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## ***SPECIAL REFORMATION ISSUE (500TH ANNIVERSARY)***

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# EDITORIAL: THE (ONGOING) NECESSITY OF REFORMING THE CHURCH

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*Rev. Martyn McGeown*

## Introduction

This year (2017) marks the 500th anniversary of the great Protestant Reformation, which began on 31 October, 1517, when Martin Luther affixed his famous *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Throughout the world of Protestant Christianity, this anniversary has been celebrated with speeches, conferences and the publication of books. With thanksgiving to God for His great work of reforming His church, which had been languishing under the corruption of medieval Roman Catholicism, we present this special issue of the *British Reformed Journal*.

Undoubtedly, most of our readers are familiar with the Diet of Worms, held from 28 January to 26 May, 1521, and with Martin Luther's famous appearance at that Diet on 18 April of that year. Many are also familiar with the Edict of Worms, which condemned Luther as a heretic. On 26 May, 1521, Emperor Charles V decreed,

We forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.

Emperor Charles V was a bigoted Roman Catholic, who ended his life disillusioned in a Spanish monastery in 1558. Fiercely opposed to the Reformation, yet embroiled in various political intrigues, Charles desired to destroy the Reformation churches while seeking to augment his own power. The Emperor required the support of the Protestant princes of Germany, who had united

in the Schmalkaldic League of 1531 in order to defend themselves against Charles' anti-Reformation edicts. He required Protestant support for his wars against the Turks on the one hand and against the French on the other. Less well known are the Diets of Speyer (Spies) in which Charles attempted to curry the support of the Lutherans, in exchange for a degree of religious toleration and even a partial or temporary suspension of the Edict of Worms. Such Diets demonstrate to us how God in His inscrutable providence directed the political wrangling of a wicked man like Charles to distract him from his goal of destroying the church: "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain" (Ps. 76:10). The Lord can raise up a defence of His church even from the weapons of her enemies!

John Calvin, at the age of 34, wrote a petition to the Fourth Diet of Speyer, held on 20 February, 1544. Calvin's petition, which was entitled *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, was designed to persuade the Emperor to aid—or at least to tolerate—the Reformation of the church. He hoped that in the midst of the imperial negotiations, the Emperor and the princes might find time to pity the church in her miserable condition. Like many such petitions (think of the *Belgic Confession* of 1561), Calvin's appeal fell on deaf ears.<sup>1</sup> We do not know if Charles ever read Calvin's appeal (or if his advisors read it to him) but he certainly paid no attention to it.

Calvin's treatise is still as relevant today as it was some 473 years ago, for there is *still* an urgent necessity of reforming the church.<sup>2</sup> Although we rightly celebrate the Reformation, we can see in the ecclesiastical landscape

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<sup>1</sup> "In 1562 a copy [of the *Belgic Confession*] was sent to the Spanish king, accompanied by a petition for relief from persecution, in which the petitioners declared that they were ready to obey the government in all lawful things, although they would 'offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire, rather than deny the truth of God's Word.' The Confession and the petition had no effect on the Spanish authorities. However, it served well as a means of instruction of Reformed believers and thus became an expression of the faith of a people enduring suffering for Christ's sake" (*The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* [Grandville, MI: PRCA, 2005], p. 22).

<sup>2</sup> About *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, Calvin's close friend, colleague and successor, Theodore Beza, wrote, "I know not if any writing on the subject, more nervous or solid, has been published in our age" (*The Life of John Calvin* in John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 1 [Edinburgh: Banner, repr. 2009], p. xlv).

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around us much departure from the truth. Calvin's indictment of the church of his day could easily be made against the church of our day. May we in this anniversary year reconsider (and promote) Calvin's treatise! May the Lord be pleased to reform His church once again!

Calvin's treatise consists of three main sections: first, he enumerates the evils with which the church was (and is) afflicted; second, he defends the remedies that the Reformers employed; and third, he explains why the Reformation was (and is) so urgent.

## **The Evils With Which the Church Was (and Is) Afflicted**

Calvin identifies three main areas in which reformation was necessary and urgent: first, the worship of the church was impure; second, the church had polluted the doctrine of salvation; and third, ecclesiastical government was corrupt.

Very early in the treatise, Calvin highlights the vital issue:

If it be enquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principle place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz. *a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.* When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain.<sup>3</sup>

### **1. Worship**

Calvin identified a fundamental liturgical principle, one that the modern

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<sup>3</sup> *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* in Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 1, p. 126; italics mine. This treatise has also been published separately: John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (Dallas, TX: Reformation Heritage Press, 1995). Hereafter all the page numbers referenced in the body of this editorial are from volume 1 of *Tracts and Letters*.

church would do well to reconsider: the regulative principle of worship. Simply stated, the regulative principle forbids all elements of worship not expressly commanded by God. By adopting such a principle, Calvin advocated the sweeping away of the man-made worship that had accumulated in the medieval church. By adopting the same principle, we could rid the church of much of her modern worship, such as “worship bands,” “drama,” “liturgical dance” and other human inventions. By adopting the regulative principle, we could (and should) simplify and purify the worship of God, so that it pleases *Him*—even if it no longer appeals to the carnal senses of worshippers or visitors, for, wrote Calvin, “it ought to be sufficient for the rejection of any mode of worship that it is not sanctioned by the command of God” (133). If some liturgical innovator desires to introduce a new element into the worship of God, he must prove that God commands it in His Word. It is not enough that it is not forbidden; it must be commanded.

In connection with the public worship of God, Calvin examines the sacraments. Not only had Rome added—without any warrant from Scripture—five additional sacraments to Christ’s two, but Rome had corrupted the two genuine sacraments instituted by the Saviour, namely, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. “The people are entertained with showy ceremonies,” Calvin complains, “while not a word is said of their significance and truth. For there is no use in the sacraments unless the thing which the sign visibly represents is explained in accordance with the Word of God” (139). Calvin insists on faith for a proper use of the sacraments, but we can only grow in faith when we are instructed from the Scriptures. To use water, bread and wine without comprehension avails nothing. This is why even today Reformed churches never administer the sacraments without the preaching of the Scriptures and a thorough explanation, such as “The Form for the Administration of Baptism.” In our day, the sacraments are viewed by many as little more than empty ordinances—Christians submit to baptism and partake of the Lord’s Supper, but they have little understanding of the sacraments as means of grace, as signs and seals of what God has accomplished in Christ for our salvation or as means by which God strengthens and nourishes our faith in His promises. The taking to heart of *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* would restore a true, biblical understanding of the sacraments.

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Another corruption of the worship of God is hypocrisy or mere externality. Calvin understands the temptation because everything is preferable to carnal man than the offering to God of his heart:

While it is incumbent on true worshippers to give the heart and mind, men are always desirous to invent a mode of serving God of a totally different description, their object being to perform to him certain bodily observances, and keep the mind to themselves (153).

Men will allow themselves to be astricted by numerous severe laws, to be obliged to numerous laborious observances, to wear a severe and heavy yoke; in short there is no annoyance to which they will not submit, *provided there is no mention of the heart* (154; italics mine).

This explains why in medieval Europe pilgrimages, idolatrous rituals and other external ceremonies were popular, and that explains why in our day showy worship is still more preferable to churchgoers than simple, Bible-centred worship. True worship of God is spiritual, for it must flow out of a heart of gratitude to God for His salvation. Such worship is by no means dull or boring, nor is it to be despised because it lacks outward pomp:

The method by which, in our churches, all pray in the popular tongue, and males and females indiscriminately sing the Psalms, our adversaries may ridicule if they will, provided the Holy Spirit bears testimony to us from heaven, while he repudiates the confused, unmeaning sounds which are uttered elsewhere (159).

Calvin had in mind the babbling of priests and monks in Latin, but we can apply Calvin's words to the modern phenomena of "tongues" in Charismatic churches today. The principle applies also to modern worship bands, choirs and special numbers, which serve more for the aggrandizement of the worship leader, the showcasing of his (or her) talents and the entertainment of the people, than the worship of God. Notice, too, Calvin's love for the Psalms—true reformation of the church's worship restores the primacy of the Psalms, not "hymns," to congregational singing, and such singing, says Calvin, is carried

out “neither in a frigid nor a careless manner” (146). We who love the Psalms have no excuse for singing them joylessly! If the modern church took Calvin’s treatise to heart, we would see a true reformation of worship.

## 2. Salvation

Medieval Roman Catholicism instructed men to seek salvation in their own works. While the theologians wrangled about the relationship between faith and works, the role of grace and the place of free will, the common people trusted in the merit of ceremonies and rituals to obtain eternal life. “Who can deny,” exclaims Calvin, “that men are labouring under a kind of delirium, when they suppose that they procure eternal life by the merit of their works?” (193). In a broadside against the prevailing error of his (and our) day, Calvin remarks,

What effect could [the doctrine of free will] have but to fill men with an overweening opinion of their own virtue, swelling them out with vanity, and leaving no room for the grace and assistance of the Holy Spirit? (134).

In his defence of justification by faith alone, Calvin complains about the Roman Catholic theologians of his day: “On no account will they allow us to give Christ the honour of being called our righteousness, *unless their works come in at the same time for a share of the merit*” (135; italics mine). Calvin does not deny that “good works ought to be performed by the pious, and [that] they are accepted by God and rewarded by him,” but he denies that they in any way reconcile sinners to God or satisfy the justice of God to take away guilt (135). To the merit-mongers, Calvin retorts, “Pride such as this, what is it but a fatal intoxication of soul?” (135). While Calvin derides the pride of those who trust in their own works, he condemns the false humility of those who forbid believers to have assurance of faith:

There was another most pestilential error, which not only occupied the minds of men, but was regarded as one of the principal articles of faith, of which it was impious to doubt: that is, that believers ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty as to their interest in the divine favour (136).

“By this suggestion” (of Satan), warns Calvin, “the power of faith was completely extinguished, the benefits of Christ’s purchase destroyed, and the

salvation of men overthrown” (136). Therefore, we see how the Reformation both overthrew salvation by the works of man and restored the joy of the peace of God to believing sinners. In our day, Arminianism, with its proud, free-will theology, and various other forms of justification by faith and works (the New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision) overthrow the truth of salvation in many so-called Protestant churches, while preachers of doubt overthrow the assurance of others. Calvin’s *Necessity* is, therefore, necessary reading for the modern church.

### **3. Church Government**

The government of the church, insists Calvin, was instituted only “for the preservation of these branches of doctrine,” without which doctrine (the doctrine of worship and the doctrine of salvation), the church with its government would be a “dead and useless carcase” (126-127). Sadly, exactly that had occurred in Calvin’s day—if the church was not yet a lifeless carcase, it was deathly ill and in urgent need of the application of spiritual remedies, remedies that Calvin urges the Emperor to administer without delay.

The spiritual polity set forth in the Bible had degenerated into a dreadful hierarchical tyranny. Calvin insisted that Christ had instituted ecclesiastical government for one simple reason, so that His sheep could be edified and preserved. “No man,” writes Calvin, “is a true pastor of the church who does not perform the office of teaching” (140). Instead, bishoprics had become “secular principalities,” since “the spiritual government which Christ recommended [had] totally disappeared, and a new and mongrel species of government [had] been introduced” (140). Pastors and teachers were not elected to their various offices by a lawful vote of the congregation, but they were imposed upon the people by the pope and his clergy. Dreadful corruption prevailed so that men were appointed not because they possessed the spiritual qualities required in Scripture, but through bribery, simony and other evils: “Ecclesiastical honours are either purchased for a set price, or seized by the hand of violence, or secured by nefarious actions, or acquired by sordid sycophancy” (142). In the meanwhile, church officers were not examples of godliness, as the Bible demands, but notorious for their impiety, which Calvin with great reluctance is forced to expose:



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I wish that by their innocence they would refute what I say. How gladly would I at once retract! But their turpitude stands exposed to the eyes of all—exposed their insatiable avarice and rapacity—exposed their intolerable pride and cruelty. The noise of indecent revelry and dancing, the rage of gaming, and entertainments, abounding in all kinds of intemperance, are in their houses only ordinary occurrences, while they glory in their luxurious delicacies, as if they were distinguishing virtues ... How many priests, pray, are free from whoredom? Nay, how many of their houses are infamous for daily acts of lewdness? (141).

To the corruption and open immorality of the clergy, Calvin adds their tyranny:

... would that those who preside in the church, when they corrupt its government, only sinned for themselves, or at least injured others by nothing but their bad example! But the most crying evil of all is, that they exercise a most cruel tyranny over souls ... what is [it] ... but a lawless, licentious, unrestricted domination over souls, subjecting them to a most miserable bondage? (142-143).

This tyrannical rule was all the more grievous because the church leaders claimed to represent God and, indeed, the merciful Good Shepherd, and yet instead of feeding the people with the Word of God, they thundered against them with threats, if they deviated from their extra-biblical edicts: “What tyrant ever so monstrously abused the patience of his subjects as to insist that everything he proclaimed should be received as a message from heaven!” (143-144).

Church government is still in need of reform in our day. How few ministers can preach, with the resultant biblical illiteracy of the people in the pew! How ignorant are the elders, who are often pooled from the middle class, rather than chosen for their spiritual qualities! Where is the office of deacon? Add to that the prevalence of female office-bearers and even the ordination of homosexuals by the “mainstream denominations” of our day, and we still have good reason to lament the state of the church. Besides that, the modern church has a slew of unbiblical offices: senior pastors, assistant pastors, worship leaders

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and youth pastors, many of whom are little more than administrators, not to mention self-styled “apostles” and “prophets” who claim to have a direct line to heaven into which their followers can tap—for a fee!

As a fitting conclusion to the first section of his treatise, Calvin summarizes the lamentable condition of the church in his day in a final, damning paragraph:

At the time when divine truth lay buried under this vast and dense cloud of darkness—when religion was sullied by so many impious superstitions—when by horrid blasphemies the worship of God was corrupted, and His glory laid prostrate—when by a multitude of perverse opinions, the benefit of redemption was frustrated, and men, intoxicated with a fatal confidence in works, sought salvation any where rather than in Christ—when the administration of the Sacraments was partly maimed and torn asunder, partly adulterated by the admixture of numerous fictions, and partly profaned by traffickings for gain—when the government of the Church had degenerated into mere confusion and devastation—when those who sat in the seat of pastors first did most vital injury to the Church by the dissoluteness of their lives, and, secondly, exercised a cruel and most noxious tyranny over souls, by every kind of error, leading men like sheep to the slaughter;—then Luther arose, and after him others, who with united counsels sought out means and methods by which religion might be purged from all these defilements, the doctrine of godliness restored to its integrity, and the Church raised out of its calamitous into somewhat of a tolerable condition. The same course we are still pursuing in the present day (144-145).

### **The Remedies That the Reformers Employed**

Having diagnosed the misery of the church, Calvin explains and defends the remedies that he and others have employed, which remedies were met with fierce, unrelenting opposition from the tyrannical church authorities:

Let there be an examination of our whole doctrine, of our form of administering the sacraments, and our method of

governing the church; and in none of these three things will it be found that we have made any change upon the ancient form, without attempting to restore it to the exact standard of the word of God (146).

Calvin's motivation is, as it was with all things, the glory of God:

We proclaim the glory of God in terms far loftier than it was wont to be proclaimed before, and we earnestly labour to make the perfections in which his glory shines better and better known. His benefits towards ourselves we extol as eloquently as we can, while we call upon others to reverence his majesty, render due homage to his greatness, feel due gratitude for his mercies, and unite in showing forth his praise (146-147).

In other words, the Reformers restored to a corrupt, ignorant church the preaching of the pure Word of God, which led the people to thankful worship of God's name. Exactly that, and not entertainment or social programmes, is required in our degenerate age. When God's people know God's name, His mercies and His salvation, then and only then do they respond in thankful lives of devoted service to Him. Such a church is a worshipping, witnessing and growing church, a pillar and ground of the truth, a church with a message worth proclaiming.

Calvin reformed prayer by changing three things: first, he says, "disregarding the intercession of saints, we have brought men back to Christ;" second, "we have taught them to pray ... with firm and solid confidence" (for faith, not doubt, is the foundation of prayer); and third, "we have taught to pray ... with understanding also, instead of continuing as formerly to mutter over confused prayers in an unknown tongue" (154).

The doctrine of salvation that Calvin restored to the church is the old, biblical gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. To build the truth on a solid foundation, two errors had to be removed from the people's thinking: the error of free will and the error of the merit of works. "If any man," says Calvin, "has any ability of his own to serve God, he does not obtain salvation entirely by the grace of Christ, but in part bestows it upon himself" (159). Calvin has in mind the medieval error that God helps with grace those who cooperate with grace, which teaching prevails in many evangelical, free-will

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churches of our day. How rare it is today to find a pulpit in which man's free will is not preached! In fact, tell most professing Christians that free will (as they understand it) is not a biblical doctrine and they will view you as mad!

In his explanation of justification, Calvin does not differ one whit from Luther: "God, without any respect to works, freely adopts [man] in Christ, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to him, as if it were his own" (161). Calvin's opponents, on the other hand, "maintain that man is not justified by the grace of God, in any sense *which does not reserve part of the praise for his own works*" (162; italics mine). The issue is not whether we are saved by grace, but whether we are saved by grace alone! The issue is not whether we are justified by faith, but whether we are justified by faith alone! The *solas* of the Reformation still matter.

Against the view that sinners can make (at least, partial) satisfaction for their own sins, Calvin exalts the work of Christ:

... the sins of men are forgiven freely, and we acknowledge no other satisfaction than that which Christ accomplished, when, by the sacrifice of his death, he expiated our sins ... our heavenly Father, contented with the sole expiation of Christ, requires none from us (163).

Calvin, then, does not reject good works or teach that they are an unnecessary response of the Christian, but accords to them a proper place, the fruit of justification which God even rewards with the reward of grace:

Our doctrine, therefore, is that the good works of believers are always devoid of a spotless purity which can stand the inspection of God; nay, that when they are tried by the strict rule of justice, they are, to a certain extent, impure. But, when once God has graciously adopted believers, he not only accepts and loves their persons, but their works also, and condescends to honour them with a reward (164-165).

The reformation of ecclesiastical government proposed by the Reformers was to restore the office of teacher: "The pastoral office we have restored, both according to the apostolic rule, and the practice of the primitive church, by insisting that everyone who rules in the church shall also teach" (170).

While many corruptions of the priesthood, monks and nuns needed to be corrected, the restoration of a competent preaching ministry Calvin viewed as most urgent:

Among us, should some ministers be found of no great learning, still none is admitted who is not at least tolerably apt to teach. That all are not more perfect is to be imputed more to the calamity of the times than to us (170).

Against this, the Roman Catholics boasted of their apostolic succession, which Calvin refutes from the Word of God. In a courageous attack on the pope's authority, Calvin thunders with righteous indignation against papal pretensions:

I deny that See to be Apostolical, wherein nought is seen but a shocking apostasy—I deny him to be the vicar of Christ, who, in furiously persecuting the gospel, demonstrates by his conduct that he is Antichrist—I deny him to be the successor of Peter, who is doing his utmost to destroy every edifice that Peter built—and I deny him to be the head of the Church, who by his tyranny lacerates and dismembers the Church, after dissevering her from Christ, her true and only Head (219-220).

### **The Urgency for the Reformation (Then and Now)**

Some in Calvin's day agreed that the state of the church was lamentable but for various reasons they were reluctant to come to the church's aid. Calvin seeks to stir up the Emperor, the princes and anyone else who reads his words to immediate action, and answers the arguments of those who oppose the Reformers' actions.

First, Calvin defends the Reformation against the charge of schism by pointing out that other faithful men of God had been slandered as "troublers of Israel." The Reformers have done nothing harmful or nefarious: "What do we even now, but strive that the one God may be worshipped amongst us, and that his simple truth may reign in the church?" (184). Second, Calvin defends the Reformation against the charge that the changes that the Reformers introduced were the cause of social and political unrest:

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There is an ancient practice which the wicked have resorted to in all ages, viz. to take occasion from the preaching of the gospel to excite tumult, and then to defame the gospel as the cause of dissension—dissension which, even in the absence of opportunity, they wickedly and eagerly court (185).

The same is true today: enemies of the gospel blame the gospel for bringing unrest into the world, when it is *their opposition to the gospel* that is to blame.

Third, Calvin insists that it was impossible to stand idly by when God's name was horribly blasphemed:

O accursed patience, if, when the honour of God is impaired, not to say prostrated, we are so slightly affected, that we can wink and pass on! O ill-bestowed benefits of Christ, if we can permit the memory of them to be thus suppressed by impious blasphemies! (193).

Calvin's treatise is a call to courage: when false doctrine is preached and God's worship is polluted, the Christian must rise up in holy indignation to defend his Lord, even if the whole world stands against him. He must do so using the spiritual weapons of the Word of God and prayer (never, of course, employing physical violence, and doing so with a zeal that is according to knowledge, the knowledge of his own sin and of the grace of God) but he cannot be silent, anymore than a dog can be silent when his master is injured (189).

The church still needs to be reformed in 2017, some five hundred years after the great Protestant Reformation of 1517. The motto of the Reformed churches is *semper reformanda* or "always reforming." Besides that, although much of what Luther and Calvin accomplished (or rather what *Christ* accomplished through them) remains to this day, a lot, sadly, has been lost through apostasy. I encourage the reader to pick up Calvin's treatise, to take its appeals to heart, and to work and pray for the reformation of the church in our day.

"Turn us again, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved" (Ps. 80:19).