

## CALVIN AND WORSHIP

John T. Dyck<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

Many people, even many Christians, are surprised to hear John Calvin referred to as a man of warmth and devotion. The caricature of him as a hard and stern authoritarian appears to be quite common, but is unknown to those who are familiar with his work. While he stood firmly and without compromise on the doctrines found in God's Word, he found in those doctrines the character and true knowledge of the God that he loved and adored. The more he learned about God from his Word, the more he loved him. This heart-felt devotion is evident in all his writings, from the *Institutes* to his commentaries.

B. B. Warfield referred to John Calvin as "pre-eminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit"<sup>2</sup> because of Calvin's emphasis on the work of the Spirit as foundational to saving faith in believers. As a corollary to that statement we might also refer to Calvin as the "Theologian of Worship," even though he did not write very much specifically about worship. He understood that faith in Christ began with a change of heart which necessarily led to worship and devotion.

Calvin believed very strongly that it is not nearly enough to simply acknowledge that God exists and to perform ceremonies for him. Very early in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin says:

Moreover, although our mind cannot apprehend God without rendering some honor to him, it will not suffice simply to hold that there is One whom all ought to honor and adore, unless we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of every good, and that we must seek nothing elsewhere than in him.<sup>3</sup>

Piety is essential to worship, and he goes on to define piety:

I call "piety" that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John T. Dyck (WRS M.Div. 1990) is pastor of the Bible Presbyterian Church in Edmonton, Alberta, and is Stated Clerk of the BPC, General Synod.

<sup>2</sup> B. B. Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1909). <http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/bbwcalvin1.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:2:1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

This last statement is reflected in the motto that is often identified with him: *My heart I give thee, Lord, promptly and sincerely.*

Reverent piety leads to worship: “Here indeed is pure and real religion: faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Regulative Principle***

Prescribed in the law? Doesn't that make worship legalistic and formalistic? Although that danger is always present in the worship of true believers, there are really only two alternatives to worship: (1) man tells God how he would like to worship him, or (2) God tells man how he wants to be worshiped. Just as God must reveal to man how he must be saved, he also clearly tells man how to worship him. Calvin says:

Moreover, the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunction of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe. Therefore, if we would have Him to approve our worship, this rule, which he everywhere enforces with the utmost strictness, must be carefully observed.”<sup>6</sup>

Commonly referred to as the Regulative Principle of Worship, this doctrine arises out of instruction from the second commandment, and states that God must be worshiped in the way that he prescribes; man has no liberty to add his own ideas or elements into the worship of the true and living God.

Although this principle may appear excessively strict to those who are used to modern day “worship” with its emphasis on “relevance” and the use of “worship teams,” it is essential to understand Calvin’s earnest desire for the reverence of God’s holiness and majesty. True worship does not result from mindlessly (and often endlessly) repeating words about God’s majesty, but it is present when we honour and love what we know about the majesty of that God.

Calvin gives two reasons for maintaining the regulative principle of worship: the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of man:

First, it tends greatly to establish His authority that we do not follow our own pleasures but depend entirely on his sovereignty; and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1:2:2.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” *Selected Works of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 128. This was written in 1544, after he had been in Strasbourg for a few years (1538-1541) and had returned to Geneva (1541).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Because our fallen human nature is quick to define religion merely as an outward observance, he goes on to say:

And we ought to note this fact even more diligently: all men have a vague general veneration for God, but very few really reverence him; and wherever there is great ostentation in ceremonies, sincerity of heart is rare indeed.<sup>8</sup>

This is one of the great concerns of Calvin and must continue to be a concern today: the mere performing or acting out of worship is not acceptable; rather, the Lord seeks heartfelt biblical worship in Spirit and in truth. This is what the Lord Jesus specifically said when he taught the woman at the well that true worshipers “shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:23). Jesus also declared: “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt 15:9).

This view of worship was just as unpopular in Calvin’s day as it is today. An emphasis on what God requires of man is a recurring theme in Calvin’s writings as a corollary to the doctrine of man’s total depravity. To declare that man must submit to God’s requirements brings strong opposition. It certainly brought Calvin into sharp conflict, not only with the Catholics, but also with the Lutherans and others who held to the normative principle of worship; they taught that whatever is not forbidden in the Scriptures is permitted in worship, as long as it promotes the peace and unity of the Church. This normative approach to worship continues to prevail to this day, its proponents ignorant of the irony that, in spite of an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and “felt needs” as well as the frequent use of biblical words, they are still looking inwardly, to man, for the basis of their worship. Worship that begins with man will end with man; it will always have a foundation of sand. In a sense, Calvin also looked inward—but when he did so, he saw a wicked, rebellious heart that needed to be changed. When that heart was regenerated by the Holy Spirit, it looked heavenward and desired to please a holy and gracious God. This certainly supports Warfield’s statement that John Calvin was “pre-eminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit.”

### ***Worship Defined***

For Calvin, worship begins with a sound understanding of who God is. The chief foundation of worship, he writes, “is to acknowledge Him to be, as He is, the only source of all virtue, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life, and salvation.”<sup>9</sup> The more we know about God, the more cause we have to love and worship him. When we thus know him to be self-existent and self-sufficient, we will “ascribe and render to Him the glory of all that is good, to seek all things in Him alone, and in every want have recourse to Him alone.”<sup>10</sup> This, he says, inevitably leads to prayer, praise, and thanksgiving as “attestations to the glory which we

---

<sup>8</sup> *Institutes*, 1:2:2.

<sup>9</sup> “Necessity of Reforming the Church,” 127.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

attribute to Him.”<sup>11</sup> This further grows into “adoration, by which we manifest for him the reverence due to his greatness and excellency.”<sup>12</sup>

After the heart is turned to God in knowledge and consequently tuned to worship, then, and only then, do we find place for ceremonies, which are “subservient, as helps or instruments, in order that, in the performance of divine worship, the body may be exercised at the same time with the soul.”<sup>13</sup> This exercising of the soul results, says Calvin, in “self-abasement, when, renouncing the world and the flesh, we are transformed in the renewing of our mind, and living no longer to ourselves, submit to be ruled and actuated by Him.”<sup>14</sup> This self-abasement leads to gospel obedience and submission to God’s will.

## **Liturgy**

When Calvin tried to introduce reforms to worship, especially with respect to church discipline, he was banished from Geneva in 1538 at the age of twenty-nine years. He was subsequently invited to pastor the church in Strasbourg. He arrived to find Martin Bucer had already been involved in the reformation of worship for a few years and he soon became a mentor to Calvin. Bucer made sharp distinctions between the complex Mass (which had been adhered to for generations with all its innovations), and the simple worship service he found prescribed in the Scriptures.

In worship, if only the inclinations of heart are followed, assuming the leading of the Holy Spirit, the result will be confusion; but when the objective standard of God’s Word is used, all things are done decently and in order. This led Calvin to prescribe a liturgy for worship which brought orderliness to the worship of an orderly God. At the same time, his disdain for ceremonies was powerful and it would be the greatest insult to John Calvin to have a liturgy aimed at spiritual worship turned into ceremony. Liturgy must be merely a means to worship, and not worship itself.

Not all the reformers were agreed concerning the details of how worship should be organized. While Ulrich Zwingli had banned congregational singing in Switzerland, Bucer encouraged it by having everyone sing Psalms and hymns. He also simplified the Lord’s Table from all the complexities of the Mass, and advocated a weekly observance of the sacrament. Calvin, as a student of Bucer, appears to be quite influenced by the reforms he had proposed, as he instituted many of them into the worship service of the church he pastored. The liturgy used in Strasbourg was very similar to the one that Calvin later introduced in Geneva.

Calvin gave the following summary and defence of his order of service:

We begin with confession of our sins, adding verses from the Law and the Gospel [i.e. words of absolution], . . . and after we are assured that, as Jesus Christ has righteousness and life in

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Himself, and that, as He lives for the sake of the Father, we are justified in Him and live in the new life through the same Jesus Christ, ... we continue with psalms, hymns of praise, the reading of the Gospel, the confession of our faith [i.e., the Apostles' Creed], and the holy oblations and offerings. . . . And, . . . quickened and stirred by the reading and preaching of the Gospel and the confession of our faith, ... it follows that we must pray for the salvation of all men, for the life of Christ should be greatly enkindled within us. Now, the life of Christ consists in this, namely, to seek and to save that which is lost; fittingly, then, we pray for all men. And, because we receive Jesus Christ truly in this Sacrament, ... we worship Him in spirit and in truth; and receive the Eucharist with great reverence, concluding the whole mystery with praise and thanksgiving. This, therefore, is the whole order and reason for its administration in this manner; and it agrees also with the administration in the ancient Church of the Apostles, martyrs, and holy Fathers.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin's liturgy changed somewhat between the time he left Geneva for Strasbourg and the time he returned again to Geneva. The two are here compared in table form:<sup>16</sup>

Calvin: Strasbourg, 1540	Calvin: Geneva, 1542
Scripture Sentence: Psalm 124:8	Scripture Sentence: Psalm 124:8
Confession of sins	Confession of sins
Scriptural words of pardon	Prayer for pardon
Absolution	
Metrical Decalogue sung with <i>Kyrie eleison</i> (Gr.) after each Law	
Collect for Illumination	Collect for Illumination
Lection	Lection
Sermon	Sermon
<i>Liturgy of the Upper Room</i>	
Collection of alms	Collection of alms
Intercessions	Intercessions

<sup>15</sup> William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship: Its Development and Forms* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 116.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 114. *Collect* is a short prayer; *Lection* is a Scripture reading; *Fraction* and *Delivery* are the breaking of the bread and distribution thereof, respectively.

Lord's Prayer in long paraphrase	Lord's Prayer in long paraphrase
Preparation of elements while	Preparation of elements while
Apostles' Creed sung	Apostles' Creed sung
Consecration Prayer	
Words of Institution	Words of Institution
Exhortation	Exhortation
	Consecration Prayer
Fraction	Fraction
Delivery	Delivery
Communion, while psalm sung	Communion, while psalm or Scriptures read
Post-communion collect	Post-communion collect
<i>Nunc dimittis</i> in metre	
Aaronic Blessing	Aaronic Blessing

### ***Differences and Concessions***

When Calvin returned to Geneva the differences he previously had with the Genevan Council had not disappeared, although both sides were willing to work together and to come to an agreement regarding worship. We might infer that the Strasbourg liturgy more closely reflects Calvin's preferences.

While Calvin preferred weekly communion, he proposed a monthly observance in Geneva. The Council objected and decreed that it should be set forth quarterly. The items referring to the Lord's Supper in the liturgy outlined above would be omitted for most of the Lord's Day services.<sup>17</sup>

Another of the elements that was quite controversial in Geneva was that of Absolution. The form he used began with reciting 1 Tim 1:15 ("This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus is come into the world to save sinners") then stating,

---

<sup>17</sup> Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 190.

Let each make confession in his heart with St. Paul in truth [‘that I am the chief’ in some editions], and believe in Christ. So in His Name do I pronounce forgiveness unto you of all your sins, and I declare you to be loosed of them in earth so that ye may be loosed of them also in heaven and in all eternity. Amen.<sup>18</sup>

He speaks of this practice in the *Institutes*:

For when the whole church stands, as it were, before God’s judgment seat, confesses itself guilty, and has its sole refuge in God’s mercy, it is no common or light solace to have present there the ambassador of Christ, armed with the mandate of reconciliation, by whom it hears proclaimed its absolution [cf. 2 Cor 5:20].<sup>19</sup>

Calvin had pronounced this absolution clearly as part of the Strasbourg liturgy, but when he came to Geneva this practice was met with hostility, the people “jumping up before the end of Confession to forestall Absolution. Thus he yielded to their scruples.”<sup>20</sup>

Musically, John Calvin made extensive use of the Psalms in worship. He made his own metrical versifications of a number of Psalms, but abandoned that work in favor of the translations of Clement Marot. In addition to the Psalms, his liturgy included a metrical version of the Ten Commandments sung before the Lord’s Supper, with the *Kurie eleison* sung after each law. He also included the singing of the Apostles’ Creed.

Although each of the elements served an important function in worship, the focus of the service was always Christ and the preaching of the Word. This emphasis does not appear so explicitly in the writings of Calvin as it does in his own practice, and the practice of all the Reformers in general.

One of the benefits that Calvin received in Geneva was the appointment of a stenographer to record his sermons. As Calvin worked his way slowly and systematically through one book of the Bible at a time, he produced “123 sermons on Genesis, 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 159 sermons on Job, 176 sermons on 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 43 sermons on Galatians.”<sup>21</sup> His preaching was always clear so that it could be understood by everyone. At the same time it contained much more in the way of Scripture verses and allusions than of illustrations and anecdotes. Preaching was the way in which the doctrinal emphases of the day were communicated to the Lord’s people so that they understood the gospel and were encouraged to draw near to God. As he preached of the Trinitarian God of the Bible, he expected his hearers to worship that God.

## **Conclusion**

---

<sup>18</sup> Maxwell, *Outline*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Institutes*, 3:4:14.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *Liturgies*, 191.

<sup>21</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 75.

Are structure and liturgy impediments to worship, as is often asserted? That is not the testimony of those who worshiped with Calvin:

Shall it be said that . . . the true Calvinian cultus was by nature cold and impoverished? Those who were present at the services have told us that often they could not keep back the tears of their emotion and joy. Singings and prayers, adoration and edification, confession and absolution of sins, acts both formal and spontaneous: all the essential elements of worship were there. And, perhaps not less important, they were united in an organism that was very simple, yet supple and strong. Calvin is, in fact, of all the Reformers the one who most steadfastly rejected the division of worship into two parts. . . . The Calvinian cultus is one.<sup>22</sup>

There are a multitude of benefits to the study of Calvin's works, one of the most important being his contribution to the reformation of worship. May the Lord bless his Church in this present age with a renewed concern for how to worship him.

---

<sup>22</sup> Emile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin*, 5:504; quoted in Maxwell, *Outlines*, 119.