

The True and False Church Ezekiel 11:14-16

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 363-368, emphasis added; updated to modern American English.

Ezekiel 11:14-16 “Again the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, “Son of man, your brethren, your relatives, your countrymen, and all the house of Israel in its entirety, are those to whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, ‘Get far away from the Lord; this land has been given to us as a possession.’ Therefore say, “Thus saith the Lord God: ‘Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.’””

. . . This passage then is worthy of observation, that we may learn not to estimate the state of the Church by the common opinion of mankind. And so with respect to the splendor which too often blinds the eyes of the simple. For it will so happen, that we think we have found the Church where there is none, and we despair if it does not offer itself to our eyes; as we see at this day that many are astonished by those magnificent pomps which are conspicuous in the Papacy.

There the name of “The Church” keeps flying bravely in the face of all. There also its marks are brought forward. The simple are attracted to the empty spectacle. So under the name of the Church they are drawn to destruction; because they determine that the Church is there where that splendor which deceives them is seen. On the other hand, many who cannot discern the Church with their eyes and point to it with the finger, accuse God of deceiving them, as if all the faithful in the world were extinct.

We must hold, therefore, that the Church is often wonderfully preserved in its hiding-places: for its members are not luxurious men, or such as win the veneration of the foolish by vain ostentation; but rather ordinary men, of no estimation in the world.

We have a memorable example of this, when God recalls His own Prophet from the chief leaders at Jerusalem, not to other leaders, who should attract men to wonder at themselves, but to miserable exiles, whose dispersion rendered them despicable. He shows therefore that some remnants were left even in Chaldea. . . .

. . . *the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, depart far from the sanctuary of the LORD; the land is given to us.* Since therefore we see that they so boldly insulted their brethren, can we wonder that at this day the Papists also are fierce, because they retain the ordinary succession and the title of the Church, and that they say that we are cast away and cut off from the Church, and so are unworthy of enjoying either a name or a place among Christians? If, therefore, at this day the Papists are so hot against us, there is no reason why their haughtiness should disturb us; but in this mirror we may learn that it always was so. . . .

We see that God even here claims some place for sinners in the Church, against whom He had exercised the rigor of His judgment. He says, by way of concession, *that they*

were cast away and dispersed, but He adds, *that He was still with them for a sanctuary; no*, because they bore their exile calmly and with equanimity, they pronounce this to be a reason why He should pity them. For neither is their sentence so general that God overlooked His own elect. This promise then ought not to be extended to all the captives without discrimination, because we shall see that God included only a few.

Without doubt then, this was a peculiar promise which God wished to be a consolation to His elect. He says, *because they bore exile* and dispersion with calmness and composure, *therefore God would be a sanctuary to them*. But this was a gracious approval of their modesty and subjection, because they not only suffered exile but also dispersion, which was more severe. For if they had all been drawn into a distant region this had been a severe trial, but still they might have united more easily, had they not been dispersed.

This second punishment was the sadder to them, because they perceived in it the material for despair, as if they could never be collected together again in one body. Thus their wrestling with these temptations was a sign of no little piety; and as some of the faithful did not demonstrate their obedience at once, yet because God knows His own (2 Timothy 2:19), and watches for their safety, hence He here opposes to all their miseries that protection on which their safety was founded.

Because, therefore, *they were dispersed through the lands, hence, says He, I will be to them a small sanctuary*. . . . The sanctuary, therefore, which God had chosen for Himself on Mount Zion, because it deservedly attracted all eyes towards it, and the Israelites were always gazing at it, since it revealed the majesty of God, might be called the magnificent sanctuary of God. Nothing of the sort was seen in the Babylonish exile, but God says, *that He was to the captives as a small or contracted sanctuary*.

This place answers to the 90th Psalm, where Moses says, "You, O God, have always been a tabernacle to us" (Psalm 90:1), and yet God had not always either a temple or a tabernacle from which He entered into a covenant with the fathers. But Moses there *teaches* what God afterwards represented by a visible symbol, that the fathers really thought that they truly lay hid under the shadow of God's wings, and were not otherwise safe and sheltered unless God protected them.

Moses, therefore, in the name of the fathers, celebrates the grace of God which was continual even before the sanctuary was built. So also in this place God says by a figure, *that He was their sanctuary*, not that He had erected an altar there, but because the Israelites were destitute of any external pledge and symbol, He reminds them that the thing itself was not entirely taken away, since God had His wings outstretched to cherish and defend them.

This passage is also worthy of notice, lest the faithful should despond where God has no standard erected. Although He does not openly go before them with royal ensigns to preserve them, yet they need not conclude themselves altogether deserted; but they should recall to remembrance what is here said of a *small sanctuary*.

God, therefore, although He does not openly exhibit His influence, yet He does not cease to preserve them by a secret power, of which in this our age we have a very remarkable proof. The world indeed thinks us lost as often as the Church is materially injured, and the greater part become very anxious, as if God had deserted them. Then

let this promise be remembered as a remedy, *God is to the dispersed and cast away a small sanctuary*; so that although His hand is hidden, yet our safety proves that He has worked powerfully in our weakness. We see then that this sense is most suitable, and contains very useful doctrine.

Yet the other sense will suit, that God is “the sanctuary of a few,” because in that great multitude but few remain who are really the people of God, for the greater part was ignorant of Him; since then God does not regard that multitude of the impious which was already within the Church, but only here directs His discourse towards His own elect, it is not surprising that He asserts them to be but few in number¹.

¹ In his commentary on Daniel 12:7, Calvin likewise notes, “. . . the Church should be a stranger in the world, and be dispersed throughout it. This was continually fulfilled from that day to the present. How sad is the dispersion of the Church in these days! God indeed defends it by His power, but this is beyond human expectation. For how does the body of the Church now appear to us? How has it appeared throughout all ages? Surely it has ever been torn in pieces and dispersed. . . . But yet the end should be prosperous, as he had previously announced, when treating of its resurrection and final salvation.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. II, 384-385.