Lev 16:29; cf vs 31). "Afflict your souls," said God. The point is that the people were to show *sorrow* for sin; their sins were to bother them to the extent that on that day they should have no appetite to eat.

The Lord does not ask us to set aside one day per year as a Day of Atonement, one day per year to confess our sins. Instead, repentance is to be a daily thing. But the sorrow for sin that Israel had to show belongs still to repentance. Inherent to repentance is an attitude of *humility*, of being broken-before-God on account of the sin we've committed. Hence the mood of a psalm as Ps 51. And the cry of the prophet Isaiah when He saw the holiness of God; "woe is me", he cried, "I'm undone!" (Isaiah 6:5). That's why we confess in our LD that repentance involves that we "grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin." As we repent daily from the evil thoughts, words and deeds of which we're guilty, we do well to do so with an attitude of humility, of sorrow. And yes, that may bring its tears also.

Yet repentance is not only tears and sorrow and humility. Israel was commanded to "afflict [their] souls" only on that one day of the year. Beyond that, there was so very much room in Israel for rejoicing in the forgiveness God granted. And so it is to be today. There is certainly need for the broken heart, for humility and tears. But it is not right that one *keeps on* crying and afflicting oneself. Repentance involves also that one grasps eagerly the forgiveness of sins Christ obtained on the cross. And that gospel of forgiveness gives cause for rejoicing. That too is confessed in the Catechism; repentance involves "a heartfelt joy in God through Christ".

This, congregation, is something we need to keep in mind for ourselves as well as for our expectations of others who we know have sinned. It is not for us to stay in our tears and remorse, and it will not do for us either to demand of others that they keep on crying for their sins. There is need for humility in the face of our sins; no doubt of that. But after grief comes joy and that joy is to continue, and it's that joy that to predominate at the good news of forgiveness. In our marriages, in our families, yes, and in the congregation as a whole, let's encourage each other to move in repentance beyond the grief and sorrow at sin to the joy of forgiveness in Jesus' blood. Without that joy at the forgiveness of sins in Christ, our repentance is not complete.

We move on to our second point:

2. Repentance requires battle against all sin.

Repentance, I'd said earlier, involved two aspects: turning away from sin and turning to God. Our Catechism echoes these two aspects with different terms. I read in A 88 about "the dying of the old nature" and "the coming to live of the new".

With these words, congregation, the Catechism expands on the simple notion that repentance is turning away from sin and turning to God. The phrase "the dying of the old nature" describes a *process*, and so does the phrase "the coming to life of the new". In this second point, it's this process I need to draw out with you.

The Catechism has borrowed the phrase "the dying of the old nature" from Paul's letter to the Colossians. In chap 3, the apostle reminds the saints of Colossae that they died with Christ when Christ died, and were raised with Christ when Christ arose. That, at bottom, is the regeneration of which we spoke last week. Paul adds in vs 5 what response the Lord requires of

the Colossians. “Therefore,” he says, “put to death your members which are on the earth.” There’s the phrase “put to death”. Here is an instruction the regenerated Colossians are given; they must see to it² that they kill, that they “put to death” those aspects of themselves which remain directed to things of this earth, directed to sin. That instruction, and the process implied in it, is captured by the Catechism when it speaks of “the dying of the old nature.” And, as turning over a coin not only hides one side but enlightens the other, so the Catechism mentions straightaway “the coming to life of the new”; to put to death the one is to encourage life in the other.

But how can one speak of repentance as a process? Does one not repent from specific sins? Yes, one does. But the point is this. It will not do to be sorry for a particular sin, and then leave oneself wide open to committing that same sin again. To repent of sin means also that one does what’s possible to make sure that you don’t commit the evil tomorrow again. And how does one do that? Here is where the matter of “putting to death” your earth-oriented urges enters the picture.

Recall: the renewing work of the Holy Spirit has not made us perfect yet. Galatians 5: “... the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (vs 17). There’s a war going on inside the self (cf Rom 7:23). War requires *battle*, requires determination, requires self-denial. That’s the point of Paul’s words in Colossians 3: there’s a battle, and you have to *kill* the enemy – lest he kill you. Who that enemy is? That’s your own flesh, those evil desires that remain within us. And that’s who we are told to kill: our own flesh! “The flesh lusts against the Spirit”, and it’s for us to *fight back*, to do so resolutely, doggedly.

Now, it’s one thing to fight the enemy across the river. From the safety of your bunker you lob a bomb into his lap, and that should be that. But what do you do when the enemy is *within*, is your own flesh? The enemy across the river gets no sympathy from us; we do what it takes to defeat him. *It is the Lord’s will that we be equally ruthless in fighting the enemy within.* Listen to Jesus’ words in Mt 5:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell” (vss 29f).

Yes, those are radical words. If that hand eggs you on to listen to Sin instead of to God, if that eye of yours sets temptation before you that you can’t handle, cut it off, pluck it out – radical!

How are we to do that concretely? I’ll come to that in a moment. First, though, I want to set before you the promise of the Scripture that we *can* wage this battle and be radical about it; it’s not too hard. After all, our Lord Jesus Christ has conquered sin and Satan on the cross of Calvary; He has “freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession” (LD 13). Satan, then, is not our boss, and sin is not either. Further, the Lord who delivered us from Satan has also poured out His Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. This Spirit has renewed our hearts so that we are made “willing and ready from now on to live for Him” (LD 1). Here’s a

² JI Packer, *God’s Words* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1981), pg 181 notes that the verb in Col 3:5 is “in the aorist tense, implying that mortification, once commenced, will be successfully accomplished.” He notes further that the same verb occurs in Rom 8:13, but there the verb “is in the present tense, implying that mortification must be continuous.”

gospel we are allowed to believe, yes, are commanded to believe, a gospel we need to work with very concretely when it comes to the material of LD 33.

Christ has defeated sin and Satan, and through His Spirit united us to Him. That is why, says Paul in Rom 6, we are no longer slaves of sin (vs 6, 11). That's something we *were*, but are not any more (vs 17). So: don't let sin be your boss, he says, (vs 12), for "sin shall not have dominion over you" (vs 14). Conclusion? When sin whispers in our ear that we should do this or that (which God has forbidden), we are able to say No to sin's temptation! Truly, beloved of the Lord, *we can say No to sin!* That's a thought we need to fix firmly in our minds: it is simply not true that we have no choice in the face of sin's temptations, simply not true that giving in to a particular temptation of sin is inevitable. Christ defeated sin and Satan, and the Spirit of Christ dwells within us, and so we are *made able* to say No to sin. Here's a very encouraging gospel!

Still, that doesn't make saying No easy. For we remain full of sin and inclined to evil. Here's where the mandate to "put to death" what's earthly in you remains so very important. And killing requires a fight, requires ruthlessness and even radical behaviour; witness Jesus' words about the eye and the right hand. Is it too hard to pluck out the eye, or to cut off the hand? *We* say, Yes it is. But the Lord says No, it's not *too* hard. Why not? Because Christ has defeated sin and Satan, and His Holy Spirit has made His home in our renewed hearts. So, in His strength, we can do it.

How, concretely? Jesus means literally exactly what He says, congregation. If that eye of yours somehow leads you to commit again the sin you committed yesterday, *pluck it out!* If your friends egg you on to commit the sin you fell into last week, *drop those friends* – and never mind if that means you end up without friends. It is better to enter the kingdom of heaven deserted by friends, then to have a row of friends accompany you to hell. If university or college presents you with more temptation than you can handle, leave university, leave college; it is better to enter the kingdom of heaven without a degree than to enter hell with a row of letters behind your name. Dare to be radical, dare to acknowledge that temptation from a certain quarter is too much for you, dare to cut your income, to cut your entertainment, to cut your friends out of your life, if that's what's required to stay clear of sin. Let it be fixed in your mind: repentance of a sin is not genuine if you leave yourself wide open to falling into the same sin tonight again.

Paul lists in Colossians 3 a number of transgressions and struggles to which we can all relate. He says: "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (vs 5). Indeed, "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire": how close these evils lie to our sinful hearts. And time and again we find our minds obsessed with unclean thoughts – and by the grace of God it bothers us so that we repent.... What would the Lord have us do now? This, beloved: *put to death* that appetite for evil passions. How do you do that? By staying miles away from temptation. Specifically: does the drive for uncleanness in our thoughts get a boost from TV? Or from the newspaper? Or from the internet? Does what you see on TV or read in your Women's Weekly take away the sharp edge from your conscience so that seeing sin doesn't bother you any more – and sin comes a bit easier to you? Then, brothers and sisters, be adult enough to throw the TV out and the Women's Weekly too; that's concrete application of Jesus' word about the eye and the right hand. Does your connection to the internet provide sin with an opportunity to goad you into accessing pages that display sin so that you in fact do access pages that fuel greed or selfishness or fornication or some other evil? Then be man enough to take radical measures about your internet access – be it terminating your subscription or uploading a program (like Covenant Eyes) that will tell another designated person exactly which

sites you've visited or evening moving your computer to the family room for any one to monitor; that's what repenting is all about, that's what the battle against sin is all about, that's how you starve the old nature and make alive the new. Radical action, action that recognises we're involved in deadly war; either I kill sin or sin will kill me – eternally. And I repeat: the battle is not too hard, for Christ has triumphed, and He has sent His Holy Spirit to renew our hearts. Only: don't put those aspects of faith on the shelf as interesting and worth talking about; rather, work *concretely* with that gospel in the struggles of your life.

Truly, congregation, the battle requires radical action. Read again through Colossians 3 at home, and reflect on how difficult you find it to put off *all* anger, all wrath, all malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth, all lying, etc. And contemplate on how difficult *you* find it always to put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, forgiving one another, etc. Yes, the battle requires radical action, requires determination to seek and do God's will, requires ceaseless prayer, requires full concentration on the battle at hand. Repentance, putting to death the old nature and making alive the new, is *work*. And to do this work, to fight this fight, you need energy, need food – and that's the reason for daily Bible study and daily meditation on what God's promises and obligations are for you. Here's need for sweat!

But believe it, beloved, believe: you can fight the battle, you can repent in the deep sense of the word, because your Lord and Saviour triumphed on Calvary, broke the back of Sin and Satan. You may *believe it*, and therefore fight on doggedly. And God shall grant that at His time you shall see progress in the struggle too; you shall see evidence that your appetite for a particular sin decreases and your delight in God's will increases. And that's the evidence of the Spirit's renewing work in your heart.

So now the question, for each of you personally: are you repentant of your own sins, all of them? And that means too: are you battling in the strength of the Lord against the evil that remains within you? These are questions you need to answer, honestly, before the throne of God.