

The History of the Reformation...Part 2

How
Christ
restored
the gospel
to his
church



Enough to Astonish Everyone Who Looks... Calvin as Writer/Teacher

Nicholas Colladon, one of Calvin's secretaries wrote this:

I do not believe there can be found his like. For who could recount his ordinary and extraordinary labors? I doubt if any man in our time has had more to listen to, to reply to, to write, or things of greater importance. The multitude and quality alone of his writings is enough to astonish everyone who looks at them, and even more those who read them...He never ceased working, day and night, in the service of the Lord, and heard most unwillingly the prayers and exhortations that his friends addressed to him every day to give himself some rest.¹

I want to talk to you this morning about two of Calvin's books. I shouldn't think we will be spending more than a couple of weeks looking at Calvin but I can't imagine doing a series on Calvin without at least mentioning a few of his more important books. Next week we'll take a look at his magnus opum, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, but this week I want to look at two of his lesser books and by lesser I personally only mean smaller or shorter though I have to admit most scholars argue that all his other books combined are less important than his *Institutes*. I suppose that technically what they argue is true...but the two little

books that I want to refer to have been so important to my own life and understanding of the gospel that must confess I cannot bring myself to call either less important.

The two works I want to consider this morning are Calvin's *Response to Cardinal Sadoletto* and his little book entitled, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. The first work is really not much more than an open letter written in response to Cardinal Sadoletto but I am going to refer to it as a book simply because that is the format in which I first encountered it. The two works were written in 1539 and 1543 respectively. That is, the *Response to Cardinal Sadoletto* was written first in 1539 in the period before Calvin was recalled to Geneva and the *Necessity of Reforming the Church* was written in 1543 after Calvin returned to Geneva. He would have been 30 when he wrote the first book and 34 when he wrote the second.

Now the two books have a couple of things in common. Both of the books are small. That is, they are both short enough that I was able to reread both of them this week in preparation for time together. The edition² of Calvin's *Response to Cardinal Sadoletto* that I own is about 45 pages long while the edition³ of the *Necessity of Reforming the Church* is about 111 pages long.

What I would like to do this morning is simply give you the background to the two books and then talk a little bit about what they cover and why it matters. And then finally, I would like to urge you to consider, seriously consider, reading each for yourself. One of things I hope I impressed on you last week is that Calvin is really plenty simple enough to read and understand and that it is a great shame to the Reformed Church that we do not often enough read Calvin the way the

Lutherans read Luther.

Alright then let's talk about the two books.

You will remember from our earlier lessons that Calvin and Farel were both dismissed from Geneva...actually run out of town...after their refusal to administer the sacrament on Easter 1538. The squabble that had gotten them both in trouble had to do with the Council's decree that no citizen of Geneva could be denied the sacrament. Calvin and Farel had wanted to use the Lord's Supper as the Bible intends as the great center fulcrum of church discipline. That is, they wanted to be able to deny the sacrament to those who lived openly disobedient lives. The Council forbade them from doing so. But Calvin and Farel had no intention of relinquishing control over the sacraments. So Calvin and Farel both announced that they too were going to refuse to administer the sacraments on Easter morning. The Council hearing of their threat forbade them to preach. Calvin and Farel refused to obey the Council's command on the biblical basis of being stewards of the mysteries of God. So on Easter Sunday morning, they mounted their pulpits, Calvin at St. Pierre and Farel at St. Gervais, in direct defiance of the Council's order and informed the Genevans that regardless of what the Council had said they had no intention of either administering the sacraments or preaching the gospel until their position as the rightful stewards of the mysteries of God was properly recognized.

Both the Small and Great councils of the city refused to be dressed down by either Calvin or Farel and accordingly gave them three days to get out of town.⁴ Calvin left Geneva the next day.

Now you have to remember that in those days, the cities in Switzerland were really just small independent city states. That is, they were not really constituent parts of larger countries. As a result, most of the cities made pacts with other cities in which they agreed to come to each other's mutual aid should one of them be attacked.

It is hard for us to imagine, but each city operated like an independent country. Each city council decided the religious direction of their city. Just a decade before the city council of Geneva had decided under the influence of Farel to accept the theology of the Reformation. The entire population had voted they were going to be Reformed rather than Catholic.

So when the Catholic Church heard about the firing of Farel and Calvin, it decided to "court" in order woo it back into the Roman church. Cardinal Sadoletto, one of the most pastoral and gentle of the Catholics, wrote the city an open letter in which he pleaded with the Genevans to return to Rome. In his letter he offered his evaluation of the Reformation and he criticized, really without any fear of response, the central tenets of everything the Reformers had argued.

Now in his open letter, Sadoletto does something really intelligent. What he does is to picture two men standing before God in the Day of Judgment. The first man he pictures is a faithful Roman Catholic. The second man is a Reformed Christian. Now what he does is to have each man plead for entrance into heaven on the basis of what they believe. By doing that, Sadoletto was able to contrast the underlying theology of the two, as he understood it.

It was a particularly intelligent thing for Sadoleto to do especially since the imagery is so visual and easy to understand and because he had no expectation of receiving any sort of challenge or response.

But first, let's listen to Sadoleto's Catholic man standing before God in the judgment.

Being instructed by my parents, who learned from their fathers and forefathers, that I should, in all things, obey the Catholic Church, and observe its laws, admonitions, and decrees, as if You, O Lord, had made them, and seeing that almost all who bore the Christian name and title in our days, and even before, were of the same opinion, all of them venerating this very Church, as the mother of their faith, and regarding it sacrilege to depart from her precepts, I studied to approve myself to You by the same faith which the Catholic Church teaches. And though new men had come with the Scripture much in their mouths and hands, and attempted to add novelties, to pull down the ancient, to argue against the Church, to snatch away from us the obedience which we all gave, I still adhered to that which had been delivered to me by my parents, and observed from antiquity, with the consent of most holy and most learned Fathers; and although the actual manners of many priests were such as might incite my anger, I did not abandon my sentiments. For I concluded, that it was my duty to obey their precepts, as You God, had commanded in the Gospel, while you alone should be the only Judge of their life and actions. Since I was myself stained by many sins, I could not be a fit judge of others. For these sins, I now stand before You imploring not strict justice, O Lord, but rather Your mercy and readiness to forgive.⁵

Next listen to how Sadoleto has the Reformed man plead his case before God.

Almighty God, where I saw the manners of priests almost everywhere corrupt, and saw the priests, nevertheless honored and wealthy, it inflamed my mind, and made me their opponent; and when I saw myself, after having devoted so many years to *literature and theology*⁶, without that place in the Church which my labors had merited, while I saw many unworthy persons exalted to honors and offices, I undertook to the attack those I thought displeasing and unacceptable to

You. And because I could not destroy their power without first trampling on the laws enacted by the Church, I induced the people to condemn those rights of the Church she had long enjoyed. If these rights had been decreed in General Councils, I said do not yield to the authority of Councils; if they had been instituted by ancient Fathers and Doctors, I said the Fathers were wrong; if by Roman Popes, I said they wrongly assumed their authority. In short, I argued all of us should shake off the tyrannical yoke of the Church, which forbids meats, which observes days, which makes us confess our sins to priests, which orders vows to be performed, and which binds with so many chains of bondage men made free, O Christ, in You; and that we should trust to faith alone, and not also to good works, to procure us righteousness and salvation. Seeing, especially, that You paid the penalty for us, and by Your sacred blood wiped away all faults and crimes, in order that we might thereafter be able to do, with greater freedom, whatsoever we wanted. For I searched the Scriptures more cleverly than those ancients did. Having thus by repute for learning and genius acquired fame and estimation among the people, though, indeed, I was not able to overturn the authority of the Church, I was, however, the author of great treason and schism in it.

After he has thus spoken, and spoken truly (for there is no room to lie before that heavenly Judge, though he has kept back much concerning his ambition, *avarice*, love of popular applause, inward fraud and malice, of which he is perfectly *conscious*, and which will appear inscribed on his very forehead), I ask you, my Genevese brethren, whom I long to have of one mind with me in Christ, and in the Church of Christ, what judgment, think you, will be passed on these two men and their associates and followers? Is it not certain that he who followed the Catholic Church will not be judged guilty of any error in this respect? First, because the Church errs not, and even cannot err since the Holy Spirit constantly guides her public and universal decrees and Councils. Secondly, even if she did err, or could have erred (this, however, it is impious to say or believe), no such error would be condemned in him who should, with a mind sincere and humble toward God, have followed the faith and authority of his ancestors. But the other, trusting to his own head, having none among the ancient Fathers, and not even general assemblies of the whole Bishops, whom he deems worthy of honor, and to whom he can bring his mind to yield and submit, arrogating all things to himself, more prepared to slander than to speak or teach, after revolting from the common Church, to what does he look as the haven of his fortunes? in what bulwark does he confide? to whom does he trust as his advocates with God...?7

There was a clamor in the city to reconsider what the council had done a decade before. The council wanted to respond to Sadoletto's arguments but they did not have anyone left in the city with the eloquence to write such a response.

The council did not want to fall out of the Reformation, and yet they saw an increasing influence gathering in the city to go back to the Catholic church. Finally, in desperation, they wrote to the city of Bern asking them to find someone to respond to Sadoletto on their behalf. One of the councilmen of the city finally suggested Calvin. Calvin was asked and was surprisingly willing, even anxious, to write the response.

The story goes that once asked it took Calvin six days to write the response. His response is a model of restraint and clarity of thought. Near the end of his letter, he decided to imitate Sadoletto's image of a man standing before God but changed it dramatically.

I, O Lord, as I had been educated from a boy, always professed the Christian faith. But at first I had no other reason for my faith than that which then everywhere prevailed. Thy Word, which ought to have shone on all thy people like a lamp, was taken away, or at least suppressed as to us. And lest anyone should long for greater light, an idea had been instilled into the minds of all, that the investigation of that hidden celestial philosophy was better delegated to a few, whom the others might consult as oracles—that the highest knowledge befitting plebeian minds was to subdue themselves into obedience to the Church. Then, the rudiments in which I had been instructed were of a kind which could neither properly train me to the legitimate worship of thy Deity, nor pave the way for me to a sure hope of salvation, nor train me aright for the duties of the Christian life. I had learned, indeed, to worship Thee only as my God, but as the true method of worshipping was altogether unknown to me, I stumbled at the very threshold. I believed, as I had been taught, that I was redeemed by the death of thy Son from liability to eternal death, but the redemption I thought of was

one whose virtue could never reach me. I anticipated a future resurrection, but hated to think of it, as being an event most dreadful. And this feeling not only had dominion over me in private, but was derived from the doctrine which was then uniformly delivered to the people by their Christian teachers. They, indeed, preached of thy clemency towards men, but confined it to those who should show themselves deserving of it. They, moreover, placed this desert in the righteousness of works, so that he only was received into thy favor who reconciled himself to Thee by works. Nor, meanwhile, did they disguise the fact, that we are miserable sinners, that we often fall through infirmity of the flesh, and that to all, therefore, thy mercy behooved to be the common haven of salvation; but the method of obtaining it, which they pointed out, was by making satisfaction to Thee for offenses. Then, the satisfaction enjoined was, first, after confessing all our sins to a priest, suppliantly to ask pardon and absolution; and, secondly, by good to efface from thy remembrance our bad actions. Lastly, in order to supply what was still wanting, we were to add sacrifices and solemn expiations. Then, because Thou wert a stern judge and strict avenger of iniquity, they showed how dreadful thy presence must be. Hence they bade us flee first to the saints, that by their intercession Thou mightest be rendered exorable and propitious to us.

When, however, I had performed all these things, though I had some intervals of quiet, I was still far-off from true peace of conscience; for, whenever I descended into myself, or raised my mind to thee, extreme terror seized me—terror which no expiations nor satisfactions could cure. And the more closely I examined myself, the sharper the stings with which my conscience was pricked, so that the only solace which remained to me was to delude myself by obliviousness. Still, as nothing better offered, I continued the course which I had begun, when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountainhead, and, as it were, clearing away the dross, restored it to its original purity. Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted; for (such is the firmness or effrontery with which it is natural to men to persist in the course which they have once undertaken) it was with the greatest difficulty I was induced to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error.

My mind being now prepared for serious attention, I at length perceived, as if light had broken in upon me, in what a style of error I had wallowed, and how much pollution and impurity I had thereby contracted. Being exceedingly alarmed at the

misery into which I had fallen, and much more at that which threatened me in the view of eternal death, I, as in duty bound, made it my first business to betake myself to thy way, condemning my past life, not without groans and tears. And now, O Lord, what remains to a wretch like me, but instead of defense, earnestly to supplicate Thee not to judge according to its deserts that fearful abandonment of thy Word, from which, in thy wondrous goodness, Thou hast at last delivered me.⁸

Now there is more to the letter...more than I can read in a few moments or even hour. But you get the idea. Calvin's work was so clear and precise that Sadoleto chose not to respond. The people of Geneva chose to stay with the Reformation and eventually decided to ask Calvin to come back to Geneva. He anguished at the prospect. I particularly like the way Ronald Wallace puts it:

Seldom can an invitation to a pastorate have been received with so much reluctance. He was convinced that Geneva was largely to blame for what had happened previously and his memories of it brought fear: "Not a day passed in which I did not ten times over wish for death." He had regarded it as a singular act of the kindness of God when he was forcibly thrown out, for only the sanctity of his call had kept him at his post so long. Set free through such a merciful deliverance by God, who could blame him for not wanting to replunge himself "into the gulf and whirlpool" which he had already found to be so dangerous and destructive. His letters show feelings of abhorrence and despondency. But he recognized that the will of God often goes contrary to our own inclinations and self-interest. He consulted others, and when he found he had to go back expressed himself vividly⁹: "As to my intended course of proceeding, this is my present feeling; had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, a slain victim for a sacrifice to the Lord ... I submit my will and my affections subdued and held fast to the obedience of God."

But Calvin did go back, and western civilization was never the same. The gospel was defended and defended and defended all over again. And much of the doctrinal understanding we now possess was forged out on Calvin's anvil in Geneva. His understanding of justification was expounded clearly and accepted

by men like John Knox, who brought the Reformation to the English speaking world through Scotland.

Now after Calvin had been back in Geneva two years he wrote a second book and it too in a sense is a an open letter only it is an open letter to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.

You see the one charge that the Catholics kept throwing toward the Reformers was the charge of being schismatic. It's a nasty word. Basically it meant they were charging the Reformers with being divisive. Calvin grew weary of hearing the charge and decided at last to write a letter, an open letter, in which he would try to lay to rest once and for all the charge of being schismatic.

Calvin concludes the opening part of his letter this way:

First, then, the question is not, whether the church labors under diseases both numerous and grievous (this is admitted even by all moderate judges), but whether the diseases are of a kind the cure of which admits not of longer delay, and as to which, therefore, it is neither useful nor becoming to await the result of slow remedies. We are accused of rash and impious innovation, for having ventured to propose any change at all on the former state of the church. What!¹⁰

A few lines later Calvin continues:

We maintain, then, that at the commencement when God raised up Luther and others, who held forth a torch to light us into the way of salvation, and who, by their ministry, founded and reared our churches those heads of doctrine in which the truth of our religion, those in which the pure and legitimate worship of God, and those in which the salvation of men are comprehended, were in a great measure obsolete. We maintain that the use of the sacraments was in many ways vitiated and polluted. And we maintain that the government of the church

was converted into a species of foul and insufferable tyranny. But, perhaps these averments have not force enough to move certain individuals until they are better explained. This, therefore, I will do, not as the subject demands, but as far as my ability will permit. Here, however, I have no intention to review and discuss all our controversies; that would require a long discourse, and this is not the place for it. I wish only to show how just and necessary the causes were which forced us to the changes for which we are blamed. To accomplish this, I must take up together the three following points.

First, I must briefly enumerate the evils which compelled us to seek for remedies.

Secondly, I must show that the particular remedies which our reformers employed were apt and salutary.

Thirdly, 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.¹¹

So there you have the content of Calvin's letter. He says he is going to show what the evils were the Reformers faced. He says he is going to show what remedies the Reformers offered. And then finally he says he is going explain why waiting was not an option.

Now obviously I don't have time to go through all of Calvin's argument and I want to commend it to you to read for yourself but I thought I might, at least, tell what Calvin thought the evils were the Reformers faced.

Here's what he argues:

If it be inquired, 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 principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity: that is, 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. After these come the sacraments and the government of the church, which, as they were instituted for the preservation of these branches of doctrine, ought not to be employed for any other purpose; and, indeed, the only means of ascertaining whether they are administered purely and in due form, or otherwise, is to bring them to this test.

Do you get what Calvin was arguing? He was arguing that the Roman Catholic Church had defiled the worship of God. He was arguing that the Roman Catholic Church had obscured the source of salvation. And he was arguing that the Roman Catholic Church had employed both the sacraments and the very government of their church to make sure that these two essential elements of Christian worship could never be put right.

Now, of course, Calvin goes into all these things in detail explaining how each one was defiled or perverted and he even explains how the Roman Catholic use of the sacraments buttressed their position so it could not be altered. And then he explains, and I find this the most engaging part, why the Reformation could no longer be delayed.

At the end of his letter he writes this:

In [the] future, therefore, as often as you shall hear the croaking note "The business of reforming the church must be delayed for the present; there will be time enough to accomplish it after other matters are transacted" remember, most invincible emperor, and most illustrious princes, that the matter on which you are to deliberate is, whether you are to leave to your posterity some empire or none. Yet, why do I speak of posterity? Even now, while your own eyes behold, it is half bent, and totters to its final ruin. In regard to ourselves, whatever be the event, we will always be supported, in the sight of God, by the consciousness that we have desired both to promote his glory and do good to his church; that

we have labored faithfully for that end; that, in short, we have done what we could. Our conscience tells us, that in all our wishes, and all our endeavors, we have had no other aim. And we have essayed, by clear proof, to testify the fact. And, certainly, while we feel assured that we both care for and do the work of the Lord, we are also confident that he will by no means be wanting either to himself or to it.

But be the issue what it may, we will never repent of having begun, and of having proceeded thus far. The Holy Spirit is a faithful and unerring witness to our doctrine. We know, I say, that it is the eternal truth of God that we preach. We are, indeed, desirous, as we ought to be, that our ministry may prove salutary to the world; but to give it this effect belongs to God, not to us. If, to punish, partly the ingratitude, and partly the stubbornness of those to whom we desire to do good, success must prove desperate, and all things go to worse, I will say what it befits a Christian man to say, and what all who are true to this holy profession will subscribe: We will die, but in death even be conquerors, not only because through it we shall have a sure passage to a better life, but because we know that our blood will be as seed to propagate the divine truth which men now despise.¹²

Now that's a letter and wonderful conclusion and you can see, I think, why his secretary Colladon could write, "writings *were* enough to astonish everyone who looks at them, and even more those who read them..."

They were indeed. Let's pray.

¹ T.H.L Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 131.

² John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1966), 49-94.

³ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters Volume 1* edited and translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 123-134.

⁴ Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 81.

⁵ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1966), 43.

⁶ Almost certainly an allusion to men like Calvin.

⁷ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1966), 44.

⁸ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto, *A Reformation Debate: Sadoleto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1966), 487-91.

⁹ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin: Geneva and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 24.

¹⁰ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters Volume 1* edited and translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 125.

¹¹ Calvin, 126.

¹² Calvin, 233-234.