

Calvin Speaks



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THE SECOND SERMON ON THE HISTORY OF MELCHIZEDEK (1559) (Part 1)

Genesis 14:18. And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. .

19. And he blessed him, and said, "Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

20. "And blessed be the most high God, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave him tithes of all.

King and Priest

We have already begun to declare to you that Melchizedek, of whom mention is here made, was a figure of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so that we might hearken more attentively to this doctrine, we are to remember what we spoke about yesterday, which is that God swore by a solemn oath that he who would eventually come to be king over His people would also be a priest (Ps. 110). Now this is certain: that God is very sparing and careful concerning His name, and does not use it in connection with just any matter. Thus we are to gather that we should have it in fearful awe, and not use it except when necessary and for such uses as are worthy of its holiness, -seeing God Himself gives us such an example. We are therefore to conclude that this is a matter of great importance and marvelously profitable for us to know, that he who would come to be redeemer of the people would also have the title both of king and of priest.¹

And indeed, if we were to separate the one from the other, the faith that we have in our Savior Jesus Christ would be very weak and would have no certain or firm foundation. For two things are necessary for our salvation. The one is that God accept us as righteous and avow us as His children. The other is that we be guided by His hand and maintained and guarded by His invincible power. If we were to take only one of these points, we would understand only half the matter. And notice what this would do

Suppose God were merciful to us, and did not impute to us our sins, but all the same the devil had power over us and we were left as a prey to all the assaults wherewith he should assail us. Surely we then would be the most miserable of castaways. On the other hand, if God put forth His power in our defense, and yet we were not reconciled to Him and not imputed and held as righteous and just, we would still have to come to judgment. And then woe to us, for we would be judged without mercy. But we know that all our righteousness consists in the fact that God has mercy on us and has buried all our offenses.

Christ as Priest

And therefore it is fitting that our Lord Jesus Christ should show Himself to be both a king and a priest; that is to say, that He should on the one hand make an atonement between God and us so that we might boldly come when we are driven to call on Him for aid and assure ourselves that He avows us as His children. We have all this by the benefit of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. For in that He shed His blood, it was to wash and cleanse us of all our spots. He was made a sacrifice of satisfaction, so that we are thereby discharged of all our debts, and the obligations that stood against our salvation were, as St. Paul says to the Colossians (2:14), broken and cancelled.

Thus we see what it was that was accomplished in the person of the Son of God, when He was sent into the world; to wit, that in suffering for the remission of our sins, He has made us righteous. Not that we are in truth completely righteous, for we still lack a great deal; but we are so far righteous that God will not judge us according to our deserts. Rather, He by His infinite goodness supports us, and the obedience which Jesus Christ performed is approved and accounted to us. It is as if another man should pay our debts, so that we are discharged of them. Even so, our Lord Jesus Christ is as it were appointed to be the principal debtor for us, and thereby discharges us before God. Nor can Satan have anything with which to accuse us, when we trust in the satisfaction paid for us by the Son of God. And therefore it is not without reason that He is called a priest. Howbeit, we need to consider what fruit

1. Calvin's point is that God can only swear by His own name, there being nothing higher, as Hebrews 6:13 teaches. Thus, the oath in Psalm 110:4 involves the use of God's own name.

and benefit we are to receive by this His office of priesthood. For it is not for Himself alone but for our profit and welfare, that the Father by a solemn oath bestowed this estate and dignity upon him.

Now, we need to note here that He is called a priest forever, so that this honor is resealed for Him and can be shifted to none other. If this point had been considered as well as it ought to have been, and as the apostle most notably sets it down in the Epistle to the Hebrews (ch. 7-10), the abomination that has been brought into the world, and which to this day rules and reigns therein, would never have been; for the Pope creates his priests with this very estate for the office of appeasing God. These are the very words which He uses when he sets his charm on them; that is to say, he creates them priests with these words of authority: *We give you power to offer sacrifice to God to appease Him.* What a horrible blasphemy this is! For this is to make God a liar, and to make void the solemn oath which He has pronounced with His own mouth, which is spoken of in the 110th Psalm, which we have noted earlier, where God says that Jesus Christ shall be a priest forever, He alone, according to the order of Melchizedek, to whom there is no match—no one else like him. And yet notwithstanding, behold how the Popish priests brag that they offer up Jesus Christ, and that they are God's priests to make reconciliation for the sins both of the quick and of the dead. For they are not content to redeem such as buy themselves out of their clutches, as out of the hands of thieves, but want to have their priestly witchery extend itself even to the dead? We see here a sharp difference manifest between this decree which is pronounced and spoken by the holy mouth of God, and that which Antichrist has falsely devised, and which even at this day he still upholds and maintains.

So then, we are to note that Jesus Christ not only offered up Himself once for all, to appease the wrath of God His Father towards us, and to pay all our debts; but that also the power of this oblation which He made endures forever, and is permanent. And therefore we may see why the apostle (Heb. 10:19) uses this similitude, that the way is, as it were, afresh consecrated to us by the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is as if he had said that the blood which was once shed for our salvation is never drawn dry, but daily flows over our souls by the power of His Holy Spirit, Who bedews us with the same, as St. Peter in the first chapter of his first and canonical Epistle says.

Mark also why Jesus Christ in His Supper says, "This is My blood of the new testament," and so consequently forever. It is as if He had said that we should not think that He had made a reconciliation which would not endure, as if it had been only for a day or a year, but that at this day He occupies the place of a priest. Because He is the Mediator to God His Father, in the power of His death and suffering which He once suffered, and makes intercession for us; we are assured that we are acceptable to God when we come to Him in the Name of our Advocate, and when we are grounded and settled upon the oblation which He once

made, so that it might serve us this day and to the end of the world.

Christ as King

I have already said that it is not enough for us to be thus set at one with God, and our sins forgiven us, unless we are also defended and preserved under His mighty hand and protection. And therefore it was fitting that Jesus Christ should be a king. For all the salvation we are to look for from the hand of God must come from our Lord Jesus Christ. We must not fly in the air to look far away for what we want, for He gives and offers Himself to us. And therefore we must find in the Person of this Redeemer all the fulness of that which is requisite for our salvation. For that reason our Lord Jesus Christ is called a king. The unction which was bestowed on Him pertains to His kingdom, to the end that we might be enriched with all His benefits, and defended against all our enemies, and have Him as an invincible fortress for us. And even if we are set upon, yet we shall always have the victory.

Thus we see how the riches of the kingdom of heaven are bestowed on us. And forasmuch as Jesus Christ was filled with them in all perfection and fulness, we for our parts are empty of them and need them. Therefore, we must come and beg them of him, that He might deal liberally with us and help us, which He does when He bestows the graces of His Holy Spirit on us that we might be reformed according to His image, and the Devil repulsed and put to flight. Now, I pray you, what strength do we have in ourselves? For the smallest temptation in the world will throw us down, and our very shadow will make us run away. But it is said that when Jesus Christ will take us into His protection, we shall be in such a fortress that all the enemies we have will never be able to have power over us.

King of Righteousness

Now we are in a better position to understand why it is not without reason that God used a solemn oath when He made our Lord Jesus Christ king and priest after the order of Melchizedek. Now the apostle goes further and explains the names, for 'Melchizedek' signifies a king of righteousness. He shows us thereby that the kingdom of the Son of God is not ordinary, nor to be esteemed like other kingdoms, but that the property of it is to make us righteous. For earthly princes may very well be called righteous, insofar as they faithfully execute their offices, abstain from outrages, tyranny, and cruelty, and render to every man his due—in this way they can be called righteous.

Howbeit, there is another kind of righteousness in the Son of God, a kind whereof we are made partakers. A man may be, as it were, an angel in all his virtues, but this goes only as far as his own individual person. He may give a good example to others, correct those who have committed wrong, and look to it that men live honestly and according to the law; but to make another righteous surpasses all man's power. And therefore the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ is not shut up within Himself so that He has it by Himself alone, but so communicates it to us that by His means we may be made just before God. And how can that be? We have already showed that

2. Calvin refers hereto the sale of indulgences, which a man might purchase for the release of sins; and to the claim of the Roman priests to release the sins of the dead in "purgatory."

God counts us as just and innocent when it pleases Him to bury our sins and iniquities. And again, when He regenerates us by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is also to clothe us in His righteousness. Howbeit, this is only partial while we live in this world. Our sins are fully forgiven without exception, and yet notwithstanding we are not so reformed but that there still remains in us infirmities and sins. And therefore we must embrace this righteousness to the remission of our sins. We see, then, in what way our Lord Jesus Christ makes us partakers of His righteousness. Here we see the first point that we are to note.

King of Peace

The second thing the apostle calls attention to is the place Salem. And Salem means peace. The apostle shows us that, over and above the righteousness which we receive from our Lord Jesus Christ, we also enjoy a peace which He alone gives, and which by no other means can we obtain. And although the wicked and those who hold God in contempt strive to be at rest and peace, yet the Lord so awakens them with a spirit of frenzy that they are like men half dead. For mark how the wicked strive to be at rest and peace: they forget God as much as they can and so become very brutish. And yet in spite of themselves, God will put them in mind of Himself, and when He appears to them they tremble as before their Judge. And besides, they have a hundred thousand witness, for their own consciences are more than all the actions in the world, yea they cannot but condemn themselves. And although God seems to hold His peace, yet the wicked cannot be pardoned, but they must rather be forced to feel their curse. And therefore Isaiah witnesses: there is no peace for the wicked (Is. 48:22, and 57:21).

But as St. Paul says to the Ephesians, Christ is our peace (Eph. 2:14), because He has conjoined and united us to God His Father. Mark also why in the first chapter to the Romans he says that being justified by faith, we are at peace with God. He sets a difference between the peace of the wicked—the peace they seek after, and cannot find—and the peace of the faithful. The wicked will turn their backs upon God and fly from Him as far as they possibly can, but the faithful come before Him and acknowledge Him as their Father, because they know that He will not impute their sins to them forasmuch as Jesus Christ has forgiven them. And thus they have peace, and rejoice in the infinite mercies which He has bestowed on them. And therefore it is not without cause that Jesus Christ is called the King of Peace.

And there is more, for the faithful are not only assured for the time present, but also for the time to come. For they know that God has begun His work in them on the condition that He will see it through (Phil. 1:6), and therefore their trust is that He will never fail them, but that He will more and more guide and govern them until they come to His kingdom. Thus we see how we have peace, and shall possess it in Jesus Christ; because without Him we cannot help but be enemies of God, and since we make war against Him through our sins and rebellion, He cannot choose also but to arm Himself against us.

Here it is also to be noted that he was a priest forever, as Melchizedek was introduced without pedigree, as was yesterday touched upon. And this was so that we might know that although our Lord Jesus Christ was sent in the fulness of time, yet He was the Son of the eternal God, and that He was also appointed to be the Redeemer before the creation of the world (Col. 1:15-17). For He is the firstborn of all creatures, because in Him and by Him were all things made; and also He, according to the wonderful counsel of God, is the one who restores all things, seeing that all things both in heaven and in earth were dissipated after the fall of Adam, who overthrew all the creatures with himself. Howbeit, all things were restored by our Lord Jesus Christ. Also, as the apostle in the last chapter to the Hebrews says, Jesus Christ is yesterday, and today, and the same forever (Heb. 13:8), His power showing itself to the end of the world.

Mark then how we must have total recourse unto this power (which the fathers themselves felt and demonstrated before the time that He was manifested in the flesh), doubting nothing, even though men may be absent from Him and there is a great gulf between heaven and earth; yet notwithstanding, trusting that we shall continually be quickened by His life, enriched by His benefits, and upheld and preserved by His power. Consider the sun, which is but an insensible creature, yet it fructifies the earth, giving heat to it. God by means of the sun nourishes and upholds us. Yet how does it compare to Jesus Christ, Who is no insensible creature, indeed no creature at all, but very God manifested in the flesh, our Mediator, on Whom God has bestowed all that is requisite to our salvation. Thus we see in sum what we have to learn from all this.

Bread and Wine

Now where the Papists and all such as bear the name of Christian ought by this passage in the books of Moses to be taught that Jesus Christ is the only king and priest, that He alone unites us to God His Father, that He alone is the reason why the Father holds us under His protection, they have turned the passage to the total contrary of its meaning.

This error, indeed, was not begun by the Papists. (Let us not lay on them more than is due to them, for they have blasphemies enough among them to condemn themselves a hundred times over.) But it is a great pity that the Devil has so ruled and reigned among them that he has for these 1400 years so blinded those that name themselves Christians that they have gone so far as to devise a bewitching fantasy that since Jesus Christ was figured in the person of Melchizedek, and since His body is the heavenly bread and His blood the wine to nourish souls, therefore Melchizedek offered the one and the other.

Now, at first sight this allegory will please such as have itching ears, since Jesus Christ calls His body bread, and His blood wine. And therefore it seems to agree well together, that Melchizedek offered bread and wine, because the body of Jesus Christ ought to have power in it to feed us, and his blood also to quicken our souls; Howbeit, there is no mention in this passage of any oblation made to God. When Moses says that Melchizedek,

king of Salem, *offered* bread and wine, he is simply saying that he presented it to Abram. To complete the allegory, then, Abram would have to be God, because the [supposed] oblation was delivered up to him; and yet it was not to him alone, but to his whole company as well. We can see here the kingly liberality of Melchizedek, after Abram had received him in friendship. Now to refer this to God would be to pervert the whole substance of the matter, as maybe seen.

And besides, our Lord Jesus Christ offered His body and blood, not because they were already "bread and wine," but it is because they were offered that they are called bread and wine, because they are of the power and nature of bread and wine to Us.³ For how is it that our souls are sustained by the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and our lives preserved by them? Obviously it is because the sacrifice was offered once and for all, and is the sum and perfection of goodness. And therefore if Jesus Christ had not been already offered up, His body would not have been at this day meat, nor His blood drink. And mark how St. Paul says in the first epistle to the Corinthians (5:7, 8) that Jesus Christ our Passover was offered up for us, and so therefore let us now eat. This, then, is the order we must hold: the oblation was first made, and we afterward may be nourished and filled with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the oblation. So then, we can see that these miserable and insane people have corrupted this passage in Moses, and have no understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now the Papists (since they have been possessed by Satan, and given over to a reprobate mind, not knowing how to judge between black and white, and that by the just judgment of God) have made themselves so ridiculous that the very children in the streets might spit in their faces; and yet, not content with this error, they have also brought in a great number of other filthy dregs of their own. For instance, they say that bread and wine must be daily offered up since the priesthood of Melchizedek corresponds to that of Jesus Christ. In this they are convinced by their own mouths of gross folly, for they say that in their Mass bread and wine are no longer present after the consecration (or rather charming) of their Host, as they call it,

3. In other words, the sacrificial animal in the Old Testament was not Spiritual food until after it had been sacrificed. It was not because it was food that it was sacrificed, but because it was sacrificed that it became food. Similarly, the incarnate Person of Jesus Christ is not life-giving "food" to us in and of Himself; it is His death as our substitute that brings life to us.

but rather what is present is God Himself. And although we see bread and wine that is distillable, yet they say they are but speeches, that is to say visible figures, [accidents] in which is no substance. For they would make men believe that there is neither bread nor wine, and so men cannot believe their sight, taste, or any of the rest of their senses. And yet in the meantime they make men believe that none of it remains once they have pronounced the sacramental words, as they term them. So then: if they will offer up bread and wine, where are they? For they say there is none of it there. And yet for all that, they take this text and say that there must be bread and wine offered up to God here. We see then that their beastliness is so gross, that even children may laugh them to scorn and be their judges.

And besides, if they seek to make a correspondence between Melchizedek and our Lord Jesus Christ, then the Psalm which we have mentioned (Ps. 110) must govern the analogy. It teaches that there is but one priest who was set up by a particular oath. And therefore, He must continually keep his office; howbeit, they make themselves priests in the stead of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus their similitude is cast to the ground. And therefore we shall not need any other replies or arguments to confute their beastliness, but take the text simply as it lies, and by this means also take their beliefs from their own mouths to cut their own throats.

But be that as it may, we see from all this that in this text there is a singular doctrine and instruction which Satan strains himself to darken, bring into doubt, and falsify; yea, if it were possible, he would utterly overthrow it. And therefore we, for our parts, ought so much the more to awaken our dull senses to imprint in our memories what is here contained. Let us be incited thereto by reason of the solemn oath that God was willing to pronounce. For, as we have already said, it was not without reason that He swore by His own name. He did it for this reason, so that our faith might be infallibly confirmed, so that we should not doubt but that whatever is required for our righteousness, peace, and defense, to lead us into the kingdom of heaven, we have through Jesus Christ His only Son. And that is what we have to learn from this teaching? (to be concluded)

4. Calvin is so busy defeating the perversion of this passage, that he omits to note that a meal shared with the priest, consisting of bread and wine, might very well typify the Lord's Supper which Jesus Christ shares with us. The communion meal is celebrated after the victory is won, both in Genesis 14 and also by Christians today, though as Calvin notes, there is no new sacrifice involved.

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