

Calvin's Ecclesiastical Advice
by
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In the time allotted, I hope to present three brief documents, heretofore untranslated, which disclose facets of Calvin's ecclesiastical advice. The documents in question may be found in the Corpus Reformatorum, Volume 38, Part I. In this volume the CR editors have compiled 46 of Calvin's writings, most of them letters, under the Latin title Consilia. 32 are in Latin; 14 are in French. Only 11 bear dates, or indicate the day, month, or year of their composition. Most list no designated receiver. Frequently, a hand other than Calvin's has provided their titles. Most, if not all, have been dictated; occasionally the secretary's name is mentioned. None of this simplifies the historian's task, but, at the same time, neither does it obscure the issues or values involved.

The CR editors have grouped these 46 pieces under seven general headings:

1. Dogmatics and Polemics
2. On the Changes and Need for Changes in Religion
3. Concerning the Worship of Images
4. Ecclesiastical Discipline
5. Marriage Questions
6. Judicial Questions
7. Miscellanies

The largest number of documents are assigned to "Ecclesiastical Discipline"; the second largest number appear under "Dogmatics and Polemics."

The advice contained in these pieces portrays the familiar Calvin we have come to expect and know, occasionally surprising us with the depth of his compassion and wit, patience and rigor. The seven I have thus far translated display him as a counselor fully conscious of the sensibilities he will both evoke and provoke, as a discerning historian and exegete, often as a reluctant but stalwart polemicist, as a theologian committed to the Apostolic and Patristic explication of the Faith, and as an ever knowledgeable realist with regard to the political, social, moral, and economic conditions of his time.

The documents I have examined are of interest not only because they preserve what Calvin has to say but because they contain his justifications for what he believes to be the Christian and biblical way of being and doing. Thus, in the process of suggesting what course of action one might pursue, Calvin frequently cites his sources or alludes to the presuppositions which illumine and inform his thought.

Any comprehensive assessment of Calvin's "Ecclesiastical Advice" cannot be based on a reading of the few documents in this collection. That assessment must also be based on Calvin's consilia throughout his Institutes, sermons, commentaries, treatises, and letters. Furthermore, the relevance for our time of either Calvin's presuppositions or methodology poses inescapable questions which we cannot ignore, as have been raised by the preceding papers at this conference.

I

With this as a preface, let me present, first, a letter containing Calvin's advice on images, which brings into focus some of the nuances to which I have alluded.

The letter in question bears the title "A Refutation of Arguments Proposed in Favor of the Worship of Images." The CR editors tell us only that Calvin addressed it to Madame Beza in response to her inquiry concerning a variety of practices in the Church and how one might approach them. It is dated "February 6, 1562 (?)."

Calvin opens with a summary of the views he intends to reject, then he addresses, in turn, the following subjects:

1. The appropriate O.T. commandments which prohibit the use of images in the Church
2. The Sabbath
3. Angels (and implied angel worship)
4. Veneration of the Saints
5. Prostrations
6. Adoration of Images
7. The Sign of the Cross and its true use
8. Martyrs
9. The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 787)

"A Refutation of Arguments Proposed in Favor
of the Worship of Images"
[CR 38, cols. 193-197]

Madame, since you are willing for me to respond to your report, I shall proceed by summarizing the arguments which are advanced by those who disagree with us.

They argue that the resolution to this question should be based on the exposition of the second commandment, which is correct, for it is the sole and unique grounds of our dispute. Hence we must determine whether our exposition is in conformity with the truth [or whether we ought accept images].

They also admonish us not to take the commandments' prohibitions so literally, because Saint Paul says: "The letter kills but the spirit gives life." I reply that their citation of this passage is improper. For in the Apostle's passage "the letter" refers to the entire Law, and the manner in which the Jews practiced this commandment shows that it was meant to be taken literally, as written.

[Moreover] God had a reason for making the collection of his commandments so brief, for he wanted his people to learn them. Nor is it believable that God wanted to obscure their truth which is so otherwise clear.

Furthermore, they have cited this commandment against us: "Thou shalt not kill" [in order to show that the commandments must be under-

stood with exceptions in mind, seeing that it is lawful for magistrates to kill, such as, for example, Phinehas did. I reply that whenever any exceptions have to be made in the commandments, they are made in deference to legislators, not to men in general. They have even cited [against us] the Manichean abuse in which the Manichees claimed that it was unlawful to eat animals.

In order to prove their argument, however, they would have to produce a passage which expressly commands the making of images and their adoration. Besides, there are numerous passages which approve of the executions which princes carried out in the name of justice in order to keep the public peace.

As for the sabbath, I know that some want to see it as a ceremonial commandment. But I accept it [as a safeguard] for pure morals.

As for [their reference] to cherubim, I would reply with Tertullian in his treatise On Idolatry, in which he addresses certain Christian workers who saw nothing wrong with making images for pagans, saying: "Why then did Moses in the desert make the likeness of a serpent from brass? My answer is that figures which were designed for some hidden purpose, not to set the law aside, but to be types, are in a separate category." That is to say, we must set aside those things which have been ordained for secret purposes. And if that seems to argue against our point, then let us hear what Tertullian writes next: "Otherwise, if we understand them to be against the Law, are we not ascribing inconsistency to God?"

It has been said that one can interpret a commandment by considering what precedes and follows it. First of all it is said: "Thou shalt not make for thyself any foreign gods," and finally, "Thou shalt not worship them."

We must insist that the commandment is broken when our opponents worship and honor images which they do when they attribute to them what ought to be offered to God alone.

Now sacrifices, consecrations of temples and the like, and incense are due God. When, therefore, you offer these to the images of the saints you are offering them to "foreign gods."

When I reflect on it, I find nothing which the Gentiles offered their idols which is not being offered to images. It has been argued that the ancients thought that their images were animated. I would respond that a few of the uncultivated among them held such a view, but the majority did not.

For example, there is Saint Augustine's passage on Psalm 113 which contains the same excuses which people propose today and which shows thereby that no images existed in the Church and that people contented themselves with vessels [only]. Lactantius in his book On False Religion says: "Why do you not address yourselves instead to him who is in heaven?" Arnobius says the same. "Sacrifice we owe [only] to God,"

says Augustine in Contra Faustum, Book 20 [Chap. 22]. [As for] incense, [it] is only one part [of sacrifice] and was something unheard of during the time of Tertullian, who says: "We do not offer frankincense." The same is said of "crownings" which are conferred today according to the book De Corona Militis.

As for prostrations, I have held that there is a "religious" reverence which is owed to God and a "civil" which is owed men. In fact, Saint Augustine in his discussion of dulia says that there are two forms of worship: one which is owed to God and another which is civil and owed to princes. Now why would a "civil" bow require the same toward images? It is without order or reason.

I [further] maintain that there are things chanted in the Church which are repugnant to God, such as [this one addressed] to the image of the Virgin: "Although not in everything, thou art everything." There is another verse which claims: "Rule according to your Mother's law." Are these not, I ask, genuine forms of impiety and idolatry?

Pagans attributed future events to idols, but the same are attributed to Saint Anthony of Padua, to Our Lady of Good News, and to others.

It has been said that the law of nature does not prohibit images. But Saint Paul says that those who worship them have exchanged "the glory of the incorruptible God" for "corruptible things." As for what occurred at Bethel, no image was erected, rather only a testimony that Jacob had seen the vision of God.

As for the "adoration" [of images], our opponents argue that they are offering only an "interior adoration," not an "exterior" one. But I argue, to the contrary, with Origen in his Eighth Homily on Exodus 20: "Restrain from both." He says the same in Book I on Romans 1. Hence, I conclude that in accordance with the word's true meaning we ought to interpret "to adore" in its proper sense and prohibit all honoring of images, whether "interior" or "exterior."

It has been said that anyone ignorant enough to worship images cannot help but say, "Image, I worship you!" Our opponents reply that they have given the image the name of that which is signified in the name they call it. Nevertheless, they continue to address the image. And that is why the people, being distracted by certain images, attach the Saint to the image.

As for the cross, idolatry pertains to it when it has been consecrated, as is the Church's custom to do with wooden objects, when it is called "the cross of our hope." However, I acknowledge that the sign of the cross is very old in the Church, and that the wooden cross falls somewhere between the sign and images. For this reason, the earliest usage of the cross was sound, but as time has elapsed it has become worse.

Nothing but the sign of the cross was practiced until the time of Constantine, who lived between the third and fourth centuries, and at

the time it received no adoration. But when Helena found the cross [supposedly in Jerusalem] and sent it to Constantine, he set it up in the forum. As for the nails, they say, she threw one into the sea; from a second she made a bridle for Constantine's horse; and the third was set in Constantine's diadem--for which she was praised.

We can only respond to this, however, in accordance with what the Word of God shows concerning that raised serpent which was shattered by Hezekiah when he saw that it led the people into idolatry.

As for Theodoret's De Sacrificiis, I would hold that the sacrifices which God has ordained predate those of the Gentiles, but the devil has sought to substitute these lawful sacrifices of God with signs and imitations of his works.

The tenth chapter of Acts and the twentieth of the Apocalypse prove that neither Saint Peter nor the angel ever found worship good. Some argue that Cornelius was a Gentile. But, on the contrary, he is called "religious," and Saint Peter went to him to lead him to the true Messiah. Cornelius was not accepted by Saint Peter because he prostrated himself before him, for Peter had to rebuke him for that, but because what Cornelius said surpassed what was required.

Moreover, God's servants in Scripture never received the praise that was accorded princes. Saint Augustine in Contra Faustum, Book 20, Chapter 21 says the same. Similarly, the angel [in Revelation] says: "I am your fellow servant. Worship God." Hence, I conclude that if the prototype refuses to be worshiped, then even less ought we worship images and other types.

As for the martyrs who have been interred under altars, Saint Augustine says in the passage cited above: "We honor the martyrs by imitating them and having a share in their company." In Chapter 16 of his book On True Religion, where he is addressing Christians instead of Gentiles, he says that the saints are honored for the sake of "imitation," not "worship." And of the angels he says: "We honor them by loving them, not by worshiping them." In his On the Morals of the Catholic Church Augustine says that in his time there were worshipers of images and pictures--both of whom he soundly condemns.

As for Saint Basil, who teaches various things about the monastic life, I cannot think of anything which he says that would contradict this.

Our opponents cite Saint Paul and Saint James on faith and works. But I will respond to this later in another context.

There exists today the same kind of ignorant idolatry as existed in ancient times. The Council of Nicaea [A.D. 787] cannot be accepted without doing error to faith. This Council was called without the Churches of Gaul and Germany being present. At the Council of Frankfort the Pope's ambassadors were present. We ourselves remove images. For Charlemagne, who prohibited their adoration, did not remove them, which resulted in our succumbing to idolatry.

As for our Confession, which they maintain was derived by our ministers alone, everyone [present] contributed his advice and concurred to adopt the testimony of the Holy Scriptures. Other Churches which have also separated from Rome and which are now dispersed maintain the same doctrine.

As for the Council [of Nicaea (787)] which reinstated images, I am unable to place any confidence in a council which denies its ecclesiastiques the power [to vote their consciences] or one in which we are not guaranteed security, notwithstanding the ordinance of the Council of Constance, although it was made an appendice of the Council of Trent. Nor can I accept a council unless it proceeds in accordance with the authority of Scripture and operates free of prescriptions.

We do not despise the Church, nor have we separated ourselves from it. And if they should ask: "Where has the Church been since the introduction of images?" I can reply: "Where was it during the time of Eli?" I think that our Church has been in the hands of poor husbandmen, indeed!

II

The second document I have chosen to present concerns Calvin's advice on the subject of prayer. The CR editors tell us only that it was addressed to a Jean Paul Aiciati, a member of the Italian [Reformed] Church of Geneva, who was eventually implicated for his involvement in Valentine Gentilis's antitrinitarian movement. Gentilis's movement was condemned in September of 1558. Gentilis, himself, was executed in Bern in 1566. Aiciati "repented" of his errors. [For further information see Paul Henry, Life and Times of John Calvin (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1852), Vol. II, pp. 263-274.)]

"Regarding the Name of God and Its Use in Prayer" [CR 38, cols. 153-156]

When we speak of God alone, without adding anything to his name, we ought to think of him in his pure essence as one sole God.

When we speak of Jesus Christ alone without mentioning the Father, we ought to perceive him as God manifest in the flesh. This is because God has taken [on] our nature in order to live in it as in his own majestic temple, and nevertheless in such union that Jesus Christ, both in his divine essence and human nature, constitutes but one person.

When we speak of God and of Jesus Christ together, then we ought to understand that this appellation includes both the Father and Jesus Christ as Lord and Head, who has been ordained by the Father to rule over us and to have complete preeminence in his name.

In any event, whenever we think of God or want to speak of him, we ought never occupy ourselves merely with his infinite essence. For this form of thinking is dangerous, since human understanding becomes confused by it. Rather, we ought constantly return to Jesus Christ, in whom the Father has revealed himself to us.

When we speak of the Scriptures, we ought distinguish between the Old and the New Testaments. For example. The Law and the Prophets proceed from Jesus Christ, insofar as he has always been the supreme Angel and the principal ambassador through whom God communicates to men. Nonetheless, the common practice was not to say that this [particular passage] was said by Moses or that [one] by David, but simply that God said these things. This was due to the fact that Christ had not yet appeared at that time.

For this reason we ought readily believe, in accordance with Saint Peter's teaching, that all the holy Prophets spoke by the spirit of Jesus Christ and, in accordance with Saint Paul's teachings, that he was Israel's guide and that even the Law was given by his hand. Nevertheless, following the accepted style of the Scriptures, when referring to things in the Old Testament, we do not say that Jesus Christ said them through the mouth of Isaiah or Moses, but we say that God thus spoke or even his Spirit [thus spoke].

With regard to the New Testament, there is another reason [why we ought to believe that it proceeds from Christ]. For in Christ's coming into the world the Father ordained him to be our teacher and master for the purpose of declaring all truth to us. Hence, we should both regard and call him Author of all that the Apostles teach, as Saint Paul himself does.

As for prayers, whether we are invoking God alone without expressly mentioning Jesus Christ, or are adding for God the Father to hear us by virtue of his Son (whom we present as our mediator), or are even addressing our prayer to him--if we do not actually utter by mouth the name of Jesus Christ, we ought to be thinking about it in our minds. Not because we are required at all times to entertain the idea that we can only approach the Father by means of this advocate, but because we ought to possess at all times the fundamental and principal realization that our only access to God in prayer consists in being brought before his majesty by him who humbled himself to our level in order to accommodate himself to our littleness.

If we entreat the Father by name, requesting him to hear us in the name of his Son, in doing so we ought to keep in mind that our Lord Jesus, through the sacrifice of his death, has won the entrance for presenting us boldly to God, and that also now, by virtue of this sacrifice, he intercedes for us, making it possible for our prayers to be acceptable to God and for us to obtain our requests. Nor ought we imagine that Christ does this by making supplications on his knees in the manner of men. But let us be content to accept him as an advocate, as one who carries the word in our name, and as one who receives our prayers in order to present them to God and to obtain a favorable audience for us.

I say "audience," insofar as God permits and grants us liberty to call upon him and listens to us. I say "favorable," insofar as he grants us, by his grace, what we ask him. Consequently, the following ought to be the attitude of every Christian who prays to God in the name of his Son: "If I should be required to go before God without any guide

or intermediary, I would never be able to come before his majesty, for it is too high. But because I have the promise of my savior, who holds my hand, my access to God becomes an easy matter."

But one might be tempted to ask: "How is it that our Lord Jesus, who is God, is able to intercede with God?" For it would seem that he is praying to himself, which is contrary to reason.

To avoid this conclusion, two considerations must be held in conjunction. The first is that, although there is only one sole God, there is nevertheless in this single Divinity the distinction between the Father and the Son, of whom we have spoken. Hence, there is nothing contradictory about our praying to the Father in particular, or our addressing ourselves explicitly to him.

The second is that our Lord Jesus, since he has taken [on] human flesh in order to accomplish our redemption, intercedes for us as mediator and advocate in accordance with that nature which he shares in common with us. Hence, when we address our prayers to Jesus Christ, or ask him to go with us to the Father as our mediator, and thereby to prepare the way for our coming to the Father, or when we request him to help us by virtue of his uniqueness as the one to whom all power is given, in whom all the fullness of divinity dwells, and as the one eternal God who has been manifested in the flesh--either way is acceptable and godly.

III

The final document I want to read has to do with the emigrations which took place due to religious convictions. The CR editors inform us that the original copy is without title and was written down by Charles de Jonvilliers. No date is provided, but it portrays a deeply sensitive Calvin, who can empathize with all those who were having to leave behind their spouse and children for the sake of faith. It is a brief and powerful piece and speaks for itself.

"On Emigrating for the Cause of Religion"
[CR 38, cols. 187-188]

If a man, whose marriage has occurred under the tyranny of the papacy, is constrained to withdraw from the papal Church on the grounds that he is prevented from serving God as faithfully and purely as he ought, I would first of all advise him to win over his wife that she might be in accord with him. For since he is her head, it is right for him to lead her into the way of salvation insofar as he possibly can.

For this reason it is improper for a Christian man, under the shadow of following the gospel, to abandon his wife. Rather let him strive by every means to draw her to our Lord Jesus in order that both of them might obey him with a common accord. Indeed let him do so not simply once, but let him continue [to draw her], even though he might find her hard and rebellious. Further, let him do so unsparingly; and, in making it his duty to teach and exhort her, let him ask God to touch her with his Spirit, for such is necessary, or all his labor will be in vain.

If one asks how long a husband ought persevere in this manner, I cannot assign a period. I can only advise him to proceed as worthily and zealously as possible, so that in a few days he might advance a little more and as much as God validates such effort.

Be that as it may, the husband must not become offended by the long wait or lose courage in the face of his wife's hardness, provided that he abstains from all idolatry. For in attempting to draw his wife to God he must not keep himself aloof or separate.

Furthermore, once he has done all he can, if he cannot live truly in peace without having to participate in papal pollutions, but is constrained to leave because of persecution, threats, or other factors, he is free to go, since he cannot be accused of not trying to lead out his wife.

Nevertheless, although his departure will not include her leaving with him, let him attempt, while being absent, to bring her out of the mire from which he has been delivered so that the two together may bless God. In doing so, no one will be able to reproach him if he later seeks a divorce or must separate himself from her. For where necessity imposes itself, there is no further obligation which he owes her which would justify him from turning aside from the service of God. Hence a man may leave behind such captivity when he has done everything he possibly can.

When a man with children is required to leave his country, whether willingly or by force or in order to flee idolatry, I would advise him to bring his children with him as [they represent] the better treasure which God has given him. For if he leaves them, they will be immediately seized and held tightly in such captivity that he will regret for the rest of his life that he left them behind.

Moreover, his leaving will not protect them or their goods, unless he has freed them and divided their inheritance. But even this he ought not do. For if he does, he will make them captives until they are twenty five.

Further, even if their appointed tutor should be of the highest integrity, what could he dare attempt? And what authority would he have for selling or exchanging anything? And, provided the man is accountable, he may even have difficulty transferring annual revenues to the father.

In brief, whoever thusly commits his goods under the name of his children is binding them with a rope, or so enveloping them, that they will be unable to extricate themselves from such an abyss, even if they should want to.

"Answer to the question concerning various
ecclesiastical rituals"

There is none of our people who is unaware of how useful it is to join some important promise to a public confession, which encourages sinners to hope for pardon and reconciliation. I have wished from the very beginning to encourage this custom, but since they have feared it would cause offence because of its novelty, I have been rather hesitant to go along with it. Accordingly, we have not done it. Now indeed, it may not be opportune to change any of this, for the great part begins to rise up before one has come to the end of the actual confession. But we instead prefer that your people become accustomed to both aspects (of the truth) during your public recitation.

In the administration of the Lord's Supper, I am accustomed to using certain words of Paul, but because some do not want repetition, lest it create a longer delay, I have chosen to stop using them (for if while more people go over the same recitation, scarcely one-tenth understand what I desire, no one has perceived the meaning of the exercise). Moreover, it would please us greatly for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated every month, or at any rate to have a more frequent usage to avoid negligence (of the Sacrament). For when the greater part abstain from Communion, the church is somehow dissipated. We prefer, nevertheless, for the church to be invited to Communion every month, rather than only four times a year--as is the custom among us. When I first came here, it was not distributed but three times a year, and indeed seven whole months came between the Communion at Pentecost and that at Christmas. Every month was what I wanted, but since I was not sufficiently persuasive, it seemed better to pardon the infirmity of the people than to wage war with them. I was careful, however, to have our defective practice recorded in the public acts so that it might be corrected more easily and freely in later times.

How many and serious reasons persuade one to judge that Communion should not be neglected for the sick. But instead I see a tendency in many to have fallen into abuse, who quietly and prudently should have been taking Communion. Indeed, unless there be communication, one is wrongly led astray from the sacred institution of Christ. Therefore, it is appropriate that a community assemble together its well-known, familiar, and neighbouring members in order to distribute Communion in accordance with the command of Christ. Then let an explanation be joined together with the action of the sacramental mystery that there be no diversity from the order of church Communion. But it is very dangerous to carry it here and there promiscuously. And it is necessary to take care lest it stir up others to seek superstition, ambition, and vain ostentation. Accordingly, let the work be carried out with trial and choice, in order that it not be done differently from the way it is done in normal life. Just as it was perverse to carry the sacred bread out of the church, so it is in no way tolerable to be carried around pompously. Farewell, most excellent men and honoured brethren. May the Lord watch over, guide and bless you forever. From Geneva 12 Aug. 1561. (Translated by Douglas Kelly)