

# Calvin Speaks



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## ALTARS AND ENSIGNS\*

(Part 1)

● *Title not in the original*

Sermon 149. 27 February 1556. Deuteronomy 27:1-10

[26:18. And the LORD has today declared you to be His people, a treasured possession, as He has promised you, and that *you* are to walk in all His commandments;

19. and that He is to set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, and in name, and in honor; and that you shall be a holy people to the LORD your God, as He has spoken.]

271. Then Moses with the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying "Keep all the commandments which I command you this day.

2. "SO shall it be on the day when you shall pass over the Jordan to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourself large stones, and plaster them with lime,

3. "And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you have passed over, in order that you may enter the land which the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you.

4. "So shall it be when you cross the Jordan, you shall set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you this day, and you shall plaster them with lime.

5. "And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them.

6. "You shall build the altar of the LORD your God of whole [uncut] stones, and you shall offer on it burnt sacrifices to the LORD your God,

7. "and you shall sacrifice peace offerings, and shall eat there, and rejoice before the LORD your God.

8. "And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly."

9. And Moses and the Levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying, "Be silent and listen, O Israel. This day you have become a people for the LORD your God.

10. "You shall therefore hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and do His commandments and His statutes, which I command you this day."

In yesterday's lecture, Moses, having exhorted the people to serve God, declared that the covenant which he had

made with them was to their great profit. The more God bestows on us, the more particularly we are bound to give ourselves over wholly to Him, if we are not devoid of all sense and reason.

But yet for all that, even though we see that God is so liberal toward us, are we moved to offer ourselves in obedience to Him? No indeed! For this reason Moses said to the Jews that they had been chosen to be in praise, in name, and in glory, as a people separated out from the rest of the world, and unto God (26:18,19). Some expound this to mean that they were "in praise and glory" so that God might be glorified. This, however, is a hard and forced exposition. It is, of course, true that God has chosen His people for His own Name, as the end for which He created all things, as it is often said in Holy Scripture. And the Church was built especially for the purpose of exalting the Name of God, as it is said in the prophet Isaiah (42:7), and as St. Paul also leads us to understand in the first chapter of Ephesians (v.6), where he treats of this thing at greater length. It is, therefore, true in itself that God adopted the Jews so that they might know His exceeding favor and goodness, and that the glory which was due Him might be given Him.

In this place, however, Moses has an eye to something we have already touched on, namely that the people might be moved and inflamed to discharge their duties, because God has called them for no other reason than to utter forth the infinite treasures of His mercies. And for this reason he says "God has placed you this day in praise, in name, and in honor," as he had earlier said (43:3), "What nation is so noble and of such dignity, which has its God so near to it, as your God has made Himself familiar to you, to govern you?" This, then, was a dignity which God had bestowed upon the Jews above the rest of the world.

This should have stirred them up all the more to be obedient to the will and word of God, though indeed, all things considered, we shall find that God can hope for nothing at our hands, or receive anything from us, but that we have all things from Him. Consider when we have taken great pains to exalt the Name of God, will He be increased at all by it? What can we do for Him? Surely we of our own

nature cannot but blaspheme His Name, and we are the reason why it is blasphemed. If He will draw any good out of us, He must first put it there. But, when God has granted us the grace to glorify Him, do we bring anything to Him, or does He receive any profit from us? Of course not. Yet, in the mean time, He continues to pour out His benefits, so that we have all of Him, as I have told you before.

So then, not without cause does Moses declare to the Jews that they were called to praise, to renown, and to honor. He upbraids them with their unthankfulness, if they do not endeavor to serve God with all their power, since He has been so liberal with them. And this also applies to us nowadays. For seeing that it pleases God to imprint His image in us, is this not a preeminence which He gives us above all other creatures in the world, calling us into the company of angels, and into the body of our Lord Jesus Christ? Since He goes before us with His goodness, what remains but that we should give ourselves wholly to Him, and show that, seeing He has filled us with His glory, we will not cause His Name to be made light of, nor will we permit the doctrine of salvation which He has given us to be reproached, that the unfaithful should make a scorn of it. Let us therefore give all diligence to this, as we see we are warned in this place.

And that is the very thing at which Moses aims when he adds that when the people have passed over Jordan, and have come into the land which was promised to them, and have it in full possession, they shall then set up great stones, and write on them an abridgment of the Law (27:2,3).<sup>1</sup> And secondly, that they shall erect also an altar to give thanks to God, and to testify that He had fulfilled the promise which He had made in former times to their fathers. This, I say, is the intent and meaning of Moses, namely that the people should not only give thanks to God one time, but that they also should do it afresh when they come into that land which had been promised them, and that they should ratify that which they had earlier confessed, which is that they owed all homage to God for that land, because it was given to them of His free bestowed goodness, and not gotten by their own power, nor befallen to them by any kind of chance or by the gift or help of men.

### Spokesmen for God

We have to note precisely what Moses says, that he and the elders of Israel commanded the people saying, "Do that which I command you." I grant that this might refer to Moses, because he was the chief servant of God in publishing the law, but it is certain that both he and the elders speak in the name and as it were in the person of God. And yet it would seem at first blush that this sentence is not well framed: Moses and the elders say to the people, "Do that which I command you," the subject of the sentence being singular rather than plural. As I have mentioned before, however, it was needful that the Jews should

be taught that these things proceed not from men but from God, Who spoke through their mouths. We see then that Moses and the elders are not coming here in their own persons as attributing anything to their own worthiness, nor do they attempt to stand on their own ground to charge the people with any laws, but they stand as the instruments of God to set forth faithfully whatever is committed to them.

Now if Moses, who was preeminent among all the prophets as we shall see (Deut.34:10), nevertheless restrained himself with such modesty that he would not usurp to himself the authority to speak anything in his own name, what shall we say of those who govern the church nowadays? Do they claim to exceed Moses? Let us note, then, that pastors are not appointed to set forth whatsoever doctrine seems good to themselves, nor to bring men's souls into subjection and bondage to them, nor to make laws and articles of faith at their own pleasure; but rather only to bring about the rule of God, that His word may be hearkened to. Let that be noted for one point. We see, then, that all the traditions of men which nowadays exist in Popedom in the place of the pure word of God, are but vain things. They must all be beaten down, and the true government of God must be established again in His church. And that government is that men hearken to Him, that they submit themselves to Him, that both great and small receive that which is delivered in His name, and that men go no further. Let this be well noted.

But at the same time we must also note that when those who are appointed ministers of the word of God perform their office faithfully, then they may speak with masterly authority. And indeed we hear how Moses with the rest of the elders says, "I command you this day, keep my statutes." It is not for a mortal creature to advance himself so high. No. But because Moses brings nothing of his own, but is a faithful minister of God, and does nothing but expound the law even as it is given and committed to him, therefore he does not refuse to speak as from on high, as one having all power and authority. Therefore, when we bring nothing but the pure doctrine of God; without falsifying it, without adding anything to it of our own, then we may bring into captivity all the loftiness of men, as St. Paul says (2 Cor.10:4), so that no man may exempt himself from the doctrine which is set forth to him, but even those who are the greatest must submit themselves to it. The servants of God; then, must behave themselves in such a way that they are not of a fearful mind to yield to the world when it rebels, and do not let themselves willingly be subdued (2 Tim.1:7); but they must hold their own with invincible constancy, yielding to their Master the honor of sovereignty and the overruling of all the world. This is the thing which we have to bear in mind concerning this text.

### A Temporary Altar

Now let us turn to what Moses said to them. The Jews are commanded to gather great stones and lime them over, and so to engrave the law of God upon them that the letters might easily be read. And secondly they are commanded to build an altar on Mount Ebal, and thereto sacrifice to God. Concerning the altar, we have already said that it was a special witness on the part of that people, doing homage

1. The verses actually say that they are to write "ali" the Law, not an abridgment of it. It is hard to conceive of Deuteronomy 12-26 in its entirety being written on large stones, and most commentators assume that actually the Ten Commandments are in view here. This is probably what Calvin had in mind in referring to an "abridgment" of the law.

to God for the land which they knew they held from Him? For indeed the law was there engraved, to the intent that the remembrance of the law should be renewed, and so that its teaching should be laid open and made common to all men. Also, this was so that at their first entrance into the land they might have a marker to put them in mind; to say, "This is a land dedicated to God." And just as princes set up their arms and ensigns in the ends and borders of their dukedoms and kingdoms, even so the ensigns of God were set up in that place, that men might say, "Behold, it is the living God that has dedicated this people to Himself, and has chosen them for His service, that He might be honored and called upon by them. Thus you see in effect what we have to bear in mind.

But before we pass any further, let us consider why it is said that they are not to make or build the altar of carved or polished stones, and that they must not lift up a hammer or any other tool upon it, but that the stones must be taken as they come to hand, without any fitting of them, so that it should be a rude heap of stones. This place has troubled many men without cause. Many have not been able to find any meaning in it without resorting to allegory, saying that when God commanded to have the altar made of rough and unhewn stones, it was to show that He takes no pleasure in any inventions of men, and that he will have no curious workmanship in His altar. This was to warn us that to serve Him rightly we must never mingle in our own notions and works, just as we see it is not lawful for men to set up at their own pleasure any service for God, because He desires obedience above all things. So this sense of theirs is in itself true, though it has nothing to do with this particular text. Moses is concerned with something else, which is that there should be but one altar to sacrifice to God.

We see that when the two and one-half tribes returned home after the conquest of the land of Canaan, and erected an altar, they were in danger of being utterly destroyed and rooted out (Joshua 22). For when news of it reached the rest of the tribes, they said, "What does this mean, making a second altar to God?" Thereupon they went forth to battle and destroy the tribes which dwelt beyond Jordan, and to put them to horrible slaughter. This was because God had commanded that they should make only one altar. And the reason for that was to maintain the unity of the faith, and agreement among the Jews. We know that although the law contains the perfect teaching of salvation, yet notwithstanding it is at the same time dark, as we have seen. Therefore, it behooved the Jews to be tied to the teaching, that they not wander. For we see how fickle men are, so that they are easily turned aside to make various sects, and every man has his worship apart by himself. God therefore, minded to prevent that mischief, which He saw men were given to by their sinful natures, insisted that there be only one single altar.

But now, if they had made an altar of hewn and squared stones, it would have lasted forever. And what would men

have said about it? "This is the altar on which they sacrificed to God." And thereupon they would have thought it proper service to God to sacrifice on it anew. And those who came long after would have thought that the sacrifices offered there were worth more. This would have overthrown the order which God had established among that people. It would have brought in general confusion.

We see what befell the hill of Samaria, as the woman who spoke to our Lord Jesus Christ declares: "Did not our fathers sacrifice on this mountain?" (John 4:20). Because Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had dwelt there, the Samaritans thought that their temple was more excellent and more holy than the Temple of Jerusalem. But it was built against the will of God. It was a heathenish place. It was more full of filthiness and uncleanness than any brothel. Of course, the people thought they were doing well, but we must always consider whether God likes what we are doing, and if He does not, woe be to us! So then, because men always seem without reason to follow the examples which they hear of, it was requisite that there should be no altars made of polished stones, for they would have remained in place and there would have been sacrifices offered on them.

Now we can see what abominations proceeded from this in Israel. Jeroboam, intending to maintain his estate, erected an altar in Bethel (1 Ki. 12:28f.), and wanted God to be worshiped there, and sacrifices to be made to Him there. He said to the people, "Behold, we sacrifice to God, who brought us out of the land of Egypt." He protests that he is not serving idols, but he actually does serve them. Indeed; for it was God's will to have His Temple built in Jerusalem, where it was; and we have seen already that He reserves authority to Himself to say, "You are to call upon Me in that place which I have chosen to have My Name called upon." For it is not for men to say, "Let us worship God in this place (Deut. 16:2);" but men must keep themselves to that which He has commanded in that regard. Jeroboam therefore, in making a second temple, brought the service of God into corruption. He distorted and falsified the true religion. Of course, he made a fair protestation, as I have mentioned, that he would change nothing in the service of God.

So we see what the meaning of God is; namely, that when they arrived in the land of promise, they should sacrifice to Him on Mount Ebal, and there set up an altar with such stones as came to hand, without using any workmanship, so that in time the altar would deteriorate, and that no mention of it should remain to draw into an everlasting rule something which was done but for one time only.

### Temporary Ordinances

Now although this ceremonial law does not directly app-

2. Even though the word "altar" appears in this sentence, Calvin is clearly speaking of the limed stones, not of the altar. The stones, not the altar, were the witness and ensign.

3. The sacrifices would be worth more because the altar was of greater antiquity than the altar in Jerusalem. During the Renaissance, when Calvin lived and worked, the notion that older was better was the operative rule among most humanists, resulting in the myth that the ancient Greeks had a high and noble civilization, a myth still common today.

ly to us nowadays, yet we may gather a very profitable teaching from this place. First of all, let us note that we must not ground ourselves upon something God commanded only for a certain time, as if it ought to be observed forever. For under the law it was God's will that men should sacrifice brute beasts to Him, but nowadays there is no such thing. He required that there should be incense compounded, and lights set up, and fire always burning on the altar. These things are now done away, and if any man renew them, they are but dung. We see how they are used in Popery. When the Papists come and perfume their idols' noses, they think that it is an acceptable sacrifice unto God. And when they have consumed much wax on their torches and tapers and candles, they think they have exercised a wonderful devotion. And yet all this is but a mocking of God, for it was His will to be sorserved under the law.

But if we should now go and try to light the sun; that is to say, if now after the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ into the world, we should yet still use those lights as in the night and in the dark, it would be a perverting of the whole order of nature.<sup>4</sup> The ancient fathers walked under dark shadows, and therefore they stood in need of those aids. And when they had a light, it was to show them that they were not coming to worship God by accident or at random, but that they were guided and directed by the Word of God and by His Holy Spirit. And so they were kept in line, so that they should not presume upon any thing out of their own fancies. But now we have no need for all these things. Why? because the veil of the Temple is rent asunder, and God shows us His face in the gospel, even in the person of His Son, so that we may now walk as at noonday. So then, let us consider what is everlasting, and what is but temporary, that we make no fond and foolish confusions as the Papists do.

For that is the fountain from which so many superstitions arise. When the Papists baptise, they take spittle. Why? because Jesus Christ did so (Mark 7:33). Yes, but did He draw as a consequence that men should make a rule of it, and that His miracle should be mocked at in baptisms? Will they make a young infant to speak, by their spitting on

4. Just as in nature we use lights during the night, but have no need for them once the sun has risen, so in the typology of the Old Covenant, lights were perpetually maintained in the darkness of the Tabernacle and Temple, but these are gone once the Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in His wings (Mal.4:2). Notice, for instance, that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night (John 32), and of course Nicodemus was "in the dark" concerning what Jesus said to him.

Obviously Calvin is not opposed to the use of lights in church buildings. He is opposed to the idea of keeping a perpetual "altar lamp" burning in the church, however, for the Tabernacle with its perpetual lamp has been replaced by the light of Jesus Christ.

his lips?

Again, they have the healing of the sick, and it is a sacrament to them. Why? because the apostles used oil when they healed the sick (Mark 6:13; James 5:14). Yes, but that gift was only for the beginning of the gospel age, and afterward miracles ceased.<sup>5</sup> Should we use these signs still, knowing this? Is this not a mocking of God? I suppose, then, that the truth and substance of things must depart and the signs must remain ! What a brilliant idea!

Again, they hold to other things, such as Lent. This is the fast that is to be kept, say the Papists. The reason is because Jesus Christ fasted. Yes, but did He Who is the Fountain of all perfection and the Mirror of all holiness, fast every year? No, He fasted but once in His life.<sup>6</sup> The Papists say that we must fast every year, and that there is great devotion and holiness therein. But in doing so they would exceed Jesus Christ. Surely this is a devilish superstition, to fast forty days after this manner, on the opinion that by this means we may make ourselves like Christ. For we know that our Lord Jesus meant to show by this that He was at that time excepted from the general condition of all men, as the same was done to Elijah by miracle, and likewise to Moses when he published the law. And did the Jews follow Moses and Elijah therein? Did any of the many holy prophets ever fast that fast? No, for they knew well that it was not commanded them of God, and that He made no common rule of it; and they knew that He did not want them drawing into the force of law matters which He had ordained for onetime only.

So then, we see that it is very profitable to consider what God has commanded for one time only, so that we do not pervert everything, nor desire to do whatsoever is contained in Holy Scripture without making any distinction, without knowing first whether the matter concerns us and is spoken to us or not. This is one point to be noted.

(to be concluded.)

5. Modern charismatic writers try to maintain that the notion of the cessation of miracles and of the gift of tongues was invented by B. B. Warfield toward the end of the 19th century. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Jonathan Edwards, in *Charity and its Fruits*, interprets 1 Cor.13:8-10 to refer to the cessation of miraculous gifts upon the completion of the canon of Scripture. Here Calvin takes essentially the same line of approach, holding that miraculous gifts were only for the infancy of the New Covenant church.

James 5:14 certainly seems to indicate a permanent practice of calling in the elders to pray over the sick, and anoint with oil. Not all Reformed expositors have agreed with Calvin at this particular point. Calvin basis his interpretation on the clearly miraculous manifestation of this practice in Mark 6:13.

6. That is, He fasted for forty days only once in His life. Lent is an annual fortyday semi-fast, observed in the Roman Catholic Church, and in some other churches.

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