

Calvin Speaks



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

Genesis 14:20b. And he [Abraham] gave him [Melchizedek] tithes of all.

21. And the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself."

22. And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted up my hand to the LORD, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth,

23. "That I will not take anything of yours, from a thread to a sandal thong, lest you say, 'I have made Abram rich;'

24. "Except for that which the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their portion."

Yesterday we considered at length the fact that Melchizedek, of whom mention is made here, was a figure or image of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, because he was above Abram in dignity, and Abram was the father of the Church. Thus it is likewise said in the Psalm (110:2,4) that the Redeemer who was to come would not only be a king, but also be a priest after the order of Melchizedek. We have also shown why all this was spoken, what use it is to us, and what benefit we receive from it. Finally the blessing was also set forth; that is, that through the power of the office and order possessed by Melchizedek, Abram was blessed. This was to show that all our prayers would be abominable before the majesty of God, and could obtain nothing at His hands, except for the intercession for us of Jesus Christ, Who holds the office of Melchizedek, according to the holy scripture.

Tithe and Priesthood

Now it is said here, that Abram gave a tithe of all unto Melchizedek. This action declares a priestly dignity in Melchizedek, as noted by the Apostle (Heb. 7:4). It is difficult to know for certain whether these words pertain to the spoil or to Abram's own goods.¹ For since he received

1. The original English translation of Th. Stocker reads: "We must not hereupon, certainly collect, whether these wordes have relation to the spoile, or to Abram his owne goods." My guess is that "not" is a typographical error for "now", but I don't have access to the French to make certain. —J.B.J.

no part of the spoil for himself, it is not likely that he meant to give to Melchizedek something that he did not take for his own. But he had another manner of reasoning, and another variety of his acknowledgement to God, than² to apply the benefit unto his own use, for the enriching of himself?

Nevertheless, whatever the case, it is sufficient that we hold on to what is certain, which is that Abram asserted that he acknowledged Melchizedek to be God's priest. For if he had served idols, or usurped any dignity which did not belong to him, Abram would have been very wrong to give him a tithe; because we know that to offer sacrifice to idols is to honor them and to forsake God. So then, this oblation of Abram must be seen to testify and approve the priesthood of Melchizedek.

And therefore we see why the Apostle, comparing the ancient priesthood of the Law with the priesthood of our

2. In Stocker this word is "and." The only way to make sense out of the sentence is to render it "than," which is an occasional meaning of "and" according to the OED 1:317, COL. 2.

3. In his *Commentary on Genesis* (Baker Book House) at this verse, Calvin writes: "It is however uncertain whether he offered the tithe of the spoils, or of the goods which he possessed at home. But, since it is improbable that he should have been liberal with other persons' goods, and should have given away a tenth part of the prey, of which he had resolved not to touch even a thread, I rather conjecture, that these tithes were taken out of his own property. I do not, however, admit that they were paid annually, as some imagine, but rather, in my judgment, he dedicated this present to Melchizedek once, for the purpose of acknowledging him as the high priest of God..."

I have found no other commentator who takes Calvin's position here. Calvin seems to overlook the obvious (we all have feet of clay, after all). Abram did not take any of the goods of Sodom or of the other cities he liberated, but there is nothing to indicate he refused to take spoils of Chedorlaomer and company. Matthew Poole (1883) puts it well: "[Tithes of] *all*, not of all the recovered goods, but of all the spoils taken from the enemies." There is no reason to think Abram did not keep these spoils.

On the relation between victory over the enemy and giving a tithe to build up the house of the Lord, see James B. Jordan, "The Mosaic Head Tax and State Financing" and "Theses on Tithing", *Biblical Economics Today* IV:3,4 (available for a contribution from the Institute for Christian Economics, Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711).

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, says that Levi, though yet in Abram's loins, paid tithes; that is to say, Levi was subject to that law (Heb. 79.10). We might also say the same of Judah, from whom our Savior Christ came.⁴ This, however, is easily answered: Melchizedek cannot be separated from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, because he represents Him, and all the excellency which he had depends on the fact that he is the figure of Jesus Christ. And therefore the Apostle by great reason shows that he to whom the right of tithes by the Law appertained, was yet notwithstanding under Melchizedek.

We must therefore conclude that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is far more excellent than Aaron ever was, or all his successors, even though they were in that respect separated as it were from the company of men. And when the priest had all his priestly garments upon him, it was but to show that he was as an angel of God, who might come near to His majesty, being a mediator to blot out the iniquities and transgressions of the people. And notwithstanding that all this was so, yet nevertheless the Apostle shows that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ far excelled him in honor, and must be exalted above all the figures of the Law, that men thereby might see him to be the very truth and substance of them all. And even if men were to take all the shadows that ever temporarily existed, yet they would profit nothing, and would be all of none effect unless they came to the true pattern.

Let us therefore well consider, that when Abram offered all the tithes to Melchizedek, it was to show that although God would soon be establishing an order of priesthood in His people, yet it would in no whit derogate from the priesthood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which was already figured in the person of Melchizedek, as it was at that time already established.

The Lawfulness of Tithing

Moreover, concerning the giving of tithes to the priests, we see that Abram did it before there was any Law written, and therefore there can be no doubt but that it was the Spirit of God which induced him and pricked him forward thereunto. For Moses does not say that this was a thing done at random or without reason, but rather declares that God ratified the office of Melchizedek, making him His priest, and that Abram acknowledged him to be so.

We must not, however, gather from this that there was any general law concerning tithes, nor that the faithful were bound to pay them, except that God also had instituted it in His Law. This was done not just because they should honor Him with the fruits of the earth, affirming that they came all of His bounteous liberality; nor was it simply for the maintenance of the ministers of the altar, those who served in the temple; but it was because they were the seed of Abram: One part of the land belonged to each of them, and they were to take possession of it, as it was said to Abram: Thy seed shall possess the land.

Levi should have been a chief man in the house of Abram, and yet he was thrust out of it, and instead of him

were two chief men made out of the house of Joseph: Ephraim and Manasseh. Here we see that Levi was deprived of his inheritance, although it had been assigned to him before by God. This is the reason why his successors are recompensed with tithes.

Now God did this for two reasons. The first is so that they should not be distracted from any service committed to their charge, nor yet from teaching. For God did not set up priests under the Law for the performance of ceremonies only, but for another reason of which the prophet Malachi speaks (2:7). He ordained them to be His ambassadors, to the end that we should demand from their lips the true knowledge and pure interpretation of the law. For this reason, so that the priests might have leisure enough to attend upon the service of the temple, and to teach the people, the tithes were appointed for them. And for that reason also, they were dispersed all over the land. They did not have any proper partition, so that they might dwell in any one certain portion of the land as the other tribes did, but were sown here and there to the end that there should be no corner in the world where God would not have His messengers and law-teachers to keep His people in awe. Here (1 say) we see the reason why God would have them to receive tithes, and not busy themselves about tilling and sowing the earth.

The second reason is this, that if they had possessed the earth, God would not have been known as Lord and Master as He was when the Levitical priests were become as it were His receivers. They were sent in His name, to take upon them the superiority, and to demand the homage which was due to Him upon the earth. And besides, although the children of Israel received that which was due to them by succession and inheritance of their father Abram, yet for all that God as it were would seem to show to them that the earth was His, and kept the propriety thereof to Himself. They were to understand that they possessed the land with this condition, that whatever they had they must hold as from Him, and in deed and in effect show that this is so. And therewithal also, there should be oblations bestowed upon the poor, out of the same tithes. For it is not said that the priests should eat and drink it all up, but keep themselves within compass; thereby to show that they were not exempt from the general law, but were bound to God for the food which they ate, and that all came from His pure and mere goodness.

We see then that the tithes of the Law were especially for the people of Israel. Yet notwithstanding, tithing was very common among the heathen, even for kings, princes, and noble men. We see likewise from secular history that they were also exacted, and in some countries exacted more than in others, according to the goodness and fertility of the soil. For it was not so great a burden for the husbandmen who had good soils and plentiful bearing grounds, to pay the eighth part, as it was to those that had but lean and barren ground to pay the tenth part. But be that as it may, this word 'tithes' or 'tenth' has been a common term among all nations.

And all princes and great men, as I have already said, since the Gospel was established, have bestowed part of the tithes towards the maintenance of the ministers of the

4. Implying that Christ also paid tithes to Melchizedek, in the loins of Judah and Abram; and thus that Christ is inferior to Melchizedek.

Word. And with good reason, as St. Paul says that those who ministered at the altar in the Old Testament were maintained, and they who at this time sacrifice to God after a more excellent manner—that is who win souls to Him, making of them sacrifices unto His majesty—should be as well provided for and maintained. And although God has not qualified how or by what manner of revenue they should be maintained, yet is there a law for it.

Now then, since God has been known through the preaching of the Gospel, a Christian order and law has been set up for the giving and bestowing of one part of the tithes. And herein we may see the deceit of the Pope and of his shave-heads [tonsured monks], for when they take up the law of tithes in their canons they take it as if it were transferred to them after Jesus Christ put an end to the priesthood of Levi. All these are lies, falsifying the holy scripture, and wickedly corrupting the same. For we see to the contrary, as I have already shown, that it has been a very long time since men paid tithes according to the law of Moses; rather, they were 'always paid either to the emperor, or to some other particular great man.'⁵

But now since the matter has been set up this way [paying of tithes to the church instead of to the state—J.B.J.], there is no abuse if the arrangement be taken for a politic law. There is abuse when men are made to believe contrary to all truth that this arrangement comes from holy scripture. But let us hold to the rule that St. Paul sets down, that we must not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn (1 Car. 9:9-13). Therefore, it stands with far greater reason that those who preach the doctrine of the Gospel, ordained in so excellent an estate, should not be abridged and deprived of their maintenance, but be very well paid.

Now as I have already said, when tithes and such like are put to a good use, we must not be so particular about the matter, asking why it is so, as many fanatics do. These people will not be content unless they turn the whole world upsidedown, saying, "We ought to eliminate all tithes, since the thing has been so long abused. There is no reason to continue it any longer." If we follow their logic we must scrape out everything, for they think that Christianity consists of changing the color of the sun and the moon. But if there is anything that ought to be amended, as I have said, because the Papists have brought in any false opinion, let that be utterly abolished.

5. One of the more unfortunate aspects of the Reformation can be seen in Calvin's not altogether clear discussion here. So intense was the reaction against the financial abuses of the Roman Church, that the Reformers were too willing to let the state run the church. There was another reason for this as well, in that only a strong anti-Papal state could oppose the might of Papal arms. Thus, the practice developed of the state's paying the salaries of the clergy in Protestant lands.

Those who pay the piper call the tune, and it was not long before the various Renaissance-influenced states of early modern Europe began trying to control their national churches. As a result, the history of the Church in Protestant lands has been a long struggle to break free of state control. Had Calvin lived to see these developments, doubtless he would have revised his opinion.

As it is, Calvin believes that the Mosaic tenth is only valid for Christendom as a rule of thumb, and he would rather the state would tax the people and pay the preachers. For a brief discussion of tithing, see the essay by Jordan mentioned in footnote 3 above.

But in the mean time, let us hold to all good ordinances. Let the tithes and all such things that are for the maintenance of the poor and the ministers, let these things be reduced to their lawful use, and let not insatiably wide gullets swallow all. Let them not consume them upon their superfluities, in pomp, drunkenness, and other dissolute-ness. But let them know that these are holy goods, which ought to be reserved for the use of the church, as well as for the maintenance of the poor as I have already said, and also for the feeding of those who serve God and His people. Thus we see that it was fit we should touch on the law concerning tithes at this point in the text. Now let us go on with that which follows.

Abram Rejects the Spoils of War

Moses now returns to the king of Sodom, of whom he had previously spoken, and ceases speaking of Melchizedek. He said that the king of Sodom wanted nothing but the persons, and was ready to leave all the spoil to Abram. He demanded nothing of what had been taken from him by his enemies, for he knew very well that Abram had won it by conquest; he only required the persons and his dwelling place. We do not know whether he did this hypocritically or not, considering that everything was in Abram's hands; or whether he thought in truth that Abram was worthy of all, and that it was enough that he and his people had been rescued from the hands of his enemies.

But however it was, it is said that Abram refused the offer, that he would take nothing that was his, not so much as a thread or a shoelatchet. That is to say, not the worth of a penny, as we commonly say; except that which the young men had eaten, for they had not come along to pay any reckoning and thus they should have some reward for venturing their lives to deliver the Sodomites. "Well sir, as for that which they have eaten, leave that, I say, alone; but as for those that came with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre, they must have their portion of the spoil; for I will not abridge them of any part of their benefit, nor it is for me to impose a law or matter of necessity upon them. I am liberal, and therefore I can in no wise straighten or measure them. Let them, then, take their shares. As for me, I will take nothing."

And in order better to confirm his speech, he says, "I have lifted up my hand unto the Lord, the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth." This is as if he had said that he had sworn it and would perform it, because it was not lawful for him to call back his word, and thereby stop his mouth about the matter. We see here that Abram's intention was to eschew all offences, when he refused to reap any benefit of anything that was Sodom's. For if the war which he took in hand was lawful, then it would have been proper in the judgment of men for him justly to reserve to himself whatever he had taken. But because he wanted to show that he was not carried away with covetousness, and that he was not a man who took up arms for gain, he said that he would not have so much as a thread of his. And in saying this, "So that you should not say that you have enriched Abram," it is certain that he was not ambitious.

Often we see men of great mind that willingly desire to enrich themselves with the goods of other men, but because they fear the shame and reproach of the world, they show a kind of constancy for the sake of appearance. Abram, however, was not such, but as I have said, he acted as he did because he did not want the name of God through his occasion to be evil spoken of. For it might be said, "Just look at that! This man, for all we can see, up to now has shown himself to be very simple, worshipping God by himself, and wonderfully devout. He says he forsook his country at the commandment of God, and yet he makes war, robs, and spoils, and therefore any man may see that he is no better than a thief." Here we see that under the name of Abram, the name of God might have been exposed to many slanders. And it is for this reason that he kept himself within compass.

A Life of Good Report

Now this is written for our learning. For, in the first place we are to observe this rule, that it is not enough that our consciences be pure before God, but we must also procure (as St. Paul gives example) a good report among our neighbors, and be well thought of. Why? So that they might not condemn us; so that they should have this opinion of us: that we would do no evil thing; so that we might stir them up to well doing. It is true that we will never be able to escape the bitings and barkings of many dogs. Yea, and even if we were without all blot and blemish, yet they will never cease slandering and speaking evil of us, for the Son

of God had His part in this way, and all the prophets and apostles were also charged with false reports. And therefore (as St. Paul says in another place) we must always be ready to do good, and yet to be evil spoken of, to be wonderfully scoffed at, reproached, and injured, for that must be our reward. And yet, notwithstanding, we must, as much as in us lies, not give any occasion to such as hunt after it, but stop their mouths so that the name of God, as I have already said, be not evil spoken of through our default.

Here we see how we are to follow Abram. We must understand that we are being watched on every side. And even if we were not, yet we owe this duty to our neighbors, not to give any offence to those that are weak, who might take any evil example from us. For let us be assured that there will always be evil men who seek to accuse us, to pick quarrels against us and defame us. But yet for all this, as I have already said, let us be clean and guiltless. For it is the will of God that we should be, as it were, set upon a scaffold, to carry His name and badge, as St. Paul says to the Philippians, and to shine before the wicked. And even though they are difficult and perverse people, yet let us walk before them in holiness and godliness, that they may be ashamed, not being able to find anything in us whereby we might be slandered, and that they may by that means be made more inexcusable, when they shall see us serve God in integrity of life, and themselves addicted to all fraud, villany, and such like. Thus, we see how we are to put in practice this doctrine.

(to be concluded)

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