

The True Church is Small, Often Very Small

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,
trans. Rev. James Anderson (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1846),
Vol. IV, 51-52, 112-113, 115-116; Vol. V, 193-194, English updated, emphasis added.

Psalm 96:5-6

“For all the gods of the peoples *are* idols, But the LORD made the heavens. Honor and majesty *are* before Him; Strength and beauty *are* in His sanctuary.”

The true church was extremely small in Old Testament times.

We cannot but notice the confidence with which the Psalmist asserts the glory of the true God, in opposition to the universal opinion which men might entertain. The people of God were at that time called to maintain a conflict of no inconsiderable or common description with the hosts and prodigious mass of superstitions which then filled the whole world. **The true God might be said to be confined within the obscure corner of Judea.** Jupiter was the god everywhere received—and adored throughout the whole of Asia, Europe, and Africa. Every country had its own gods peculiar to itself, but these were not unknown in other parts, and it was the true God only who was robbed of that glory which belonged to Him. All the world had conspired to believe a lie.

Yet the Psalmist, sensible that the vain delusions of men could derogate nothing from the glory of the one God, looks down with indifference upon the opinion and universal suffrage (votes/choices) of mankind. The inference is plain, that **we must not conclude that to be necessarily the true religion which meets with the approval of the multitude**; for the judgment formed by the Psalmist must have fallen to the ground at once, if religion were a thing to be determined by the suffrages of men [i.e., popularity and public opinion polls], and His worship depended on their caprice [unpredictable, changing beliefs]. **Be it then that ever so many agree in error, we shall insist after the Holy Spirit that they cannot take from God’s glory; for man is vanity himself, and all that comes of him is to be mistrusted.**

Having asserted the greatness of God, he proves it by reference to the formation of the world, which reflects His perfections. God must necessarily exist of Himself, and be self-sufficient, which shows the vanity of all gods who made not the world. The *heavens* are mentioned—a part for the whole—as the power of God is principally apparent in them, when we consider their beauty and adornment. . . .

In a time of widespread idolatry and false worship, the true Church may be found where even just two or three believers meet together in Christ’s name.

Psalm 137:4 “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?”

In our own day under the Papacy, great as the danger may be to which the faithful expose themselves by not conforming to the example around them, the Holy Spirit makes use of such a barrier as this to separate them from sinful compliances. To those, whether Frenchmen, Englishmen, or Italians, who love and practice the true religion, even their native country is a foreign place when they live under that tyranny [of false religion].

And yet there is a distinction between us and God's ancient people, for at that time the worship of God was confined to one place, but **now He has His Temple wherever two or three are met together in Christ's name, if they separate themselves from all idolatrous profession and maintain purity of divine worship.**

The Psalmist by the language which he employs would by no means put down every attempt on their part to celebrate God's praises. He rather exhorts them under their affliction to wait with patience till the liberty of publicly worshipping God was restored, saying upon the matter—We have been deprived of our Temple and sacrifices, we wander as exiles in a polluted land, and what remains but that in remembrance of our outcast state we should sigh and groan for the promised deliverance.

Psalm 102:13-14

"You will arise *and* have mercy on Zion; For the time to favor her, Yes, the set time, has come. For Your servants take pleasure in her stones, And show favor to her dust."

. . . The sadder the desolation is to which the Church has been brought, the less ought our affections to be alienated from her. Yes, rather, this compassion which the faithful then exercised, ought to draw from us sighs and groans; and would to God that the melancholy description in this passage were not so applicable to our own time as it is! He, no doubt, has His churches erected in some places, where He is purely worshipped; but, if we cast our eyes upon the whole world, we behold His word everywhere trampled under foot, and His worship defiled by countless abominations. Such being the case, His holy temple is assuredly everywhere demolished, and in a state of wretched desolation; yes, even those small churches in which He dwells are torn and scattered.

The true church is not to be seen in pomp, splendor, and magnificent buildings, but rather in the true temple of God in which the Holy Spirit dwells—that place in which the Word of God is faithfully believed and taught.

What are these humble erections, when compared with that splendid edifice described by Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah? But no desolation ought to prevent us from loving the very stones and dust of the Church. Let us leave the Papists to be proud of their altars, their huge buildings, and their other exhibitions of pomp and splendor; for all that heathenish magnificence is nothing else but an abomination in the sight of God and His angels, whereas the ruins of the true temple are sacred.

Psalm 102:16-18 "For the LORD shall build up Zion; He shall appear in His glory. He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, And shall not despise their prayer. This will be written for the generation to come, That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD."

. . . There is in the words a beautiful contrast between the new creation of the people and the present destruction; of which interpreters improperly omit to take any notice. When the people were expelled from their country, the Church was in a manner extinguished. Her very name might seem to be dead, when the Jews were mingled among the heathen nations, and no longer constituted a distinct and united body. Their return was accordingly as it were a second birth.

Accordingly, the prophet with propriety expects a new creation. Although the Church had perished, he was persuaded that God, by His wonderful power, would make her rise again from death to renovated life. This is a remarkable passage, showing that **the Church is not always so preserved, as to continue to outward appearance to survive, but that when she seems to be dead, she is suddenly created anew, whenever it so pleases God.**

Let no desolation, therefore, which befalls the Church, deprive us of the hope, that as God once created the world out of nothing, so it is His proper work to bring forth the Church from the darkness of death.

Post tenebras lux. After darkness, light!