

Is Marriage a Sacrament? Calvin on Scripture Alone, Sacraments, and Separatism

From John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 1973), pp. 606-607.

John Calvin taught that there are two sacraments (or holy ordinances) of the Church—Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

In his sermon on Ephesians 5:31-33, he discusses how the Roman Catholic Church used Paul’s words--“ This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church”—to declare that marriage was also a sacrament of the Church. In the Latin Vulgate, they say, “This is a great sacrament.” Calvin writes, “On this some people have been so foolish as to say that marriage is then a sacrament.”

What did John Calvin think about corrupt Christianity and those who boast of their titles and credentials yet have failed to grasp the basic teachings of Holy Scripture?

“Now when we see that such stupidity has crept in throughout the whole world, and that these great Doctors have need of being put to their A.B.C. again, since they do not know even the things that they ought to have judged by their own natural reason, we see by this that there lies a great vengeance from God upon such as have corrupted true religion and made general confusion in the Word of God according to their own fancies. Accordingly we have to thank our God so much the more, that he has drawn us out of such pits.”

And so Calvin had no regrets or guilt for separating from Rome, for Rome had separated herself from the God of Truth, the God of the Bible:

“And seeing there was such dreadful confusion in men reported to be the lamps and pillars of the church, and who were taken to be so; since we see that God so utterly stupefied them, we ought not to be afraid to separate ourselves from their company and synagogue [an allusion to synagogues of Satan, Revelation 2:9; 3:9, an image of false Christianity.]”

Calvin was a firm believer in Scripture alone—that the Scriptures alone are the basis for what we believe about God, true doctrine, faith, and worship. The Scriptures reveal to us the will of God for our lives. To be reformed is to conform our doctrine, worship, faith and life to the will of God revealed in the Scriptures alone!

Calvin adds, “And seeing he has granted us this grace to be no more mingled with them, let us keep on our way and walk on soberly. For there we have a warning to hold ourselves in check, that we, being God’s true scholars, and distrusting ourselves, may not go looking for five feet on one sheep (as they say) but handle the holy Scripture with such reverence that God may guide us to the true understanding of it by his Holy Spirit.”

So false religionists, even with all their doctorate degrees and religious titles, may try to convince you that a sheep has five feet instead of four. They can be masters of deception, twisting and convoluting the simple truth of God’s Word, adding to it and taking away from it. We must be sober-minded, like the Bereans, “receiving the word with all readiness, and searching the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Calvin set up his own theological academy. He was not against formal education. However, God's true scholars are not led astray by false prophets and their worldly theories. We must distrust ourselves and all worldly wisdom, and we must submit ourselves to the simple and pure teachings of Scripture alone.

Calvin calls us to separate from apostasy, to separate from false religion, even from churches that masquerade themselves as Christian. And he calls us to reform ourselves and our churches, as we are purified and cleansed by the Word of God alone!

Soli Deo Gloria!