

## A Comment on Calvin's *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543)

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### I: -- Setting

Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, was aware that the disputes the Reformation had engendered were unsettling on many fronts. He was anxious lest the multi-faceted upheaval distract Protestant princes from his war with France. Wishing to maximize the probability of his triumph, Charles V called for a Diet in the German city of Speyer<sup>1</sup>, wherein he would plead his case; namely, that Protestant doctrinal zeal, with its concomitant divisiveness, should be suspended in the interest of maintaining a united ecclesiastical front against France.

Speyer had been the site of Diets in 1526 (where Protestantism had been recognized) and again in 1529 (where such recognition had been rescinded.) Charles scheduled the third Diet for February 1544, several months away.

Martin Bucer, the Reformer in Strasbourg whose theology had influenced Calvin<sup>2</sup> when Calvin had been harassed out of Geneva and had been afforded refuge in Strasbourg from 1538 to 1541; Bucer had considered writing a document that would set forth the Reformation's case<sup>3</sup>, therein reminding (if not informing) the emperor as to why the Reformation Church could not surrender theological conviction or suspend theological activity regardless of social, political or military consequences.

The Reformers were iron-fast in their intransigence and its defensibility; their theological convictions, after all, pertained not to theological *adiaphora* or religious frippery but rather to

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<sup>1</sup> Speyer had been the site of two previous Diets, 1526 and 1529. The former recognized Protestantism, while the second rescinded the recognition; thereafter the Reformers were labelled "Protestants."

<sup>2</sup> See Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, transl. Mairet, P.; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> See "Introduction", "The Necessity of Reforming the Church"; Reid, J.K.S., transl.; *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1954), p.183 and Greschat, M., *Martin Bucer*, transl. Buckwalter, S.E.; (Philadelphia, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), pp.195-197.

the eternal well-being of humankind. In other words, the Reformers were convinced that the Reformation, however collaterally disruptive on however so many fronts, was essential to the recovery and prosecution of a gospel apart from which humankind was ultimately lost before God.

The document Bucer considered writing would assure the emperor that Protestants were not politically treacherous or even politically indifferent. At the same time, Protestants could never be expected to surrender theological conviction for the sake of a united, extra-theological front.

Bucer, however, came to doubt whether such a document would be effective.<sup>4</sup> He declined to write it. Yet where Bucer appeared immobilized, Calvin was inflamed. By the end of 1543 he had penned a tract that would subsequently assist the theological self-criticism and gospel-reorientation of the Protestant Church for centuries thereafter.

In light of Reformation writings extant by 1543, why was such a document needed? Luther had already written much and disseminated it widely. Melancthon had published his *Loci Communes*, the first systematic theology of the Reformation, a work that Luther had deemed subordinate only to Scripture. Calvin himself had already published his 1536 *Institutes*, the tome for which he would chiefly be known thereafter. In addition he had hugely expanded the Latin edition of 1536 into the Latin edition of 1539, and then had translated the latter into French in 1541, thereby assuring a much wider readership. Moreover, while he was working alongside Bucer in Strasbourg, Calvin had written his iconic commentary on Romans in 1539 and had published it in 1540. Had not the Reformation's cause and course been announced, driven and defended in all such publications? Had not Calvin's convictions been exposed adequately in his own writings to date, together with what he had produced since the Romans commentary (e.g., *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, 1541)?

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<sup>4</sup> Reid, Introduction, *op. cit.*, p.183.

Plainly Calvin was aware that the Church has to be producing at least two types of theology. One type is the sort exemplified in Melancthon's *Loci Communes* or Calvin's *Institutes*; namely, that theological construct which explores the "whole counsel of God"<sup>5</sup> in such a way as to identify the essential 'building blocks' of the faith (e.g., creation, fall, calling of Israel, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, bestowal of the Spirit, eschatology) and relates them internally to each other, indicating a logical connection wherein the neglect of any one of them denatures all the remaining. The second type of theological writing is 'occasional' in that it addresses a crisis or opportunity that has appeared unanticipated; i.e., what the turning of the wheel of history has exposed on a singular occasion should be seized and dealt with before the same wheel, turning relentlessly, eliminates such an opportunity. Calvin knew that the *ecclesia* was not merely *reformata* but also *semper reformanda*, always being reformed because always needing to be reformed. *Reformanda* remains essential since the Word of God must be brought to bear remorselessly on the anti-gospel accretions that haunt the church, and since, in the second place, *reformanda* characterizes the church's mission to a world whose challenges appear in different dress in different eras. For this reason Calvin leapt at the opportunity to address the princes of the Reformation territories on the necessity (i.e., the non-negotiability and the non-postponement) of reforming the Church.

## II: -- Doctrine

Calvin addresses the tract under discussion to the emperor and to the princes "...that they seriously undertake the task of restoring the Church, presented in the name of all those who wish Christ to reign."<sup>6</sup> On the one hand Jesus Christ, declared victor in his resurrection, has been installed as ruler in his ascension and session. As such he is impregnable, and reigns

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 20:27 (RSV).

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, cited in Reid, *op. cit.*, p.184.

regardless of what anyone wishes or does not wish, the reign of Christ not being determined by creaturely acknowledgement. On the other hand, Calvin boldly asserts that unfaithful guardians of sound doctrine “banish Christ and the truth of his gospel.”<sup>7</sup> (Two decades later Calvin will be found making the same bold point: where doctrine is distorted “God’s remedy for rescuing mankind from death is rendered useless.”<sup>8</sup>) When doctrine is distorted Christ cannot be called upon and known. For this reason the recovery of sound doctrine is essential to the salvific accessibility of Christ – and therefore reason enough for the Reformers’ preoccupation.

How urgently does sound doctrine need to be recovered and the Church restored? Calvin maintains that the issue is not whether the Church is afflicted with disease, but whether the disease is of such a nature that waiting upon “too slow a remedy”<sup>9</sup> inexcusably imperils people. For this reason Calvin rejects the accusation that he and his fellow-Reformers are guilty of “rash and impious innovation.”<sup>10</sup> In fact he denies that the Reformation is innovation at all; it aims at restoring the Church, not re-inventing it. As for the suggestion of rashness, Calvin presupposes an understanding of the human predicament that forbids any imputation of indiscretion. In this regard he refers to Luther, whom, along with others, “...God raised up as a torch...that lifted people into the way of salvation.”<sup>11</sup> Evidently Calvin assumes that sinners are at risk before the all-holy God. People need to be *lifted* into the way of salvation inasmuch as they are not in that ‘way’ at present, are imperilled as long as they are not, and are unable to raise themselves from death to life. Salvation, for all the Reformers, is that act of God whereby God-in-his-mercy saves people from God-in-his-condemnation.

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<sup>7</sup> *op. cit.*, p.209.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*; Farley, B., transl.; (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing Company, 2003), p. 369.

<sup>9</sup> *op. cit.*, p.185

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

There is no suggestion anywhere in the Reformers of the existentialism that laps contemporary theology; namely, that the gospel is God's remedy of a predicament that humankind has brought upon itself; i.e., alienation or estrangement. To be sure, humankind *is* alienated – from God, from each other, from self – but all of this not because of human disobedience, rebellion or folly but rather on account of God's *reaction to and judgement upon* such inexcusable disobedience, outrageous rebellion and culpable folly. (Adam and Eve, it should be noted, did not wander out of the Garden of Eden but rather were expelled from it by a judicious act of God.) Ultimately, the threat to humankind is none other than God; only God can rescind the threat that he is. He has done so by rendering himself 'propitiatory' (a word that Calvin uses on almost every page of *Institutes* and *Commentaries*) in the cross, the truth of which is attested by doctrine. The recovery of doctrine must proceed without tarrying for any consideration, including the emperor's, lest the day of grace be foreclosed. For this reason Calvin tells the emperor and other political leaders that regardless of the urgency of their causes, the Protestant cause, and with it the writing of his tract, is of the "*highest necessity*."<sup>12</sup>

Essential to God's urgent, relentless 'search and rescue mission' is a repristination of the "heads of doctrine"<sup>13</sup>, or to use an expression mentioned earlier, the building blocks of the faith. Such heads of doctrine setting forth the "pure of worship of God" and comprehending "the salvation of men (*sic*),"<sup>14</sup> had been rendered "in a great sense obsolete."<sup>15</sup> Had they been rendered utterly obsolete, of course, the faith would have disappeared, and with it the salvific availability of Christ. Still, Calvin does not hesitate to say that essential doctrines have "in a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *op. cit.*, p.186.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

great measure<sup>16</sup> been lost to sight.

What renders anything obsolete at any time? Novelty does. What is novel renders what is current obsolete. Theological novelty – i.e., what is non-scriptural (and therein necessarily non-catholic) – has rendered obsolete the truths without which the Church crumbles. Reformation theology, Calvin wants everyone to know, so far from exemplifying novelty renounces faddism in any form.

In anticipating and denying the charge of theological innovation Calvin everywhere insists that Jesus Christ is Truth (in the sense of the apostle John's *aletheia*, 'reality'.) In accord with Scripture and the Church Fathers he insists no less on soundness of doctrine in that he is aware at all times of the relationship between Truth and the truths (doctrine) that point to reality and articulate it. Truth is a living person; truths are statements that describe this reality. Truth and truths are categorically distinct and must therefore always be distinguished. Yet even as they must be distinguished they may not be separated. Theology is concerned with both insofar as theology (i) has to do with reality; (ii) formulates statements that aim at speaking provisionally, to be sure, yet speak *truthfully* and *adequately* of this reality without pretending to speak *exhaustively*. Not to be concerned with sound doctrine is to "banish Christ" in the sense that one is asserting (i) that there is no Truth, or (ii) Truth (i.e., the reality of the living God) is not knowable, or (iii) Truth is of such a nature that while it may be intuited it cannot be articulated (by means of truths) and therefore cannot be commended. Either sound doctrine (truths in the service of Truth) is recovered or Christ remains effectively "banished."

Calvin avers that apart from doctrinal pronouncement the Lord of such pronouncement does not operate salvifically within the economy of the Church and its mission. In a word, while Jesus Christ infinitely transcends all that the Church can say or think concerning him,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

nevertheless human witness to him and articulation of him as God's redemptive event remain the means of his acting upon humankind to the latter's eternal blessing. The Lord of all such witness and articulation assured the apostles that as they enacted their ministry in his name, *he* would speak to and act upon the recipients of the apostles' witness. "Whoever hears you, hears me"<sup>17</sup> is Christ's promise to do nothing less than this without thereby collapsing himself into the apostles or claiming to act apart from them.

In his *Necessity of Reforming the Church* Calvin returns relentlessly to the cruciality of doctrine that is Scripture-normed and Scripture-informed just because he is aware of the ineluctable connection between doctrine and the reality that transcends it. Here, however, Calvin is far from the Calvinistic scholasticism that arose after him and with which he is identified incorrectly. All forms of scholasticism, Reformed as surely as Roman, tend to identify statements (truths) with the Truth they are deemed to express.<sup>18</sup> Such inappropriate identification is to be avoided even as doctrine is ever to be refined by the Word of God for the sake of intimacy with the One whose mercy must always justify the sinner, and justify as well every aspect of the sinner, including doctrinal formulation.

In light of the intrinsic relation among doctrine that de-obscures the gospel, the self-magnification of the One who adopts and uses such doctrine, and the restoration of a Church that is nothing less than the earthly-historical manifestation of that One's body, Calvin claims that he speaks for himself, for several European princes and untold numbers of devout people who deplore the corruption of the Church and who, for this reason, will not apologize for the Reformation.<sup>19</sup>

Essential to this doctrinal recovery is an unremitting attention to Scripture. Such attention, however, does not entail an uncritical or illogical Biblicism – an approach to Scripture that

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 10:16 RSV.

<sup>18</sup> See Torrance, T.F.; *Reality & Evangelical Theology*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p.49.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.185

Calvin does not endorse. At the same time, where Scripture does not norm, form and inform theology the Church, now fast departing from the faith “once for all delivered to the saints”<sup>20</sup> is left either with listening to little more than “old wives’ tales and fictions equally frivolous”<sup>21</sup> or submerging the Word of God in the fanciful vagaries of speculation<sup>22</sup> – or as he says in a related tract, “the fictions of our reason.”<sup>23</sup>

### III: -- Worship

Worship is always at the forefront of Calvin’s theological consciousness. God is honoured only as the gospel constrains the Church’s thinking so as to conform the Church’s mind to the mind of Christ. At the same time, Calvin characteristically eschews a one-sided cerebralism that upholds the head but neglects the heart.<sup>24</sup> When Calvin speaks of worship he appears to mean more than what the congregation does corporately on Sunday. Worship, for Calvin, appears to include the formal, public praise of God as well as the attitude or disposition that characterizes every aspect of the Christian’s thinking and doing. Such worship, says Calvin, should be marked by

[1] a manner that is neither cold nor presumptuously chummy, the latter being “careless”;<sup>25</sup>

[2] a magnification of the glory of God (this is bedrock for Calvin, for worship must be preoccupied with discerning and adoring God’s inherent splendour now visited upon the Church; worship is always other-directed, the congregation’s glory appearing only as the congregation aspires to renounce all claim to glory and live to serve the glory of God);

[3] the making known the perfections in which God’s glory shines; (Calvin, eschewing empty

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<sup>20</sup> Jude 4 RSV.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.187.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.188.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Best Method of Obtaining Concord*; cited in Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, p.330.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin’s concern with the heart, the affective response of the whole person to the gospel, looms everywhere in his theology.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.187

theological clichés, wants worshippers to know precisely what it is in God that is nothing less than glorious);

[4] the setting forth of the “benefits” vouchsafed to believers (“benefits”, for Calvin, always refers to the two benefits that jointly exhaust the gospel; namely, justification and sanctification, or remission of sin and newness of life); these benefits are to be lauded “as eloquently as we can”, naturally enough, since they gather up the totality of Christ’s work on behalf of his people and within them;

[5] the incitement to reverence God’s majesty; (it is to be noted that Calvin characteristically speaks of the majesty of God – i.e., the grandeur of God; Calvin does not speak in this tract – if he speaks anywhere – of the sovereignty of God; throughout the *Institutes* Calvin speaks *nowhere* of the sovereignty of God);

[6] an atmosphere that moves people to “render due homage to his [i.e., God’s] greatness;”

[7] a felt gratitude for God elicited by God’s mercies;

[8] a oneness of heart and mind in the showing forth of God’s praise.<sup>26</sup>

The outcome of the foregoing is that there is “infused into their [i.e., worshippers’] hearts that solid confidence which afterwards gives birth to prayer.”<sup>27</sup> People who are the beneficiaries of Christ through faith in him and who possess assurance concerning their union with him are constrained to “confide in his power, trust in his goodness, depend on his truth,...turn to him with the whole heart, rest on him with full hope,...resort to him in necessity, that is, at every moment, and ascribe to him every good thing enjoyed, and testify to this by expressions of praise.”<sup>28</sup>

Undeniably, according to Calvin, doctrine is always intimately related to life. Only as doctrine is re-developed so as to allow the gospel’s inherent brightness to shine forth are

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<sup>26</sup> Points 1-8 are found in Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.187.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

people able to call upon God, know God, mirror God's glory, and "enjoy" the One who alone gladdens the heart of those made in his image and likeness. Doctrine, categorically distinct from the human person's intimacy with God-in-person, is nonetheless essential to it, and therefore essential as well to believers' enjoyment of such intimacy.

#### **IV: -- Catholicity**

The Protestant Reformers, ceaselessly accused of unconscionably sundering the unity of the Church, replied as often they had done no such thing. Throughout one of his earliest tracts, *Reply to Sadolet* (1539) Calvin maintained that sectarianism could not be charged against the Reformers. When Cardinal Sadolet had charged the Genevan Church with schism Calvin had maintained that the Reformers' dispute with Rome was not that the Church of Rome was 'too catholic' but rather that it was insufficiently catholic.<sup>29</sup> Roman Catholicism, the Reformers insisted, had obscured aspects of the gospel vouchsafed to the Church and found, for instance, throughout the Patristic era. As the Roman See had gained primacy, catholicity had weakened, rendering the Church of Rome sectarian in several respects. So far from espousing sectarianism the Reformers, in reforming the Church, were underlining catholicity as essential to the definition of the Church. Once again Calvin is adamant: the theological non-negotiables of the Reformers are no invention. While the Reformers, for instance, have insisted that preaching accompany every celebration of the sacraments lest the latter degenerate into an "empty spectacle"<sup>30</sup> (the spectacle soon becoming worse than empty as superstition takes over and idolatry dishonours the One of whom a sacrament is meant to be effectual sign), the Church Fathers had earlier stipulated as much.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, when the Reformers, perusing Scripture, noted that *episkopos* and *presbyteros* have the same

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<sup>29</sup> See Calvin, *Reply to Sadolet, passim*, in Reid, *op. cit.*, pp.221-256.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.188.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.203.

denotation, their conclusion that monarchical episcopacy could not pertain to the *esse* of the Church was manifestly supported by Patristic authorities.<sup>32</sup> The ancient Church maintained, as the Reformers have come to insist, that presbyters are to be examined with respect to both their doctrine and their life.<sup>33</sup> In the same vein, ancient authorities support the Reformers' insistence on a worship whose substance and style are governed by a zeal for hearing and heeding Scripture.<sup>34</sup>

A major point here is Calvin's emphasis on tradition's witness to the un-normed normativity of Scripture. Tradition, Calvin notes, does not attest the primacy of tradition. Unquestionably tradition is authoritative; tradition, however, remains a normed norm, self-acknowledged to be Scripture-normed. The Reformation can never be accused of rejecting tradition; it can be thanked, however, for recovering tradition's self-understanding on behalf of the Church. Calvin, supported by tradition, maintains that if tradition is elevated above Scripture the gospel will be submerged and "gross idolatry" will surface; such "gross idolatry" will be evident, e.g., in "divine honours paid to dead men's bones."<sup>35</sup>

Calvin's point here is telling; his warning pertains to the Church in every era. We must be sure to note the contemporary Protestant equivalent of his criticism of Sixteenth Century Roman Catholicism. In 2001 I was asked to attend the World Methodist Council. The theme of the 2001 Council was the Aldersgate event (1738) wherein Wesley felt his "heart strangely warmed." Throughout the conference Wesley's experience was both romanticised and left unprobed. As a result, despite the conference's veneration of Wesley in the birth and development of Methodism it failed to mention (i) that the Aldersgate heart-warming found Wesley thereafter repudiating the mystical moralism that had rendered his ministry

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<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.207.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *loc.cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.190.

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.188.

ineffectual for fifteen years; (ii) that the same event was the springboard for an evangelistic ministry whose foundation was justification by faith; (iii) that Wesley unhesitatingly and uncompromisingly declared thereafter that justification by faith was “the very foundation of our Church [i.e., Anglican]...and indeed the fundamental [doctrine] of the Reformed Churches;”<sup>36</sup> (iv) that Wesley’s ministry after 1738 presupposed an understanding of the human condition under God that was nothing less than catastrophic regardless of unbelievers’ ignorance of it; namely, the sinner’s condemnation already enacted and merely awaiting manifestation on the Day of Judgement, which condemnation could be relieved only as the sinner exercised Spirit-wrought repentance and faith. Despite the adulation of Wesley there was no recognition of what impelled the man to travel 250,000 miles on horseback, preach 40,000 times, endure ice-cold downpours and abusive mobs and denominational opposition and a criminal justice system that abetted injustice. There was no examination of Wesley’s gospel concerning either its substance or its urgency. What else was such misbegotten veneration except “divine honours paid to dead men’s bones”?

## **V: -- Sacraments**

Calvin’s chief complaint is that the ‘signs’ (water, bread, wine) of the sacraments are one-sidedly attended to, thereby befogging the One whose action the sacraments attest, Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup> The result is that people come to trust not the Lord to whom the signs point but the signs themselves. The twofold outcome of this latter misapprehension is idolatry of the elements and the veiling of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

In a seeming paradox, Calvin avers that once Christ is collapsed into the sacrament and is

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<sup>36</sup> Wesley, Sermon #150, “Hypocrisy in Oxford”; *Works of John Wesley*, Vol. IV; (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), p.395.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.203.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *loc.cit.*

deemed to inhere it (this is one of the Reformers' objections to transubstantiation), Christ is obscured by the sacrament<sup>39</sup>; i.e., that once the sacrament is held to "contain" Christ, the rite renders Christ inaccessible. The confusing of sign with signified finds people venerating elements (here Calvin has in mind such practices as the reservation and adoration of the host.) Once rendered "content with gazing upon them [i.e., the elements] and worshipping them," worshippers "never once raised their mind to Christ."<sup>40</sup>

The same confusion may be present in Protestant denominations today, especially in those that are declining precipitously. As nervous observers watch an institution decline it is recalled that Christ has guaranteed that the powers of death will not prevail against the Church.<sup>41</sup> Frequently forgotten is the fact that Christ's promise pertains to his people; he has guaranteed that the community of his faithful people will never perish. He has made no such promise to institutions. History is littered with the debris of long-dead denominations and congregations. It appears that false confidence has arisen through the notion that Christ has collapsed himself into the Church and now inheres it. Overlooked is the truth that while the most intimate relationship obtains between Christ and his people, the relationship is between Christ and his *people*, not between Christ and any institutional structure as such. Overlooked as well is the truth that while head and body cannot be severed (i.e., Jesus Christ is not a severed head), Christ ever remains *lord* of the relationship between him and his people, *lord* of the Church. In other words, even as Christ remains indissolubly bound to the Church he infinitely transcends it, has not collapsed himself into it, and must not be thought to inhere it. Any suggestion that he does inhere the Church, in the seeming paradox Calvin noted concerning the sign and signified in the elements, renders the Church idolatrous, the gospel obscure, and Christ 'inaccessible.' The peril of misunderstanding and misapplying Christ's

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<sup>39</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.205.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *loc.cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 16:20.

pledge concerning the indefeasibility of the Church is precisely what Calvin found concerning the misunderstanding of the sacraments; namely, that as soon as Christ is thought to inhere the Church, Christ is obscured by the Church. No institution that obscures Christ should comfort itself with a promise that the Lord whom no one can ‘capture’ has made to the Church.

Continuing with his defence of the Reformers’ theology of the sacraments, Calvin objects to the practice of sundering command and promise.<sup>42</sup> The command is “Take, eat, drink;” the promise, “You eat my body and drink my blood.”<sup>43</sup> Whenever the elements are reserved and adored but not consumed, command and promise have been sundered.<sup>44</sup> Disobedience to the command forfeits the blessing of the promise.

Calvin does not relate explicitly his point about command and promise in connection with the Lord’s Supper to Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, but the connection is undeniable in view of the fact that Calvin recognizes Genesis 22 to be the paradigmatic test, as attested in both older and newer testaments, of holding command and promise together.<sup>45</sup> Abraham has been promised that he will have descendents as numerous as the sand on the seashore. Abraham, the prototype of faith, must persevere in faith and Isaac must survive. If Abraham surrenders faith in God, Abraham can have no descendents *in faith*. If Isaac perishes, Abraham will have no *descendents* in faith. The dilemma is stark: if Abraham obeys God and offers up Isaac, the promise has been cancelled since Isaac has not survived; if Abraham second-guesses God (i.e., disobeys God) and spares Isaac in order to ‘ensure’ the promise, the promise has been cancelled by a disobedience that exemplifies Abraham’s unfaith. What is Abraham to do? Replete with knife and flame and firewood the anguished man resolutely

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<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.205.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *loc.cit.*

<sup>45</sup> See Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), pp.561-572.

trudges up Mount Moriah, determined to obey God immediately and trust God to fulfil God's promise to him even though his obedience appears to void the promise. In other words, Abraham will obey God in an act whose outcome he cannot deny and trust God to fulfil God's promise to him in a manner he cannot foresee. The conclusion of the trial of Abraham (and no less of Isaac, old enough to carry sufficient wood to consume his remains and deemed, by rabbinic tradition, to be 37 years old)<sup>46</sup> is glorious: because of Abraham's refusal to sunder command and promise all the nations of the world will be blessed.<sup>47</sup>

In his insistence on the simultaneity of command and promise Calvin challenges the Church today. The Church is commanded to declare the gospel and to live by it alone. God has promised that his word does not return to him fruitlessly, that as the Church obeys the command, the promise will be fulfilled. Yet the command appears to vitiate the promise as the Church dwindles (at least in some places) week after week. The gospel appears too specific in an era that prefers religious generalities, too narrow in an age of inclusiveness, too confident of its effectiveness in a time of polite opinions, too sharply delineated for those who prefer the softer contours of romanticism. It appears that as the Church attempts to live by the gospel it will die by the gospel. Then what is the Church to do? Like Abraham of old it must obey God even as it trusts God to fulfil his promise concerning the Church in ways that the Church at present cannot anticipate. To do anything else is to abandon Abraham, faith's prototype; to do anything else is to sunder command and promise, a divorce that Calvin deems to render Christ an idol and worship superstition.

## VI – Spirituality

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<sup>46</sup> For an expanded exposition of Genesis 22, including the exegesis of both Calvin and Luther, see Shepherd, Victor; "Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22: Hope as the Reconciliation of Promise and Command", in Greenman, J., and Kessler, J., eds.; *Teach Me Your Paths*, (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2001), chapter 3.

<sup>47</sup> Genesis 22:18.

Calvin's emphasis on doctrine, worship and sacrament never eclipses his awareness that the Word must transmogrify and indwell the human heart. In holding Word and Spirit together Calvin insists that what has been done outside of us yet for us (*extra nos, pro nobis*) in Christ must also be done in us (*in nobis*) by the Spirit – or else all that Christ has achieved on our behalf fails to profit us.<sup>48</sup> No caricature of Calvin is less accurate than the notion that he is a one-sided theologian of the 'head' while neglecting the 'heart.' Consider, e.g., "...with *experience* as our teacher we find God just as he declares himself in his Word,"<sup>49</sup> "...God openly reveals what he has proclaimed and promised in his Word, and enables us to *experience* it."<sup>50</sup> The knowledge of God's benevolence toward us that is essential to faith must be both revealed to our minds and *sealed upon our hearts*.<sup>51</sup> Similarly Calvin does not hesitate to announce that "...the enjoyment of Christ kindles a new desire for him"<sup>52</sup>, and that spiritual need can be remedied only when such need is "really felt," those who are "insensible" of their need remaining "incurable."<sup>53</sup> Only in those who "cheerfully" embrace the teaching of Christ is our election in Christ sealed upon us "visibly"<sup>54</sup> – election, cheerful faith and visible seal necessary in view of the fact that the Fall ensures that we are born "bears and lions and tigers."<sup>55</sup> As crucial as the cognitive aspect of faith is, it always subserves the affective aspect; e.g., "...knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension," such assurance alone allowing us "...with tranquil hearts to stand in God's sight."<sup>56</sup> Again, while faith is certainly knowledge of God, the heart is deeper than the head,

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<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, chapters 1-2 *passim*.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, 1.11.2. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*; transl. Farley, B.W.; (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003); (Emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, 3.2.7 (Emphasis added).

<sup>52</sup> Calvin, *Commentary* John 7:38.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, 9:41.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, 8:47.

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, 10:8.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.14; 3.2.15.

with the result that while believers “feel the divine power of the gospel”<sup>57</sup> faith cannot “comprehend what it feels.”<sup>58</sup> The ethos Calvin’s theology generates is not at all hostile to the contemporary concern with spirituality.

Calvin, of course, does not use the word “spirituality”, the word entering the theological vocabulary centuries later through a Jesuit agenda fostered by Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Calvin speaks frequently of “godliness” and “piety.” Godliness, obviously, is other-engendered. Piety, for Calvin, is “that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.”<sup>59</sup> Calvin customarily speaks of faith, since faith presupposes Jesus Christ (who bears and bestows the Spirit) as faith’s author and object. Calvin always suspects a devaluation of gospel vocabulary wherein biblical words with precise meanings are reduced to religious commonplaces devoid of gospel content. In this regard Calvin reminds readers in *Necessity* that gospel substance is jettisoned whenever gospel words are retained but gospel significance lost. Merely to deploy “faith” and “repentance” is no guarantee of spiritual adequacy.<sup>60</sup> Today he would cringe at the way “guilt” has been altered from one’s situation before God to how one happens to feel; i.e., from a divine-judicial category to a psychological category.

As eager as he is to recognize the place of spiritual experience Calvin warns us against a contemporary concern with spirituality that often appears unable to recognize and resist rampant subjectivism. Drift is always more dangerous than decree. Few denominations decree a repudiation of doctrinal standards; most, however, drift imperceptibly.

It appears that drift may be evident where not expected. Whereas Calvin maintains that

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<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, 3.2.10.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, 3.2.14.

<sup>59</sup> Calvin, *Inst.*, 1.2.1.

<sup>60</sup> Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p.193.

there is found in us “nothing but sin and death”<sup>61</sup>, a widely-used book on Christian spirituality asserts, “Augustine, like us, sought for an external God, a God separate from himself. He discovered, however, that God is to be found and loved within the depths of our being.”<sup>62</sup> Augustine aside, Calvin would insist that God *is* external to us, even as God has come among us in his Son and indwells us by his Spirit; not only do we not find God in the depths of our being, we do not find God at all since God finds us as God overtakes us and arrests us in our headlong flight from him. Ransacking our ‘depths’ will never yield God.

If it is true that the Church, in the past few decades or in the Reformation tradition generally, has one-sidedly emphasised the head to the detriment of the heart, the way forward is not by means of an uncritical subjectivism; the way forward is the recovery of the emphasis Calvin makes in *Necessity* and throughout his work. Calvin’s characteristic deployment of “feel” and related words recalls Charles Wesley’s hymn wherein he asks, “Depth of mercy, can there be mercy still reserved for me? Can my God his wrath forbear, me the chief of sinners spare?” only to answer, “God is love; I know, I *feel*; Jesus lives, and loves me still.”<sup>63</sup> In Eighteenth Century English “feel” meant “prove by lived experience.” The affective dimension is upheld while a self-referential mentality is denied. Two hundred years earlier Calvin had as much in mind when he wrote that believers are to “feel due gratitude for his [i.e., God’s] mercies.”<sup>64</sup> Calvin remains a theologian of the heart no less than a theologian of the head. Recovering his theology will satisfy the Church’s legitimate quest for spiritual experience without courting religious romanticism.

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<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Necessity*, p.197.

<sup>62</sup> Mulholland jr., R.; *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self*; (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), p. 143.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in *Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), Vol. 7, pp.284-285.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Necessity*, 187.

In penning and promulgating his tract *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* when Charles V preferred him to postpone it for political considerations, Calvin was aware that he would likely be accused either of folly or presumption. In self-extenuation he pleaded, “If a thing is done honestly and from pious zeal, we deem it worthy of praise; if it is done under the pressure of public necessity, we at least deem it not unworthy of excuse.”<sup>65</sup>

The spiritual descendent of Calvin who expounds the Reformer’s tract can only plead the same.

*Victor Shepherd September 2009*

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<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *op. cit.*, p.184.