

CALVIN'S DEFENSE OF LUTHER IN HIS CONGRATULATIONS TO GABRIEL OF SACONAY  
by  
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An important source for the thought of Calvin on Luther is found in a little known treatise, which until this month has never been translated out of Latin: but now, thanks to the suggestion of Professor John Leith, has been: Congratulations to the Venerable Presbyter, Lord Gabriel of Saconay, Precentor of the Church at Lyon, For the Beautiful and Elegant Preface That He Wrote for the Book of the King of England.

Today, let us look first at the origin of this treatise; secondly, at its peculiar style; and thirdly, at what Calvin says in this treatise about Luther.

### I. The Origin of this Treatise

This treatise was written and published anonymously. The Corpus Reformatorum (where this treatise is found) tells us that it was written by John Calvin in 1561. Throughout the work he refers to himself in the third person. It seems to Professor Philip Rollinson and myself, who worked together on the first draft of the translation, that the Latinity of this treatise does not come up to the usual polished standard of Calvin's excellent style. Whether that would indicate another hand in the original preparation of this treatise, or whether it would be explained by the satirical, tongue-in-cheek nature of this production (which we will soon discuss), neither of us is at all competent to judge. However, we shall proceed on the assumption if Calvin was not be the author, the treatise at least came from the circle of his associates.

This treatise (which we shall call Congratulations to Gabriel) is an answer to Gabriel of Saconay, a church official in Lyon, who had reissued Henry VIII's Defense of the Seven Sacraments with its polemic against Luther. Gabriel added a preface to King Henry's work in which he vitriolically attacks the character of Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers, and seriously perverts their teachings. Gabriel accuses the Reformers of drunkenness, sexual lechery, participation in orgies, as well as of heresy, schism, and subversion. Calvin, in turn, answers a large number of Gabriel's wild charges point by point. This leads us secondly to:

### II. The Style of this Treatise

The satirical--and frequently vitriolic--style of this treatise leaves our twentieth century sense of propriety wounded and bleeding by the side of the road. Calvin takes the fantastic charges of Gabriel against Luther and himself, and turns them back on him with a gleeful vengeance. Lest we be too shocked at the rough handling Calvin gives his opponent, it is important that we look at this type of literature in the light of its historical context.

Answering the criticisms of an opponent in a satirical manner that involves sustained personal abuse and indelicate language was a genre of literature that was widespread in the Renaissance and Reformation eras,

with roots in classical rhetoric. For instance, the renowned scholar, Scaliger, only a few years before had written a similar satirical, abusive critique of Erasmus. A century later, Milton and his French adversary, Sommesius, penned abusive interchanges (over the execution of King Charles I). Works of this sort are rooted in classical rhetoric, as in the works of Cicero (such as against Mark Antony and against Cataline).

The idea was that the speaker or writer creates his own "ethos" (or ethical atmosphere). If you could show that he is an unworthy man then you have--according to this theory--automatically shown that his teaching is as unworthy as he is. Our modern division between a person's private ethics and his ideas (which can be valuable regardless of his personal life) was not taken into consideration in this classical and Renaissance genre of abusive writing.

Also we note that in much of this treatise, Calvin is probably not motivated by serious anger so much as he is by an almost fiendish glee in having fun at his enemy's expense. In these days theologians relax by watching ball games and shooting ducks. In Calvin's time they relaxed by writing humorous and abusive treatises in Latin. Much of this treatise is definitely tongue-in-cheek writing, and has to be appreciated as such.

I might add here--if I will not be thought irreverent--that the first three or four pages of this material contain some statements that might get the Playboy crowd interested in reading Calvin. Listen to this:

If you want to find his true home, you must go to a certain famous whorehouse in Lyon. I omit (his) dancing and lewd cavorting, which austere and chaste men call enticements to evil. I frankly say that he shows as much hospitality for prostitution and other vices as if he were actually making money from those things. He frequents houses filled with every disgrace and smells out the stench like a hunting dog after a most pleasant odor. However if he enters more wholesome and decent places, he corrupts them with the filth of his desires. Of course it is rather difficult to prove this unless he carries about the marks of venereal disease. But the more nicely the wound kills, the more valuable it is to hold on to. His best companion and most similar in morals was one Samouseto, who was also the most notorious of the boys in Lyon. There was such closeness of spirit between them that by mutual consent and apparently by common agreement they shared the same whore between them. But then a third rival in love cropped up, and somehow this Samouseto supposed that he had spent the night in bed, and thus to avenge the injury pounded on the door of the house at night to beat up his wretched companion. Fired by jealousy, he beat the stuffings out of him. At this point the unhappy athlete is brought home. When Samouseto recognized his error, they patch up their friendship with mutual tearful embraces.

### III. What Calvin Says in This Treatise about Luther

The real reason for which Professor Leith asked that a paper be delivered on this little-known treatise is to see what Calvin says about Martin Luther. This is apparently the last time that Calvin mentions Luther in his writings (Calvin died three years later). Elsewhere in his works Calvin does not have a great deal to say about Luther (relatively speaking). In general, Calvin does make clear his great respect for Luther, although he is not above criticizing Luther's vehemence and some of his opinions. Calvin most frequently mentions Luther in his Second Defence . . . Against Westphal. Calvin shows here that he looks on Luther as a spiritual mentor, and was in warmest relations with Melanchthon and other early Lutheran reformers. Calvin accuses Westphal of imitating Luther's weak point--belligerence--without having his excellent strong points. Calvin calls Luther "the illustrious servant of Christ," and notes that--according to Melanchthon, Luther had a high view of what he had seen of Calvin's writings--even though he was critical at points. In his Commentary on Genesis, Calvin did reject several of Luther's opinions, but maintained a great respect for him. In his writings against Pighius and On Scandals, Calvin excuses some of Luther's early statements in light of the continual necessity of theology to keep advancing, as well as the necessity for Luther to accommodate himself to the times.

Calvin's Congratulations to Gabriel is the last major source of his estimate of the elder Saxon reformer, Luther. We could justly entitle this paper "Calvin's Defense of Luther," for throughout this treatise--and especially in the last part--Calvin stands up for Luther in the strongest way.

In the earlier part of the Congratulations, Calvin does admit that Luther could speak with excessive vehemence, and regrets that he did not accept moderating counsel from people such as Oecolampadius. (Calvin brings up this matter in order to reply to a criticism of Gabriel). Further, Calvin agrees that Gabriel was correct in reporting his refusal to consider Luther "the last Elijah." But--replies Calvin--this refusal was not motivated by envy on Calvin's part, as though he desired the title for himself. On the contrary, writes Calvin, it is "preposterous and unbearable" to think that anyone is the final manifestation of Elijah. It is clear that Calvin is eager to demonstrate his loyal appreciation for Luther.

Throughout the rest of this brief work (some thirty-one columns in the C.R.) Calvin defends and at times praises Luther at every point where his name is mentioned. If there be any doubt as to whether Calvin considered himself in the same camp with Luther and as to whether he valued the life, writings, and leadership of the great Saxon, this Congratulations to Gabriel should usher such doubts to their final resting place.

Not only that, but various hints in this treatise indicate that Calvin must have had a fairly competent knowledge of many of the writings of Luther as well as of the events of his life. He quotes--with praise--a statement from Luther that the current Roman

Curia is by no means the same thing as the ancient mother Church of Rome. Calvin goes on to state that in attacking "the prodigy of Transubstantiation," Luther was "relying on the agreement of the universal Church." Calvin knows the writings of both Luther and Melancthon well enough to show that Gabriel "perverts the testimonies" that he adduces from them, so that Gabriel "proves nothing."

Gabriel slams Luther for his controversy with Carlstadt, but Calvin appeals to the testimony of Melancthon that Carlstadt started the quarrel out of hatred for Luther, and that Luther had every right to be offended at the absurdities of Carlstadt.

In a later section of Congratulations, Calvin answers Gabriel's indictment of Luther for his shifting opinions. Once Luther had said "the kernel of Christianity is in the Papacy." Indeed, says Calvin, "this hyperbolic clause . . . would be retracted by noble Luther if he lived today. Why, indeed should he not be given another chance after 33 years?" [(when Luther originally said this)]

Later in the text, Calvin replies to Gabriel's charge of inconsistency in Luther for once revering the pope and accepting purgatory, prayers to saints, the sacrifice of mass, celibacy and confession--and then denying them all. "Frankly," cries Calvin, "I wonder why you did not consider it an offence on his part for not having spoken before he came forth from his mother's womb!" This ironical statement makes an important point for Calvin: Luther--and the reformation--were obviously subject to the universal principle of gradual development. He shows that Luther started off by calling indulgences by the too gentle term "pious frauds," because "he had not yet understood that they came from the deepest pit." Calvin then generalizes this principle and shows that Luther's theology developed in reaction to the increasing defensiveness of the partisans of papal absurdities.

And perhaps he would have remained longer in a [(moderate)] "grey" area, unless he had been aroused by the folly of those who then tried to defend all the grossest errors. Luther cleverly says somewhere: 'willy, nilly, they are forcing me to become wiser than my adversaries in a short time.'

Earlier in the treatise Calvin--in an ironic way--looks at the humble origins of the Lutheran reformation in light of this principle of development:

In order to render the name of Luther odious and to dishonor our whole doctrine in his person, he recalls how obscure, weak, and contemptible the beginning was: but in the advance of time merely insignificant sparks burst forth into a great fire. What, I pray, had Luther done, for whom only a spark, and indeed of obscure light flashed out? He therefore published freely what he knew, that is, a little more than nothing.

But if Luther's work really was "little more than nothing" then why was it, asks Calvin in the last paragraph of this treatise, that "the pope cannot enjoy normal living, because he is continually being pricked

by the barbs of Luther? Instead, his kingdom is wasting gradually away . . ."

Calvin has an easy time disposing of several incredible charges which Gabriel levels against Luther. Gabriel claims that the books of Luther are unknown and unimportant: they can be found only in the back waters of Saxony. Here is Calvin's rejoinder: ". . . coaches are ready for hire, which can carry this valuable treasure house into all parts of Europe. How insipid you are, who do not even surmise how great the supply of books and the variety of papal materials which Luther daily casts down from their seats! . . . No, unless the furor absolutely blinded you, you should know that some of Luther's writings have been translated into Gallic tongue; you have the name inscribed of the city and printer. Anyone who wishes to buy any one of Luther's books will find them for sale in the shops." Calvin also denies that he prohibited the printing of Luther's works in Geneva.

Finally, a close reading of Congratulations to Gabriel indicates that Calvin had a competent and very appreciative knowledge of the life of Luther. Earlier in the treatise, Calvin easily disposed of incorrect charges of Gabriel concerning Luther's relationships to men such as Zwingli, Melancthon, Carlstadt, and Oecolampadius. Calvin obviously has the facts at his fingertips and knows the relevant literature, for often he tries to shame Gabriel by reminding him that the details of Luther's life are a matter of public record.

Two comments at the end of the treatise show that Calvin had looked into the deep places of Luther's experience and had understood: Calvin refers to Luther's struggles of conscience and to his righteous death. Luther was a danger to the pope even before the Reformation, says Calvin, because he insisted on "being persuaded by a good conscience . . . I only want to say this: in the battles of conscience with which God engaged this man, he was a bright example of the serious fear of God."

In disposing of Gabriel's calumny that Luther died in a drunken hangover, Calvin simply and nobly replies: "Unless you were absolutely hopeless, you would have said with Balaam (Num. 23:10): 'Let my soul die the death of the just,' rather than have dared to grunt with your pen in this way."

I conclude with one brief thought. Christians today from Lutheran, Calvinist and other major traditions are trying to reach out to one another. I believe that a careful study of the original reformers (as illustrated in a relatively minor treatise such as this) will indicate that they were closer together than we have generally thought, and that they would encourage all our efforts to understand and appreciate one another.