

John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1544; reprinted, Audubon, N.J.: Old Paths Publishing, 1994). Pp 117. Forward by W. Robert Godfrey. Reviewed by Morris McDonald.

“Not the time for slow remedies,” was an opening observation by John Calvin, as he undertook the assignment of examining the condition of the church in his time.¹

Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strasburg, appealed to Calvin to draft “a statement of doctrines of and the necessity for the Reformation.” The Emperor Charles V had called a Diet of the Holy Roman Empire to meet in the city of Speyer, and the Protestants were intent on making the best possible case before the Diet. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor in Geneva called *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* the most powerful work of his time.

In his appeal, Calvin wrote,

I leave it to your prudence, Most Invincible Emperor, and yours, Most Illustrious Princes, to consider whether or not it is for the private interest of the Roman Pontiff, and his whole faction, that the Church should be restored to true order, and its most corrupt condition reformed, according to the strict standard of the gospel.²

In the seven-page introduction Dr. Godfrey notes that Calvin concluded that in the Roman Catholic Church “the whole form of divine worship in general use in the present day is nothing but mere corruption,” and, “The antidote to the theatrics of the church in Calvin’s day was a godly simplicity of worship.”³

Henry Beveridge, in an older edition of Calvin’s writings, makes the following observation, “The Treatise, accordingly, is not of the ephemeral interest of the Diet which gave occasion to it, but *embraces the great questions by which the Church is agitated at the present day.*”⁴

Calvin’s treatise is organized in three sections, a section on the evils in the church that required reformation, the particular remedies to those evils adopted by the reformers, and why reform could not be delayed, but demanded “instant amendment.”⁵

In each section the Reformer focuses on four topics, which he calls the soul and body of the church. “The soul of the church is worship and salvation. The body is sacraments and church government,” notes Dr. Godfrey.⁶

Calvin first addressed worship. He insisted that worship must be regulated by the Word of God alone. God “declares that he is grievously offended with the presumption which invents

¹ P. 3.

² P. 110.

³ P. vii.

⁴ P. ii. (my emphasis)

⁵ Pp. v, 4.

⁶ P. v.

such worship [that which is “unsanctioned by his Word”], and threatens it with severe punishment.”⁷

Second, Calvin turned his attention to salvation and justification. “There is no point which is more keenly contested, none in which adversaries are more inveterate in their opposition, than that of justification, namely, as to whether we obtain it by faith or by works.”⁸

On the matter of the sacraments, Calvin lamented that the simplicity of sacramental doctrine and practice that prevailed in the early church had been lost. “The people are entertained with showy ceremonies, while not a word is said of their significance and truth.”⁹ “What Christ commanded to be done, and in what order, is perfectly clear. But in contempt of his command, a theatrical exhibition was got up, and substituted for the Supper.”¹⁰

Calvin turned to the subject of the government of the church. “Were I to go over the faults of ecclesiastical government in detail, I should never have done.”¹¹ And, “Assuredly, there is no difficulty in proving that the Church labored exceedingly under a load of human traditions.”¹²

As though addressing much of modern evangelical worship, Calvin declared, “In regard to doctrine, I maintain that we make common cause with the prophets. For, next to idolatry, there is nothing for which they rebuke the people more sharply than for falsely imagining that the worship of God consisted in external show.”¹³

⁷ P. vi.

⁸ P. vii.

⁹ P. viii.

¹⁰ P. 16.

¹¹ P. ix.

¹² P. 56.

¹³ P. 30.