



Calvin as a Controversialist

by *Cornelius Van Til*

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1. There is back of all that Calvin wrote a deep joy because of sins forgiven. He knew that through Christ he had been reconciled to God.
2. He therefore looked with deep compassion upon the multitudes of men about him who knew not this reconciliation with God. These multitudes of men had no one to point them to the Christ and to what he wrought for sinners on Calvary's cross. Instead of leading men to Christ through the Scriptures, the Church of Rome usurped the place of Christ. Forbidding men to rest secure on the promises of Christ, the Church held them suspended over the abyss of hell.
3. How Calvin rejoiced in the work of Luther through whom Christ and his righteousness had been brought to humble believers! With what care he wrote brief statements of the faith in order that every man might readily possess the central truths of the gospel! A lifetime of labor went into the exegesis of Scripture and the writing of his *Institutes* in order that ministers might preach Christ from the Word, according to the analogy of faith, for the building up of the people of God in the most holy faith.
4. But Calvin realized that the gospel cannot be faithfully preached unless it is also faithfully defended: "For the Lord hath appointed us ministers of his doctrine with this proviso, that we are to be as firm in defending as faithful in delivering it." 1 And "when a struggle for life must be endured, few know what it is to defend the cause of Christ." 2
5. Calvin knew that Satan was back of all the opposition to the pure preaching and teaching of Christ. And he knew that Satan seeks to accomplish the destruction of the Church of Christ in various ways.

Extreme Opposition

6. During Calvin's early days, Francis 1, the king of France, undertook a violent persecution of the Protestants in his land. "The German princes, who had espoused the cause of the Gospel, and whose friendship Francis was then courting, feeling offended with him at his persecution of the Protestants, the excuse offered ... was that he had not punished any but

the Anabaptists, who substituted their own spirit for the divine Word, and held all civil magistrates in contempt.” 3

7. In this circumstance Calvin raises himself up to his full height and says: “The characteristic of a true sovereign is, to acknowledge that, in the administration of his kingdom, he is a minister of God.” 4 Identifying himself with his people he adds that they suffer persecution because they believe it to be life eternal to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent (Jn 17:3).
8. But back of the king, Calvin knows, is the Apostolic See. The priesthood of Rome has become the adversary of God’s people. “The true religion which is delivered in the Scriptures” matters little to them “provided not a finger is raised against the primacy of the apostolic See and the authority of the holy mother church.” 5

Importance of Scripture

9. “If only the Pope will remove himself and no longer stand in the light of the sun! Those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture ... ” 6
“Enlightened by him, we no longer believe either on our own judgment or that of others that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured—as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it—that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God.” 7
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11. It is thus that Calvin seeks to keep open the line of communication between Christ and his Church. That which pretends to be the Church but is not subject to the voice of Christ, speaking in Scripture, acts as a tyrant of God’s people, either directly or indirectly through the civil power. And those who pretend to need no church, even when it speaks on the authority of Christ in his Word, live in darkness. Satan employs Francis the king, the “Holy See,” and men’s own follies in order to keep them from obedience to Christ.
12. How then are men to be relieved from an evil conscience? Only if from Scripture, as the very mouth of God, they learn that Christ Jesus “died for our sins, and rose again for our justification.” 1 Then they will have the existential knowledge of God through Christ. For then they will no longer listen to the speculations of churchmen about the essence of God apart from his revelation in Christ. Covenant-confrontation with God in Christ then takes the place of the “frigid speculation” of scholastic theologians. With Christ speaking to them in Scripture, men will also realize that “true religion must be conformable to the will of God as its unerring standard.” 2

Covenant Communication

13. To defend the faith means, therefore, for Calvin (a) to keep Satan from introducing static into the instrument through which Christ speaks to his Church and (b) to keep Satan from obstructing the response of faith and obedience that the Church should give to its Head.

Covenant communication between Christ and his Church must at all costs be maintained. In his hatred of Christ, Satan is out to destroy this communication. The true servant of God must watch lest all his labor in preaching and teaching should serve the purposes of Satan rather than those of Christ. The true servants of Christ must protect the sheep from themselves, from false shepherds, and from Satan. How else can believers grow in the grace and knowledge of their Savior? And how else can the Church, the people of God, proclaim God's message to the world?

14. Throughout his life, Calvin followed the straight-forward course which he set for himself when first he defended the benighted Protestants in France. Always his basic interest was the building up of God's people in the faith. But always too he kept watch lest, in one way or another, this building process was obstructed by Satan. Only a small fraction of his work in this field can be indicated.

Open Confession

15. One of Satan's subtlest schemes was that of keeping believers from openly confessing their faith, "holding it enough to worship Christ in mind, while they gave outward attendance on Popish rites." 3
16. With deepest sympathy Calvin writes to a friend on this subject. He pities his friend for living in "that Egypt in which so many Idols and so much monstrous Idolatry" are daily presented to his eyes. 4 But let him not begin, lest he would commence his ruin, to consider any policy of keeping silent when Christ would be confessed before men. "Whenever any semblance of good or convenience would withdraw us one hair's breadth from obedience to our heavenly Father, the first thought that ought to present itself for our consideration is, that everything, be it what it may, which has obtained the sanction of a Divine command, thereby becomes so sacred as not only to be beyond dispute, but also beyond deliberation." 5 "In short, the Lord calls his followers to confession, and those who decline it must seek another master, since he cannot tolerate dissimulation" (false pretence, hypocrisy—K.). 6 By dissimulation we would serve that cruel master Satan, rather than our merciful Savior who confessed a good confession before Pontius Pilate and was crucified when he did.

Timid Colleagues

17. The Confession of the Church, Calvin maintained, must not only be of the individual believer, it must also be of the church. When first settled at Geneva he "published a short formula of Christian doctrine, adapted to the church of Geneva, which had just escaped from the pollutions of the Papist." His "first object was to obtain from the citizens ... an open adjuration of the Papacy, and an oath of adherence to the Christian religion and its discipline, as comprehended under a few heads." 7
18. Here then Calvin would lead in a clear-cut public and corporate confession of Christ. But "most of his colleagues, from timidity, keeping aloof from the contest, and some of them (this gave Calvin the greatest uneasiness) even secretly impeding his work" 8 sorely tried Calvin's courage. His courage was rewarded and Satan was defeated, for "the senate and people of Geneva solemnly declared their adherence to the leading doctrines and discipline of the Christian religion." 9

Discipline

19. Calvin's whole approach to the Reformation of the church was existential because it was scriptural. The clarity of God's revelation in Christ through Scripture was basic in all that he undertook. Hence, as noted, his opposition to all speculation. Hence also his insistence that the table of the Lord must not be defiled.
20. In a running controversy with Rome Calvin therefore rejected its doctrine of the mass as an attack on the finished sacrifice of Christ. And in Geneva Farel and he "openly declared, that they could not duly dispense the Lord's supper to a people so much at variance among themselves, and so much estranged from all ecclesiastical discipline." 10 "Flagrant immoralities" and "old feuds" "between some of the best families" were the occasion of this bold position of Calvin and his colleagues.
21. For their bold stand Calvin and his colleagues were ordered to leave the city.

Cunning of The "Mother Church"

22. Would the church at Geneva be able to continue its brave corporate witness to Christ after Calvin was banished? Wouldn't it die out for lack of fearless leadership? Satan took no chances. He clothed himself in the cloak of piety in order to lead the Genevan people back into bondage.
23. Cardinal Sadolet wrote a letter to the Genevan people calling them his "very dear brethren in Christ." 1 It seemed good, he says "to the Holy Spirit and to me ... to write somewhat to you." He speaks of "their hope in Christ," and of the "blessing of complete and perpetual salvation": which they may have "by faith alone in God and in Jesus Christ." 2 They must realize that it is this that the Catholic Church has been transmitting to them. "This Church hath regenerated us to God in Christ, hath nourished and confirmed us, instructed us what to think, what to believe, wherein to place our hope, and also taught us by what way we must tend towards heaven." 3
24. Will not his "dearest brethren" then return to mother church forsaking modern novelties? Think of the judgment day. If you have returned to the church you may meet it with confidence, having in her been obedient to the Gospel. But if you have not returned you must meet the judgment day with fear. Suppose you were one of the "authors of dissension." You would then have to say to the Judge, among other things, that you had cast aside the church, and appealed directly to the sacred blood of Christ in order that you might thereafter be able to do, with greater freedom, whatsoever you wished. 4 With such cunning deception did "Mother Church" seek to woo her wandering children back to herself.
25. There was at this time, says Beza, no one at Geneva able to answer Sadolet. Will Calvin come to their defense? Have they not cast him out? If Sadolet and Satan had put their trust in this circumstance they did not realize that Christ had prepared for himself in Calvin a faithful shepherd. He informs Sadolet that, "though at present relieved of the charge of the Church of Geneva," ... "God, when he gave it to me in charge ... bound me to be faithful to it forever." 5

The Holy Spirit

26. "I am compelled," says Calvin, "whether I will or not, to withstand you openly. For then only do pastors edify the Church, when, besides leading docile souls to Christ, placidly, as with the hand, they are also armed to repel the machinations of those who strive to impede

the work of God.” 6 When Sadolet appeals to the Spirit of Christ, Calvin asks, “What comes of the Word of the Lord, that clearest of all marks, and which the Lord himself, in pointing out the Church, so often recommends to us? For seeing how dangerous it would be to boast of the Spirit without the Word, he declared that the Church is indeed governed by the Holy Spirit; but in order that that government might not be vague and unstable, he annexed it to the Word.” 7

Subjectivism

27. To appeal to the Church as above the Word is, argues Calvin, to appeal to man instead of to Christ. “We are assailed by two sects, which seem to differ widely from each other. For what similitude is there in appearance between the Pope and the Anabaptists? And yet, that you may see that Satan never transforms himself so cunningly, as not in some measure to betray himself, the principal weapon with which they both assail us is the same. For when they boast extravagantly of the Spirit, the tendency certainly is to sink and bury the Word of God, that they may make room for their own falsehoods. And you, Sadolet, by stumbling on the very threshold, have paid the penalty of that affront which you offered to the Holy Spirit, when you separated him from the Word.” 8 Ours must be the Church “whose supreme care it is humbly and religiously to venerate the Word of God, and submit to its authority.” 9 A soul “when deprived of the Word of God, is given up unarmed to the devil for destruction.” 10
28. Calvin disclaims for himself and for all believers the ability so perfectly to expound the Word of God as not to fall into error. But therefore it is all-important, he maintains, that the judgment of all believers, and therefore of the Church must be subject to the voice of Christ as it speaks in Scripture.” 11 When the believer has diligently sought thus to obey the voice of Christ, then, and then alone, he need not fear the judgment day. Think of one of these believers, says Calvin in his reply to Sadolet, and hear him at that day: “They charged me with two of the worst of crimes—heresy and schism. And the heresy was, that I dared protest against dogmas which they received. But what could I have done? I heard from thy mouth that there was no other light of truth which could direct our souls into the way of life, than that which was kindled by thy Word.” 12 When the Church had replaced the Word as the final rule of faith “there was none who duly considered that one sacrifice which he offered on the cross, and by which he reconciled us to himself—none who ever dreamed of thinking of his eternal priesthood, and the intercession depending upon it, none who trusted in his righteousness only.” 13 Calvin would protect his flock that they might live and die in the faith of Christ, their righteousness.

The Council Of Trent

29. But it was not alone the local church of Geneva which Calvin sought to defend against an individual Romanist theologian. At the Council of Trent (1546) the Church of Rome met to do by argument what it had failed to do by persecution. This “Sacred, Ecumenical, and General Council of Trent, lawfully met in the Holy Spirit” 1 was interested in “Extirpating Heresies and Reforming Manners.” The council met under the presidency of the legates of the Holy See.
30. In replying step by step to the pronouncements of the Council Calvin again makes central the doctrine of Scripture: “We especially repudiate their desire to make certainty of doctrine

depend not less on what they call *agrapha* (unwritten), than on the Scriptures. We must ever adhere to Augustine's rule, 'Faith is conceived from the Scriptures.' ” 2

31. And with the Roman Church's denial of the sole authority goes its denial of the sole sufficiency of the work of Christ in the salvation of sinners. "Paul claims the whole work for God; they ascribe nothing to him but a little help." 3
32. Moreover, the false teachers dishonor the Holy Spirit as they dishonor the Son. They refuse to make "God the author of a good will." 4 And faith, Calvin urges, is what it is because of its object, Christ. "Let us remember that the nature of faith is to be estimated from Christ." 5 With Christ clearly revealed in Scripture and Scripture accepted as the Word of Christ by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, the believer may live and die in the certainty of acceptance of God. Faith "is destroyed as soon as certainty is taken away." 6

Election

33. Finally, in order to protect Christ's little ones from a church that takes their Christ away Calvin traces their salvation back to their election. But this election is in Christ. To appeal to election apart from Christ is, for him, the acme of self-deceptive speculation. He says that "nothing is more pernicious than to inquire into the secret council of God, with a view of thereby obtaining a knowledge of our election . . ." This is "a whirlpool in which we shall be swallowed up and lost." But the matter is quite otherwise when we contemplate that "our Heavenly Father holds forth in Christ a mirror of our eternal adoption." For "no man truly holds what has been given us by Christ save he who feels assured that Christ himself has been given him by the Father, that he may not perish." 7
34. For Calvin, the idea of election is anything but a philosophical notion, to be placed either at the beginning or at the end of a construction of human thought. For Calvin it is Christ, speaking through his Word, who bids men to trace their salvation back to God the Father who chose them in his Son to be his children. The clarity of the revelation of Christ in Scripture, the certainty of faith and election go together. These truths cohere with one another. They are not deduced from one another. They are all taught by Christ, who is the Truth. In suppressing Christ as the Truth the Romanist church took away from God's people all the riches purchased for them by Christ.

Truth and Peace

35. Was Calvin then only for Truth and not for peace? Far from it. Often enough he acted as mediator between extremists in the Protestant fold. 8 But he knew the truth of Christ's gospel is the only bond of peace. 9 We are, therefore, not to "bargain concerning the eternal and immutable Truth of God, how far it is to prevail!" 10 There are those who would contrive "a kind of specious Pacification" which would leave us "a half Christ" "but in such a manner that there is no part of his doctrine which they do not obscure or bespatter with some stain of falsehood. And this artifice for deforming piety they send forth—so help them!—under the name of Reformation." 11 "Whatever may happen, let it be our resolute determination to listen to no terms of peace, which mingle the figments of men with the pure truth of God." 12
36. To pacify dissension the advocates of a "specious Pacification" contend "that we are not to stand out pertinaciously on other points, provided the doctrine of free Justification remains

safe.” 13 Can we as Protestants not rally round this central point so as to have peace among ourselves and repel our common foe?

37. Calvin replies that there “is a great difference between merely uttering the one expression—we are justified by faith—and setting forth the whole matter in a distinct explanation.” 14 And the latter must be done if the Church is really to be Reformed. To be sure, catechisms and brief statements of faith must be used for the instruction of God’s people. But such instruction itself must be protected by a setting forth of the full significance of the doctrine of justification by faith, against the errors of Rome. The denial of this doctrine is, in the case of Romanism, a part of its speculative system. In particular it is its false doctrine of man and of God that underlies the Romish falsification of justification by faith.
38. It is therefore not “from a love of disputation” or because “we will not allow anything to be passed over that does not altogether please us” that we must undertake to show that in Romanism we have the interweaving of the doctrine of justification with a pagan system of thought.
39. In order “to maintain the doctrine of justification entire” it behooves us “to have a sure definition of faith.” 15
40. “With regard, then, to the obtaining of Righteousness before God, I say that we must necessarily hold the following viewpoints concerning Faith: —First, that it is an undoubting persuasion, by which we receive the word brought by Prophets and Apostles as truth sent from God. Secondly, that what it properly looks to in the Word of God is the free promises, and especially Christ, their pledge and foundation, so that, resting on the paternal favor of God, we can venture to entertain a confident hope of eternal salvation. Thirdly, that it is not a bare knowledge which flutters in the mind, but that it carries along with it a lively affection, which has its seat in the heart. Fourthly, that this faith does not spring from the perspicacity of the human mind, or the proper movement of the heart, but is the special work of the Holy Spirit, whose it is both to enlighten the mind and impress the heart. Lastly, that this efficacy of the Spirit is not felt by all promiscuously, but by those who are ordained to life.” 16
41. “Unless these points are put beyond controversy, though we may ever and anon repeat like parrots that we are justified by faith, we shall never hold the true doctrine of Justification.” 17
42. Only a glimpse has been given of Calvin as a controversialist. Of the wider implications of his work for science, art, and philosophy we have not been able to speak at all. But so much has been shown as to enable us to see him as valiant for truth. And for him Christ was the truth. Calvin truly counted all things but loss for the knowledge of Christ. Only if Christ speaks to his people and if his people speak to Christ will the triune God be glorified.
43. Did Calvin make no mistakes? Are we to engage in hero-worship? Calvin himself confessed his mistakes and grievous faults. Is there not a single wart that we can see on his face? But in his testament, executed shortly before his death, he said: “I also testify and declare, that, in all the contentions and disputations in which I have been engaged with the enemies of the Gospel, I have used no impostures, no wicked and sophistical devices, but have acted

candidly and sincerely in defending the truth.”¹⁸ Would that we might be able to speak likewise in our day.

1 *Calvin's Tracts*, Edinburgh 1851, Vol. 3, p. 345.

2 *Idem.*, p. 242.

3 The “Life of John Calvin,” Theodore Beza in *Calvin's Tracts*, Vol. 1, p. 27.

4 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—Prefatory Address, Edinburgh, 1845, p. 6.

5 *Idem.*, p. 9.

6 *Institutes*, Vol. 1, p. 95.

7 *Ibid.*

1 *Idem.*, Prefatory Address, p. 10.

2 *Idem.*, p. 61.

3 Beza, *Life of Calvin*, *Op. cit.* p. 31.

4 *Calvin's Tracts*, Vol. 3, p. 360.

5 *Idem.*, p. 365.

6 *Idem.*, p. 366.

7 *Calvin's Tracts*, Vol. 1, p. 29.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Idem.*, p. 30.

10 *Idem.*, p. 32.

1 *Idem.*, Vol. 1, p. 3 ff.

2 *Idem.*, p. 9.

3 *Idem.*, p. 10.

4 *Idem.*, p. 18.

5 *Idem.*, p. 27.

6 *Idem.*, p. 29.

7 *Idem.*, p. 35.

8 *Idem.*, p. 36.

9 *Idem.*, p. 50.

10 *Idem.*, p. 53.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Idem.*, p. 56.

13 *Idem.*, p. 57.

1 *Calvin's Tracts*, Vol. 3, p. 61.

2 *Idem.*, p. 70.

3 *Idem.*, p. 110.

4 *Idem.*, p. 111.

5 *Idem.*, p. 119.

6 *Idem.*, p. 125.

7 *Idem.*, p. 135.

8 Calvin's many discussions on the Lord's supper were all of a mediating nature. Cf. *Tracts*, Vol.2.

9 *Idem.*, *The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church*, p. 240.

10 *Idem.*, p. 241.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Idem.*, p. 242.

13 *Idem.*, p. 243.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Idem.*, p. 249.

16 *Idem.*, p. 250.

17 *Idem.*, p. 254.

18 *Calvin's Tracts*, Vol. 1, p. 87.