

## **(2) Duke Kwon - "Can we repent for racial sins we didn't personally..."**

"Can we repent for racial sins we didn't personally commit?" This afternoon, we discussed this question, among others, as part of the Potomac Presbytery public forum on a denominational "overture" on confessing racial sins during the Civil Rights era. Though it gets slightly technical for those who aren't pastors or theological nerds, here's a summary of the perspective I shared orally in an effort to answer the question in the affirmative:

Many people will appeal to the principle of imputation vis-à-vis the doctrine of original sin. "We are held responsible for Adam's sin though we did not personally commit it, and Christ paid for our sin though he did not personally commit it," the argument goes, "therefore, we likewise should be willing to confess sins we are associated with but did not personally commit." But, while the imputation of Adam's sin to us and ours to Christ is helpful as analogy, it is slightly imprecise as theology. Imputation, strictly speaking, assumes federal headship. Adam's sin is credited to me because he is the covenantal representative of the human race and for no other reason; the same could be said of Christ's relationship to the new humanity recreated in him (Rom. 5:12-21). More importantly, this arrangement was legally and morally unique, a once-for-all exchange in redemptive-history.

Perhaps one might appeal to imputation—again, by analogy—as the basis for a people's confession of the sins of its leader or a delegate serving in a representative, "covenantal" role (or vice versa). Otherwise, strictly speaking, in principle neither the guilt of one individual, nor the obligation to repent of that guilt, can be "imputed" to another (Jer. 31:29-30; cf. Deut. 24:16; Ezek. 17b-22).

Is there a different way to make the case for corporate repentance? I believe there is. The strongest theological basis for the practice of corporate repentance, in my opinion, is not the principle of imputation, but rather, the principle of corporate identification.

God has always dealt with humanity covenantally as both a "me" and a "we," that is, both individually and corporately. Throughout scripture, moral responsibility is assigned for sins on both these levels, albeit in different ways.

For example, many in Israel were held accountable for sins they did not personally commit. By virtue of their shared identity as Israelites, bound together by covenant, they suffered the afflictions of exile, even physical death, as a form of temporal judgment. This of course included even those who had exercised saving faith and personal "repentance

unto life." Some, like Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan. 1), were simultaneously personally righteous and corporately responsible. The wheat and chaff were treated as a covenantal unit. They suffered for sin together. They were called to repent together (Jer. 15:19; Ezek. 14:6; Hos. 14:1; 1 Kgs. 8:46-51). And the righteous would repent of sins, even those they had not committed personally (Lev. 26:40-45; Ezz. 9:6-16; Neh. 9:16-37; Dan. 9:4-11).

Some may argue that times have changed under the New Covenant, which ostensibly deemphasizes the corporate aspects of the Old. I would simply point out that Jesus himself regularly issued corporate calls to repentance to a "wicked and unbelieving generation" (e.g., Matt. 12:39-45; 17:17), as did his apostles (Acts 2:40). Further, the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 were invitations for entire churches to repent corporately (Rev. 2:5, 16; 3:3; etc.) irrespective of which individuals were responsible for the enumerated sins. Evidently, the principle of corporate identification endures in the New Covenant with respect to repentance.

Therefore, it is proper to repent for sins of those with whom you share a covenantal identity—not because God imputes other individuals' sins to you individually, but because God holds the covenant community responsible for their collective sins collectively. Of course, these two dimensions to repentance, individual/personal and corporate/communal, are not morally equivalent. It is important to note that many Israelites regularly participated in acts of corporate confession/repentance, for example, on the Day of Atonement, without having "circumcised their hearts" (Jer. 4:4), which is to say, without having exercised saving faith or repentance unto life. This underscores the enduring necessity (primacy?) of repentance for personal sin for "eternal life." Again, individual and corporate repentance are not morally equivalent. But they are both morally necessary.

This covenantal principle of corporate identification is but one reason why, though I wasn't alive during the days of Jim Crow and the founding of the PCA, and though I am neither white nor black, and though I did not personally bar African-Americans from my pews, nor preach in support of segregation, nor participate in white supremacist organizations, I, on behalf of—and, Lord willing, together with—my denomination, do repent of our racial sins of commission and omission during the Civil Rights era.

They are mine, though I did not personally commit them.