

Calvin Speaks



Vol. 3, No. 2

@1982, Geneva Divinity School

February, 1982

ALTARS AND ENSIGNS*

(Part 2)

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 149.27 February 1556. Deuteronomy 27:1-10

Summary of the First Half

The large limed stones that were to be set up at the entrance of the land were God's ensigns, placed at the border of His territory, to proclaim to all the world that this was His kingdom, governed by the laws recorded on the stones. The altar was to be made of unpolished stones, and while it is true that men are not to worship God according to their own works but solely according to His grace, that is not the reason why the altar's stones were not to be tooled. Rather, it was so that the altar would rapidly deteriorate and disappear, so that there should be only one active altar in the land, to preserve the unity of the faith. This altar was temporary, and not to be used again. The permanent altar was at the location of the Tabernacle. From this we learn that there are a number of temporary ordinances in the Bible, appropriate to one time and place, but not designed to be imitated throughout the subsequent history of the church. Our Lord's fortyday fast in the wilderness, for instance, is unique, and there is no implication in the teaching of the gospels that we should observe an annual fortyday Lenten fast in imitation of it.

The Unity of the Faith

A second point to be observed is that we ought, as much as we possibly can, to maintain unity and agreement among ourselves, as we shall declare by and by. It was God's will that there should be only one Temple. Why? because He wanted it to be a bond to hold the people together in the purity and soundness of the faith: "We have only one God who is called upon among us, and we must come into one certain place to sacrifice to Him, and all of us must gather together there." It is indeed true that we are not nowadays tied to any such a system, but no matter what the circumstances are, yet the substance remains for us. Let us therefore take heed unto all those aids which we have to hold us in this communion of faith, and in this unity which God requires; let us keep them well, and let no man turn aside from them.

Concerning the outward order of things, we know that

our Lord Jesus Christ would have men to assemble themselves together. I grant that we are not bound all to be in one place, and men also preach in various churches in one town. Why? because the whole world cannot be present to hear one sermon. Yet for all that, because of our slowness we are so bound that we must gather ourselves together in the name of God. He who wants to stay at home, despising the common order, and says, "I can read at home and edify myself sufficiently there," that man breaks asunder the unity of the faith and tears in pieces the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, with all his strength.

We know that baptism was ordained so that it should serve as a common seal that we are the church of God, and are governed by His Spirit. Now if every man wants to have his baptism performed separately, what a wicked disorder that would be!

The Holy Supper of the Lord is also distributed as a common food so that we should all communicate of it. We are warned by it that we are one body. And as one loaf is made of many grains of wheat, which are so mingled together that they make but one substance,⁸ even so ought we to be knit together if we want to be counted as the children of God. Therefore, if every man wants to have his own separate, private supper, is this not a withdrawing of themselves from the community and brotherhood which Jesus Christ would have us to keep?

In Popery every man must have his altar and his chapel. Indeed, they were of the opinion that God was much bound to them for so doing. There should have been one common table (I will not go on to point out that they have turned the

7. The Bible, of course, does not *insist* on baptisms' being performed in the course of a worship service, any more than circumcisions were. Calvin is reacting a bit to the divisions he sees in Romanism at this point.

8. This is a point stressed by Augustine. It is based on a consideration of Leviticus 23:9-21. The offering of first sheaf is followed by the offering of the first loaf, on Pentecost. The Spirit's coming on Pentecost bound the individual grains of the disciples into the united body of Christ, which is the loaf.

communion table into an altar to sacrifice upon, which thing in itself is a devilish abomination), but in the mean time, although they retain the terminology, yet they will not have a common table for all the church.⁹ For every man thrusts himself in, saying, "Oh, I will have a chapel, and there I will have my devotions by myself." When men have come to this point, it is a horrible wasting of the church of God, and the building of so many altars has been the cause of the creation of so many sects and divisions. Even if the Papists had placed no idols in their churches, and even if they did not have such a number of superstitions and idolatries as we see they have, yet in doing this one thing they have broken the unity which Christ has solemnly set among His members, and in the whole church.

What must we do then? Let us endeavor to keep ourselves in brotherly agreement and under the signs and tokens which God has given us, and let us continue in them and make all those means which He has given us to serve to that end. That is the teaching which we have to gather from this place.

The Duty of Praise

But let us now return to what we said in the beginning, which is that God here required of His people a solemn acknowledgement of how much they were bound to Him. We are therefore exhorted to acknowledge the benefits of God, and to occupy ourselves therein, so that we never forget them. The people had already given thanks to God after they had come out of Egypt, in the wilderness, where they sacrificed continually to Him; but all the same, after they passed over Jordan, they were to begin to give thanks again. Why? because men tend always to discharge their duties to God by halves, and they soon forget them altogether, and no longer think about what they owe God. This is the reason why they are required to be occupied continually in God's service.

So then, let us note well that during the entirety of our lives we are to devote our whole endeavor to magnify and set forth the name of God. For although we are not lodged in this land of Canaan, yet the favor of God ought to be esteemed as highly by us, and indeed more so, than any earthly inheritance which was given to the children of Israel. For God, having plucked us out of the dungeons of death, and out of the bondage of Satan, declares that we are blessed by Him and that we are a royal priesthood. Who among us can discharge himself in magnifying so great and so inestimable a goodness of God? So then, because we are slow and slack to give that glory to God which is His due, and because when we have once done it, we think it enough and we are loath to do it again, let us bear in mind this lesson which is taught us here, which is that just as God increases His gifts to us, and just as He confirms and ratifies them, so ought we on our part to be so much the more moved and stirred up to yield Him praise, declaring thereby how much we are bound to Him, and pro-

9. "Church" here means a local church. Obviously, Calvin realizes that a common table for the world-wide church is physically impossible. In any given locale, however, there is a church, and that church should be united.

testing that we are wholly His, and that we will dedicate our whole life to Him. This, I say, is the thing which we have to bear in mind concerning this passage, where mention is made of sacrificing to God.

Gratitude

Now, after Moses mentions the whole burnt offering, he adds, "You shall offer also peace offerings to the LORD your God." Earlier on in the books of Moses, we are told that the peace offerings sewed for thanksgiving, so that if God had delivered His people, if He had given them any victory against their enemies, if he had delivered them from famine or any other calamity, they sacrificed in witness that this benefit deserved not to be forgotten. We see then that Moses aims wholly at something we have already declared, namely that the people should make an acknowledgement of this benefit to God, after they came into the land of Canaan. And when Moses says that it was a land flowing with milk and honey (as we have already seen heretofore), it is for the purpose of stirring up the people to give glory to God, when they see that the land is so fertile, and that God has showed Himself so liberal towards them.

We know that at this present time it is not so fruitful a land, nor was it so fertile before their coming to it,¹⁰ and this is a wonderful thing. And yet notwithstanding, the wicked have taken occasion from this to blaspheme, as that wicked heretic who was punished here mocked both Moses and the prophets, saying that when they praised the land of Canaan they were but setting out a fable.¹¹ This man show shows himself (as do all despisers of God and such enraged persons as are possessed by Satan) to scorn God's benefits, which men may see with their eyes. Nor did he consider that God expressly threatened to salt that land (Ps.107:34), which is to say, to make it barren, so that at this present day men see it desolate and waste; and he maintained his false opinion despite the fact that the matter was explained to him. At any rate, it is a dreadful thing to behold the condition of that country at the present time, in comparison with what it is known to have been like previously. The meaning is this, as said in the psalm (107:37), that when it pleases God to bless a land with fruitfulness, it will be fat and full of all manner of fruits, and contrariwise when He lifts up His hand to make it barren, it will be totally withered. We see this to be true in the land of Canaan.

So then, let us note here that Moses meant to show more particularly the favor which God showed to His people in nourishing them in a land which, a man might say, was flowing with milk and honey, showing by this figure that this was done by miracle. Now for our part, it is true

10. This is a bit speculative on Calvin's part, especially in the light of Gen.13:10, "The whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD." The area around Sodom was like Eden, but was cursed with salt for its sin, though it is symbolically restored by the gospel in Ezekiel 47:8-10. The history of this region is a type, and the same pattern is played out in larger scale with Canaan as a whole, and larger still with the history of the world as a whole.

11. Michael Servetus had been executed on 27 October 1553, a couple of years before this sermon was preached; though Calvin might be referring to someone else.

that we shall not be fed fat in respect to our bodies,¹² but yet in feeling the spiritual benefits which God so largely bestows on us, we ought to be moved and stirred up to this consideration, that when we have stated as solemnly as possible that we are His, and that we owe all to Him, yet we are not performing even the hundredth part of our duty of gratitude.

The Duty of Obedience

Turning now to the great stones on which God commanded His law to be written, which we have alluded to earlier, let us note that God meant to hold His people under His obedience by any means He might. For men by reason of their infirmities need to be kept in awe, and to be called back to God, so that they do not swerve aside from Him. I have already made a comparison to the ensigns of princes, instead of which God would have His law to be written. Why? because His laws are His true ensigns, and His word is the lively image wherein we ought to behold Him. And that is the reason why He says, "You shall come and present yourselves before My face," when in fact they presented themselves before the Ark of the Covenant, in which the law was enclosed. For God refused to have any other shape by which to be represented to men, than the continual instruction of His word, as we have already seen in our sermons on Deuteronomy 4:12, where it is said, "Remember that you saw not the shape of a man, nor of any creature whatsoever, but you heard the voice of God." Take heed, therefore, lest you counterfeit any thing in this regard.¹³

Now that we understand the text, let us note that when our Lord vouchsafes to have His word preached in any place, and gives us peace and quiet as by His own hand, it is so that we might do Him double homage. All those who live in the world and are fed and sustained by God ought to confess that He is worthy to have all sovereignty over them; but we who have a special privilege from God, and who are separated from the rest of the world, and who have His word preached to us, and who have freedom to call on His name in purity, shouldn't we enforce ourselves to do Him double homage for it? Surely this ought to be thoroughly considered nowadays.

How greatly God has favored us! We may use His sacraments with all liberty and we have our ears every day filled with the doctrines of salvation, so that He continually calls us to Himself. On the other hand, we see many wretch-

ed people who are held in bondage under the tyranny of the Pope, and dare not open their mouths or make the least endeavor to worship God in purity. They have neither churches to resort to, nor any means to be taught. The whole world sees this. So then, we ought indeed to have the ensigns of God, whereby the law should be presented.

Unfortunately, we see the reverse; for as soon as any man comes near to us [here in Geneva—JB], he should perceive a wonderful change in us, because we have withdrawn ourselves from the defilements of the unbelieving. But whereas men should see that God reigns and bears rule among us, and has His seat and throne with us, they may actually see us as loose in living as the most ignorant people in all the world. Nay, a man may see that God is defied by some of them to whom the gospel is preached, and that there are worse devils and more wicked men among them than in the deepest dungeon of Popery. Surely this deserves a double woe, for it is not only to the Jews that Moses has spoken, but it is to show to all in general that as God vouchsafes to us the favor to be His, even so we ought to remove all corruption from among us, that men may know that we are indeed His people.¹⁴

This does not, of course, excuse those who live in Popery. No matter how much they are threatened, so that they are not able to make a free confession of their faith without danger of death, yet they are always guilty of offending God in that they have not honored Him. Now if there is no excuse for them, how much greater will be our condemnation? For there is nothing to hinder us from sewing God except our own wickedness and negligence.

So then, let us be diligent to discharge our duty, not as touching the outward ceremony of great stones as commanded here, but in respect to the thing God had a special eye on, namely that every one of us should not only yield himself to His obedience, and dedicate himself to follow His will, and also that with one common accord we should show that He is our sovereign King and that we are under His government. And because He has put us in a place where His name is openly trailed upon and where there are churches for us to come together to make our common prayers and to confess our faith, let us also endeavor to walk in such a way that men may indeed know that those places are not defiled, but reserved to the glory of Him who has chosen them for His use.

The Ensigns of God

Now for the end and conclusion, let us note that our Lord does not want His ensigns to be blazed [published] in just any sort of way that men like, but He will have His own image to be set forth in it, and that is why He speaks purposefully of the law: "The words," He says, "of the law." The Papists have chapels, crosses, and gay paintings, and they think that God is represented by them, but God has no liking for those things. We must return to the Word, which

12. Calvin is not saying that the church will never prosper; indeed, a study of the prayers Calvin prayed after his lectures and sermons reveals a most this-worldly optimism. While Calvin did not disparage material blessings, he did not expect to see much of them in Geneva during his lifetime, thus "we shall not be fed fat." Calvin always stressed the context of blessings over the sheer *quantity* of them. In his remarks on Mark 10:28-31 ("he shall receive a hundred fold in this life,... and in the world to come everlasting life"), Calvin emphasizes that the Christian takes greater delight in a few good things than does the unbeliever with vast riches, because the Christian has his goods in the context of the joy of the Spirit, while the unbeliever has his goods in the context of the bitterness of sin.

13. A reference to the making of images of God for worship purposes, a violation of the second commandment.

14. In other words, a Theocracy (a Christian Republic) should act to restrain the open, public sins of men. Note that Calvin is advocating that just as the Mosaic law was God's ensign of civil government for Israel, so it should be for all nations. For a brief summary of Calvin's views on this, see *Calvin Speaks* Vol.2, No.6, available to those requesting it and sending a contribution.

is the means by which God opens Himself to us, and He will be known by it. Let men therefore content themselves simply therewith.

Now concerning the injunction, "Let those words be well engraved," hereby we are taught that God did not give His law for a few people, but meant that it should be a common teaching to all, both great and small, even to the most simple-minded, and that all should be instructed by it. And if this was the case in the time of the law, by greater reason it ought nowadays to be in force among us who live in the New Covenant. For it is said that the gospel is to be preached to all creatures (Mark 16:15). God will not allow His teaching to be locked up, so that none but the clergy should thrust their noses into it, but He wants all to be His scholars, and the law to be written so that every man may read it. Why? so that all men should receive instruction from it. Let none therefore exempt themselves from the reading of it, as we see many do, saying, "Oh, I am no clerk; I never went to school; reading does not pertain to my occupation." I grant readily that it is not every man's occupation to be a teacher, but who may exempt himself from being a scholar in the Word of God? A man might as well renounce Christianity as say, "Oh, as for me, I know neither A nor B [I am illiterate]; so how can I tell what the law of God or any of Holy Scripture means?" Nevertheless, the will of God as declared to us in His word is written in letters big enough, and although nowadays we have no heap of stones setup for the law of God to be written and engraved upon, yet notwithstanding our Lord meant to show in this symbolism that when He delivered His word it was so that we should be taught and ordered by it, and that the teaching thereof should be common to all.

And truly, we have no less need to nourish our souls with the word of God than we have to sustain our bodies with bread and other daily food. Seeing then that this is so, let every one of us labor in the way, and let us be attentive to hearken to our God when He speaks to us by the mouth of the minister; and when we have His Holy Scripture, let every man endeavor to be taught by it. Those who have no skill to read themselves, let them hear it read, that we may show that, since our Lord speaks to us, we are ready to receive whatever He says, and desire nothing else except to profit under Him in such a way that His word is not only engraved in stone and lime but also imprinted on our hearts, so that in our whole life we seek to follow it, and give ourselves wholly to it.

Prayer

Now let us kneel down in the presence of our good God, with acknowledgement of the great number of faults and offences which we cease not to commit daily against His majesty, praying Him to make us feel them better than we have, so that we may endeavor to amend them more and more until we are clean rid of them; and since we obtain pardon for them by our Lord Jesus Christ, we may also increase and be confirmed in all righteousness and holiness, that so we may indeed confirm our calling. And let us pray Him that since He has chosen us for His people, it may please Him also to withdraw us from all the defilements of the world, so that we may be to Him a holy people in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And let us pray that it may please Him to grant this grace not only to us but also to all people and nations of the earth, etc.

A REMINDER

Correspondence courses are available from Geneva Divinity School. Study the Christian faith in your own home. Write for details.

Calvin Speaks is published every month by Geneva Divinity School. It is mailed free of charge to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. Address: 708 Hamvassy Drive, Tyler, TX 75701. Donations are tax deductible; checks should be made out to Calvin Speaks. Back issues can be sent only to those making a contribution.