

GRACE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

Symposium to Celebrate 500 years since the Birth of John Calvin

***Calvin's Defence of the Protestant Movement***

According to his letter to Charles V,

*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*

1544

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***Introduction***

Like anywhere else in the world, New Zealand has seen its fair share of church splits. What right has anyone got to cause a split in the church of Christ? How would you feel if this happened in your church?

It all depends on where you are, doesn't it. If the split occurs in your own church, then it is generally a traumatic experience. Friendships are lost, families ties are strained and unbelievers mock. As one of my early mentors in the faith once soberly remarked, "*Church splits are never edifying.*" However, if the split occurs in the church down the road that we believe to be heretical, then its okay.

You see, schism and splits are serious issues and must never be taken lightly. Yet, as descendents (close or distant?) of the Protestant Reformers we take it for granted that we and others worship in separate churches. We don't bat an eyelid as we pass four or five other churches on our Sunday morning drive to *our* church.

But, if you lived in the times of the Reformers we would see things differently. There was only one village church that everyone attended. Therefore to suggest that you could break away and form your own church was dangerous revolution. Such a revolution is exactly what our beloved John Calvin was a part of.

### ***The Purpose***

How could Calvin justify such revolutionary and dangerous actions? In 1544 Calvin addressed a public letter to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558). In this letter he calls for understanding and tolerance on the part of the Roman Catholic political leaders of the day for the cause of the early Reformers. This letter was entitled *De Necessitate Reformandae Ecclesiae* and subtitled 'A humble exhortation seriously to undertake the task of restoring the church'. In it he set out the following three heads to argue in defence of the Protestant movement. He writes:

- 1. I must briefly enumerate the evils that compelled us to seek for remedies.*
- 2. I must show that the particular remedies that our reformers employed were apt and salutary.*
- 3. I must make it plain that we were not at liberty any longer to delay putting forth our hand, inasmuch as the matter demanded instant amendment.*

Today I want to argue that Calvin and the reformers were right to split the church.

### ***Historical Background***

At the 1526 Diet of Speyer the Emperor was forced to accept a resolution of tolerance of Protestantism to maintain the support of the Lutheran princes. Because this in effect nullified the Edict of Worms, the Catholic rulers were keen to remove the motion of toleration. Although he shared some sympathies with the reformers, Charles and others argued that the task of reforming the church could wait until the threat of Turkish invasion and the problem of France had been dealt with. Calvin took the opportunity in 1544 before the fourth Diet to plead the Protestant case again as a cause that couldn't be placed on the shelf while wars were fought.<sup>1</sup>

### ***'The Necessity of Reforming the Church'***

In *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* the 34-year-old Calvin wanted to draw his reader's attention to the glaring inconsistencies that there were between the Mediaeval Roman Catholic church and the church of the New Testament. To convince his readers of that fact, he needed to be as precise and factual in his argumentation as possible.

Calvin begins his work by outlining in a very clear manner, what are the essentials of the Christian faith. He states that the two most important things that a person needs to know in life are:

- 1. The mode in which God is duly worshipped***
- 2. The source from which salvation is to be obtained***

Using a helpful analogy, he says that these two doctrines are the very 'soul' of Christianity. Other issues, such as:

- 3. The sacraments***
- 4. The government of the church (specifically the pastoral office)***

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, John., *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*(Texas, Protestant Heritage Press, 1995) Based on ET of Henry Beveridge, 1844. p.152

are not so vital, and could be considered as the *'body'* of the faith. These are instituted by God for the preservation of the first two doctrines. But without the biblical worship and salvation by Christ alone through faith alone, there is no purpose to the rest. In other words, without the soul a body is lifeless, and without a body a soul is not visible.

The thesis that Calvin argues for, is that, the Reformers *had* to go back immediately and rediscover this *'soul'* of what had become a lifeless and corrupt body.

### **The Soul**

Protestantism, according to Calvin, was necessary because the worship of Roman Catholicism was false. *'Due worship'* is an acknowledgment of the existence of God, and consists of *prayer, praise and thanksgiving, adoration, ceremonies, and then self-abasement*. This is the worship which God requires from all who would acknowledge His majesty.

Everything in must be regulated by what is in Scripture alone. God wants us to regulate our worship by His word to, *firstly*, glorify Him, and *secondly* stop us slipping into error. Error comes when fallen creatures engage in, what Calvin terms, *'εθελοθηρησκεια'* or *'will worship'*. When *'will worship'* reigns, the soul of the faith is no longer alive.

### **Worship**

He argues that the Reformed churches of his day worship God free from superstition in a simple manner which aims for spirit and truth. They come with *faith, prayer and praise* through Christ alone with *boldness* and *understanding*. Prayers are in the language of the people and the whole congregation joins in singing praise.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Calvin points out that the established church with its *veneration of the saints, images, liturgical prayers, Mariolatry, elaborate ceremonies and traditions* is nothing but mere corruption.<sup>3</sup> Through the place given to the adoration of saints in the church, true prayer to God has been perverted. Prayers are offered to all the saints under the sun, while Christ Himself is neglected, or merely set on a shelf beside all of the rest. The congregations no longer praise God, but sing hymns, *'...In which the saints are lauded for every blessing, just as if they were the colleagues of God.'*<sup>4</sup> The ceremonies are a mere show of pageantry and glamour.

### **Salvation**

It may come as a shock to some Calvinists that Calvin has a three-step plan of salvation as a helpful guide for seekers. The reformed hearers are taught that they must experience:

1. conviction of wretchedness,
2. turning to Christ
3. resting on Christ in faith

In the Reformed churches, people are taught that sin has affected even our minds, that salvation is entirely monergistic, and that it is only Christ who gives any of our works value.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.55

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.23

The message of salvation in Romanism is fatally flawed, he argues. It denies the full extent of original sin, claims that a sinner able to turn to God himself, and teaches that our 'works of satisfaction' have merit with God. Christ is dishonoured as a mere participant in redemption by the idea that our own works were more important than the atoning work of Christ. And because salvation depended on human works, the third and final step of assurance is unattainable for the member of the Roman Catholic Church.

### **The Body**

The next part of the argument for reform is called by Calvin the '*body*' of the faith. These are the less important or secondary areas of the sacraments and, church government.

### ***Sacraments***

Calvin levels his attack at the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic church, declaring that, "...*Christ only appointed two... and these others rest merely on human authority.*"<sup>5</sup> Of the two proper ones observed by the church, Calvin believes the Romish Mass is '*excommunication*' rather than communion<sup>6</sup> because of its entirely corrupt nature. Unlike the reformed churches, there is no teaching when the sacraments are dispensed, the cup is wrongly withheld from the laity, and on the whole, it is an elaborate show. To make matters worse, the people are lead to believe that the sacraments (all seven) are effectual by themselves, leading to the superstitious and evil practice of selling religious rites.

The Genevan pastor says that in his church, '*we have revived the practice of explaining the doctrine and unfolding the mystery to the people; whereas formerly the priest not only used a strange tongue, but muttered in a whisper the words by which he pretended to have consecrated the bread and wine.*'<sup>7</sup> The same is true of both sacraments so that people will understand the '*there is a truth which is conjoined with them and which they represent.*'<sup>8</sup>

### ***Church Government***

For Calvin the mot needed change in the government of the church was the restoration of the office of pastor. The office of pastor is neglected by careless hirelings, and the sheep suffer from the lack of care and oversight. The priesthood has become the vocation of corrupt profligates who are worse than the worldly<sup>9</sup>. They rule these flocks as tyrants, taking no concern to bear and share their burdens. Pastoral offices are bought and sold more commonly than farms, and the laity have no say in those who are put into office. Because of these abuses in the church, men like Luther arose '*to seek out means and methods by which religion might be purged from all these defilement's*'<sup>10</sup>, said Calvin. And this is the same course he was still pursuing in his day.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.29

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.70

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.70

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>10</sup> 'The Necessity of Reforming the Church' p. 39

The Reformed churches have restored the role of the pastor who can teach, whose life and doctrine has been examined, and who has the support of the people. These come not to enforce their own opinions on the flock by lording over their consciences, but to shepherd them by teaching the people the word of God.

### Schism?

It is reassuring to see how seriously our brother took the charge of schism. How could he call himself a pastor when he and Luther were disturbing the church?

Calving responds to the charge by raising the ghosts of Elijah and King Ahab.<sup>11</sup> Ahab called Elijah the ‘troubler of Isreal’ because of his reformational preaching. But who was right, Elijah or Ahab and Jezebel? Should Elijah have remained silent while this Israelite king mocked God by his heinous abominations? Let Calvin pose the question himself: *‘It is unfair...to load us with odium on account of the fierce contest concerning religion which this day rages in Christendom, unless...it be thought proper first to condemn Elijah, with whom we have a common defence.’*<sup>12</sup>

This doesn’t mean that Calvin and the other reformers enjoy the role that they feel called to play in the church. He says, *‘We ...are not so stupid as not to perceive how desirable it is to avoid public tumults, nor so savage as not to be touched, and even to shudder in our inmost soul, on beholding the troubled condition in which the church now is.’*<sup>13</sup> That is something any would be modern day revolutionaries do well to take note of. There is no jingoism or delight in church carpark gossip in this man.

So why push on knowing that you’re going to upset many powerful people? He did so because he loved gospel truth. This is not to say that he was a naive idealist, for he acknowledges that the church always has had, and always will have errors that need to be ignored rather than fought over.<sup>14</sup>

The point was, however, that the errors present in the Roman Catholic Church of his day were so severe that *‘the whole substance of the Christian religion is brought into question.’*<sup>15</sup> To remain silent in the face of such shocking errors is to tolerate them. There can be no fellowship with such deep impiety. For Calvin, therefore, the love of true doctrine is more important than unity in the dark. Let him speak; *‘O accursed patience, if, when the honour of God is impaired, not to say prostrated, we are so slightly affected that we might wink and pass on!’*<sup>16</sup> Or again; *‘While God is thundering from heaven, were we to sit quiet?’*<sup>17</sup>

What about the seamless garment of Christ, his body, the one true Church? Here Calvin points out to those accusing the Reformers of schism that they don’t actually know what the true nature of the Church is. He argues that, since the body or

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.89

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 89

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 88

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.92

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.93

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.p.101

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.97

church cannot be separated from the 'Head' (which is Christ), then those who do not believe in Christ, but practice idolatry and superstitious nonsense can in no way be the Church in the first place.

The Church is the pure body of all true believers in all ages. This invisible church can never be held by any one particular group or person. Calvin quotes Cyprian (200- 259 A.D.)<sup>18</sup> who says, '*Separate a ray from the body of the sun, the unity of the light is not divided. ...So also, the church of God, irradiated with light, sends its beams over the whole world. Still it is one light which is everywhere diffused. The unity of the body is not violated*'<sup>19</sup> By this Calvin ably shows that the work of the Reformers was one of restoring that true light of the Bride of Christ.

### ***Conclusion***

I have no hesitation at all to say that Luther and Calvin were right to pursue to the reformation of the church of their day. The principles on which this book is founded are rich jewels which must be not only guarded, but also used to adorn the Bride of Christ today. The relevance of Calvin's summary of doctrine and practice is ageless. This is true for all churches, especially our own. As Calvin told the Genevan Council during negotiations for his return there;

*"If you desire to have me for your pastor, correct the disorder of your lives... I consider the principal enemies of the gospel to be, not the Pontiff of Rome, nor heretics, or seducers, nor tyrants, but bad Christians"* <sup>20</sup>

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>18</sup> De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.132

<sup>20</sup> Ozment. S...The Age of Reform. p.366