

**THE REFORMATION MANIFESTO OF JOHN CALVIN:
AN OVERVIEW OF *THE NECESSITY OF REFORMING THE CHURCH*
Kevin C. Carr, D. Min. – April 30, 2009**

The Apostle Paul admonished Timothy, “What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you” (1 Tim. 1:12-13). Jude spoke of contending “for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3-4). These and other like Scripture are the impetus that lie behind the need for Reformation in the church. They recognize that the Bible presents a baseline of truth from which the sinful heart is prone to wander. They call the church to return to “the pattern of sound teaching”—“the good deposit”—that was her original trust. This was the essence of the sixteenth-century Reformation.

John Calvin is indisputably one of the church’s great Reformers. Shortly after his return to Geneva he wrote his Reformation “manifesto” entitled *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1544). The treatise was addressed to Emperor Charles V on the occasion of the Diet of Spires held in 1543. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s colleague, successor, and biographer notes, “I know not if any writing on the subject, more nervous or solid, has been published in our age.”^p *Reforming the Church* is divided into the three parts. He addresses 1) what particular things are in need of reform; 2) what actions have been taken by the Reformed church; and, 3) why immediate reform is necessary. The tract is symphonic in structure. He draws attention to his major Reformation themes and returns repeatedly to them throughout the “movements” or major parts of the work. In Calvin’s view there were four cardinal issues driving the need for Reformation. He says that “the question is not, whether the church labors under diseases...but whether the diseases are of a kind the cure of which admits not of longer delay.”ⁱⁱ These were matters where “slow remedies” were not an option. Calvin is clear concerning what he regards as areas urgently requiring Reform. Targeting worship, justification, sacraments, and church government, he makes the following claims:

We maintain, then, that...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 great measure obsolete. We maintain that the use of the sacraments was in many ways vitiated [impaired or made defective by the addition of something] and polluted. And we maintain that the government of the church was converted into a species of foul and insufferable tyranny.ⁱⁱⁱ—

For Calvin there is an order of importance. He seeks a recovery of knowledge, “*first*, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and *secondly*, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.” He continues, “When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain.” Secondarily, but important for the “preservation of these branches of doctrine”, he includes the sacraments and the government of the church.^{iv}— The latter two he says “resemble the body, whereas the doctrine which regulates the due worship of God, and points out the ground on which the consciences of men must rest their hope of salvation, is the soul which animates the body.”^v—

Calvin places worship before everything else. Under that topic he discusses what Reformed Christians call the regulative principle of worship. For Calvin there are two reasons why God disallows all forms of worship that are not authorized by Scripture. He claims: “First, it tends

greatly to establish his authority that we do not follow our own pleasure...and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray.”^{vi}— He recognizes the challenge that such a view presents to the Reforming church. He admits, “I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God.”^{vii}— Calvin discusses such aberrations as the worship of images and relics, the intercession of the saints, and unbiblical ceremonies, while promoting prayer with faith and understanding in true humility. He notes that “the Word of God is the test which discriminates between his true worship and that which is false”^{viii}— and insists that “God rejects, condemns, abominates all fictitious worship, and employs his Word as a bridle to keep us in unqualified obedience.”^{ix}—

Closely allied with worship in importance is the doctrine justification by faith. For Calvin, “The safety of the church depends as much on this doctrine as human life does on the soul. If the purity of this doctrine is in any degree impaired, the church has received a deadly wound.”^x— According to Calvin the knowledge of salvation is presented in three stages. First, he says, “We must begin with a sense of individual wretchedness, filling us with despondency as if we were spiritually dead.”^{xi}— Second, Christ must be acknowledged “as the only Priest who reconciles us to the Father, and His death as the only sacrifice by which sin is expiated, the divine justice satisfied, and a true and perfect righteousness acquired.”^{xii}— Third, a sinner must “rest in him with firm and solid confidence, feeling assured that Christ is so completely his own, that he possesses in him righteousness and life.”^{xiii}— However, Calvin understands that “this doctrine has been perverted” which is the reason for the attention it is given. He claims, “There is no point which is more keenly contested, none in which our adversaries are more inveterate in their opposition, than that of justification, namely, as to whether we obtain it by faith or by works.”^{xiv}— Calvin recognizes that the ultimate dispute between Rome and Geneva “is not, whether good works ought to be performed by the pious, and whether they are accepted by God and rewarded by him; but whether, by their own worth, they reconcile us to God; whether we acquire eternal life as their price; whether they are compensations which are made to the justice of God, so as to take away guilt; and whether they are to be confided in as a ground of salvation.”^{xv}—

If worship and gospel are the soul of the church, sacraments and government are the body which gives it form. With regard to sacraments, Calvin criticizes Rome’s propensity for “ceremonies devised by men” that are placed on par with “the mysteries instituted by Christ.”^{xvi}— He denies Rome’s system of seven sacraments while acknowledging only baptism and the Lord’s Supper as true sacraments instituted by Christ. Although he does not present his sacramental view in full, he does expose the sacrificial nature of the Roman mass calling it an “excommunication”^{xvii} and a “theatrical exhibition.”^{xviii}— He claims that the priest “offers a sacrifice to expiate the sins of the people” and asks, “Who authorizes men to convert *taking* into *offering*?”^{xix}— Furthermore, Calvin sees an uncomfortable comparison between the Roman view of the sacraments and paganism. He observes that the consecration of baptism and the mass “differs in no respect whatever from magical incantations.” He continues:

For by breathings and whisperings, and unintelligible sounds, they think they work mysteries. As if it had been the wish of Christ, that in the performance of religious rites his word should be mumbled over, and not rather pronounced with a clear voice. There is no obscurity in the words by which the gospel expresses the power, nature, and use of

baptism. Then, in the supper, Christ does not mutter over the bread, but addresses the apostles in distinct terms when he announces the promise and subjoins the command, ‘This do in remembrance of me.’^{xx}—

He also reveals what is perhaps his major complaint—the Word divorced from the sacrament. He observes how “people are entertained with showy ceremonies, 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.”^{xxi}—

For Calvin, the government of the church was deficient in a number of areas. Along with exposing the folly of the “auricular confession” [that is, the practice of confessing to the priest], restrictions on eating meat, and the celibate priesthood, Calvin addresses two major concerns. The first regards a minister’s primary calling. Whether denominated bishop or pastor, he notes that the office was appointed “that they might edify the Church with sound doctrine.”^{xxii}— He says of the priest, “They would sing or mutter in the church, exhibit themselves in theatrical vestments, and go through numerous ceremonies, but they would seldom, if ever, teach.” He continues, “According to the precept of Christ, however, no man can claim for himself the office of bishop or pastor who does not feed his flock with the Word of the Lord.”^{xxiii}— Calvin’s second concern regards a minister’s conduct. He exposes the practices of acquiring church offices through purchase, violence, or other “nefarious actions.” A man of God was to undergo strict examination in both doctrine and life. For Calvin, “The Word of God furnishes a standard by which all such appointments ought to be tested.”^{xxiv}— Yet Calvin mourns the abysmal lack of holiness in life and conduct among the clergy of his day. He exclaims, “While those who preside in the church ought to excel others, and shine by the example of a holier life, how well do those who hold the office in the present day correspond in the respect to their vocation!”^{xxv}—

The Reformers were particularly sensitive to Rome’s accusation that they were schematics, caring little for the unity of the church.^{xxvi}— But the unity of the church was the very thing they cherished. Calvin insists that “it is not enough... simply to throw out the name church, but judgment must be used to ascertain which is the true church, and what is the nature of its unity.”^{xxvii}— Referencing Ephesians 4:4-5 he insists that such unity as the Bible teaches, “We hold sacred, and we denounce anathema against all who in any way violate it.”^{xxviii}— Significantly he defends the Reformation’s course of action as both correct and necessary on the grounds that the Roman Church had corrupted the very things he had been addressing. Rome called for tolerance and moderation. For Calvin and the Reformers some things were not negotiable. He says:

In a corruption of sound doctrine so extreme, in a pollution of the sacraments so nefarious, in a condition of the church so deplorable, those who maintain that we ought not to have felt so strongly, would have been satisfied with nothing less than a perfidious tolerance, by which we should have betrayed the worship of God, the glory of Christ, the salvation of men, the entire administration of the sacraments, and the government of the church. There is something specious in the name of moderation, and tolerance is a quality which has a fair appearance, and seems worthy of praise; but the rule which we must observe at all hazards is, never to endure patiently that the sacred name of God should be assailed with impious blasphemy; that his eternal truth should be suppressed by the devil’s lies; that Christ should be insulted, his holy mysteries polluted, unhappy souls cruelly murdered, and the church left to writhe in extremity under the effect of a deadly

wound. This would be not meekness, but indifference about things to which all others ought to be postponed.^{xxix}—

Calvin's critique of the church in his *Necessity of Reforming the Church* speaks with a contemporary resonance. Before the modern church seeks to reinvent itself, it should read *Necessity of Reforming the Church* and consider its time tested priorities and practices for badly needed reform. The issues it discusses are of utmost importance and have not gone away. Worship continues to be driven by human caprice rather than the Bible. The erosion of the gospel persists at an alarming pace. The Rome continues to condemn it, the modernist has rejected it, and the evangelical often ignores it. The sacraments are frequently treated in a cavalier manner rather than as the sacred mysteries and means of grace that they are. The church's government is ordered and organized by pragmatism rather than Scripture. Calvin's translator, Henry Beveridge, admits that the church of his day (in the nineteenth-century) still sadly contended with these issues which were "so long ago triumphantly refuted." Yet he says, "It is pleasing to think that refutation still exists....Every one who studies it [*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*] thoroughly puts himself in possession of a weapon offensive and defensive, which will enable him, within his own sphere, to fight the battle of true Protestantism against open enemies and treacherous friends."^{xxx}—

End Notes:

[i](#) Henry Beveridge, ed., *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (1844; repr. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), I:xliv.

[ii](#) *Ibid.*, I:125.

[iii](#) *Ibid.*, I:125.

[iv](#) *Ibid.*, I:126.

[v](#) *Ibid.*, I:127.

[vi](#) *Ibid.*, I:128.

[vii](#) *Ibid.*, I:128.

[viii](#) *Ibid.*, I:132.

[ix](#) *Ibid.*, I:133.

[x](#) *Ibid.*, I:137.

[xi](#) *Ibid.*, I:133.

[xii](#) *Ibid.*, I:134.

[xiii](#) *Ibid.*, I:134.

[xiv](#) *Ibid.*, I:135.

[xv](#) *Ibid.*, I:135.

[xvi](#) *Ibid.*, I:137.

[xvii](#) *Ibid.*, I:138.

[xviii](#) *Ibid.*, I:137.

[xix](#) *Ibid.*, I:138.

[xx](#) *Ibid.*, I:138.

[xxi](#) *Ibid.*, I:139.

[xxii](#) *Ibid.*, I:140.

[xxiii](#) *Ibid.*, I:141.

[xxiv](#) *Ibid.*, I:142.

[xxv](#) *Ibid.*, I:141.

[xxvi](#) Ibid., I:211. Calvin says, “The last and principle charge which they bring against us is, that we have made schism in the church. And here maintain against us, that in no case is it lawful to break the unity of the church.”

[xxvii](#) Ibid., I:213.

[xxviii](#) Ibid., I:214.

[xxix](#) Ibid., I:198.

[xxx](#) Ibid., I:x.