

The True Altar and the True Priest

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book IV, 19.30-31; 18.12, 14-20, English updated and emphasis added.

30. . . . Meanwhile, they [the Papist priests] observe not that in professing to be the successors of the sons of Aaron, they are injurious to the priesthood of Christ, which alone was foreshadowed and typified by all ancient priesthoods. In Him, therefore, they were all concluded and completed, in Him they ceased, as we have repeatedly said, and as the Epistle to the Hebrews, unaided by any gloss, declares. But if they are so much delighted with Mosaic ceremonies, why do they not hurry oxen, calves, and lambs, to their sacrifices? They have, indeed, a great part of the ancient tabernacle, and of the whole Jewish worship. The only thing lacking to their religion is, that they do not sacrifice oxen and calves. . . .

31. . . . They are attempting, indeed, an ingenious device; they are trying, by a kind of patchwork, to make one religion out of Christianity, Judaism, and Paganism. . . .

12. Any who will diligently consider, will perceive that the word of the Lord makes this distinction between the Mosaic sacrifices and our eucharist [the Lord's Supper] — that while the former represented to the Jewish people the same efficacy of the death of Christ which is now exhibited to us in the Supper, yet the form of representation was different. There the Levitical priests were ordered to typify the sacrifice which Christ was to accomplish; a victim was placed to act as a substitute for Christ Himself; an altar was erected on which it was to be sacrificed; the whole, in short, was so conducted as to bring under the eye an image of the sacrifice which was to be offered to God in expiation.

Under the new covenant, the Church does not have altars or priests. Christ is the true priest who was sacrificed once and for all, for us. The Lord's table replaces the old covenant altar; Christian ministers replace old covenant priests.

But now that the sacrifice has been performed, the Lord has prescribed a different method to us — namely, to transmit the benefit of the sacrifice offered to Him by His Son to His believing people. **The Lord, therefore, has given us a table** at which we may feast, **not an altar** on which a victim may be offered; **He has not consecrated priests to sacrifice, but ministers** to distribute a sacred feast. The more sublime and holy this mystery is, the more religiously and reverently it ought to be treated. Nothing, therefore, is safer than to banish all the boldness of human sense, and adhere solely to what Scripture delivers.

And certainly, if we reflect that it is the Supper of the Lord and not of men, why do we allow ourselves to be turned aside one nail's width from Scripture, by any authority of man or length of prescription? Accordingly, the apostle, in desiring completely to remove the vices which had crept into the Church of Corinth, as the most expeditious method, recalls them to the institution itself, showing that from there a perpetual rule ought to be derived.

14. Wherefore, I conclude, that it is an abominable insult and intolerable blasphemy, as well against Christ as the sacrifice, which, by His death, He performed for us on the cross, for anyone to think of repeating the oblation [the act of offering up Christ], of purchasing the forgiveness of sins, of propitiating God, and obtaining justification. But what else is done in the mass than to make us partakers of the sufferings of Christ by

means of a new oblation? And that there might be no limit to their extravagance, they have deemed it little to say, that it properly becomes a common sacrifice for the whole Church, without adding, that it is at their pleasure to apply it specially to this one or that, as they choose; or rather, to anyone who is willing to purchase their merchandise from them for a price paid (i.e., an indulgence). Moreover, as they could not come up to the estimate of Judas, still, that they might in some way refer to their author, they make the resemblance to consist in the number. He sold for thirty pieces of silver: they, according to the French method of computation, sell for thirty pieces of brass. He did it once: they as often as a purchaser is met with.

We deny that they are priests in this sense — namely, that by such oblations [i.e., sacrifices as are done in the mass] they intercede with God for the people, that by propitiating God they make expiation for sins. **Christ is the only Pontiff and Priest of the New Testament: to Him all priestly offices were transferred, and in Him they closed and terminated.** Even had Scripture made no mention of the eternal priesthood of Christ, yet, as God, after abolishing those ancient sacrifices, appointed no new priest, the argument of the apostle remains invincible, “No man takes this honor unto himself, but he who is called of God, as was Aaron” (Hebrews 5:4).

How, then, can those sacrilegious men, who by their own account are murderers of Christ [i.e., in claiming to sacrifice Christ daily in the mass], dare to call themselves the priests of the living God?

15. There is a most elegant passage in the second book of [the Greek philosopher] Plato's *Republic*. Speaking of ancient expiations, and deriding the foolish confidence of wicked and iniquitous men, who thought that by them, as a kind of veils, they concealed their crimes from the gods; and, as if they had made a paction [pact] with the gods, indulged themselves more securely, he seems accurately to describe the use of the expiation of the mass, as it exists in the world in the present day.

All know that it is unlawful to defraud and circumvent another. To do injustice to widows, to pillage pupils [students], to molest the poor, to seize the goods of others by wicked arts, to get possession of any man's succession by fraud and perjury, to oppress by violence and tyrannical terror, all admit to be impious. How then do so many, as if assured of impunity, dare to do all those things? Undoubtedly, if we properly consider, we will find that the only thing which gives them so much courage is, that by the sacrifice of the mass as a price paid, they trust that they will satisfy God, or at least will easily find a means of transacting with Him.

Plato next proceeds to deride the gross stupidity of those who think by such expiations to redeem the punishments which they must otherwise suffer after death. And what is meant by anniversaries and the greater part of masses in the present day, but just that those who through life have been the most cruel tyrants, or most rapacious plunderers, or adepts in all kinds of wickedness, may, as if redeemed at this price, escape the fire of purgatory?

16. Under the other kind of sacrifice, which we have called eucharistic [i.e., the Lord's Supper], are included all the offices of charity, by which, while we embrace our brethren, we honor the Lord Himself in His members; in short, all our prayers, praises, thanksgivings, and every act of worship which we perform to God. All these depend on the greater sacrifice with which we dedicate ourselves, soul and body, to be a holy temple to the Lord. For it is not enough that our external acts be framed to obedience, but we must dedicate and consecrate first ourselves, and, secondly, all that we have, so

that all which is in us may be subservient to His glory, and be stirred up to magnify it.

This kind of sacrifice has nothing to do with appeasing God, with obtaining remission of sins, with procuring justification, but is wholly employed in magnifying and extolling God, since it cannot be grateful and acceptable to God unless at the hand of those who, having received forgiveness of sins, have already been reconciled and freed from guilt. This is so necessary to the Church, that it cannot be dispensed with. Therefore, it will endure forever, so long as the people of God shall endure, as we have already seen above from the prophet. For in this sense we may understand the prophecy, "From the rising of the sun, even unto the going down of the same, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering: for My name shall be great among the heathen, said the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 1:11); so far are we from doing away with this sacrifice.

Thus Paul beseeches us by the mercies of God, to present our bodies "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God," our "reasonable service" (Romans 12:1). Here he speaks very significantly when he adds, that this service is reasonable, for he refers to the spiritual mode of worshipping God, and tacitly opposes it to the carnal sacrifices of the Mosaic Law. Thus to do good and communicate are called sacrifices with which God is well pleased (Hebrews 13:16). Thus the kindness of the Philippians in relieving Paul's want is called "an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18); and thus all the good works of believers are called spiritual sacrifices.

17. And why do I enumerate? This form of expression is constantly occurring in Scripture. No, even while the people of God were kept under the external tutelage of the law, the prophets clearly expressed that under these carnal sacrifices there was a reality which is common both to the Jewish people and the Christian Church. For this reason David prayed, "Let my prayer ascend forth before You as incense" (Psalm 141:2). And Hosea gives the name of "calves of the lips" (Hosea 14:3) to thanksgivings, which David elsewhere calls "sacrifices of praise;" the apostle, imitating him, speaks of offering "the sacrifice of praise," which he explains to mean, "the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name" (Hebrews 13:15).

This kind of sacrifice is indispensable in the Lord's Supper, in which, while we show forth His death, and give Him thanks, **we offer nothing but the sacrifice of praise**. From this office of sacrificing, **all Christians are called "a royal priesthood,"** because by Christ we offer that sacrifice of praise of which the apostle speaks, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name (1 Peter 2:9; Hebrews 13:15).

We do not appear with our gifts in the presence of God without an intercessor. Christ is our Mediator, by whose intervention we offer ourselves and our all to the Father; **He is our High Priest**, who, having entered into the upper sanctuary, opens up an access for us; **He is the altar on which we lay our gifts**, that whatever we do attempt, we may attempt in Him; He it is, I say, who "has made us kings and priests unto God and His Father" (Revelation 1:6).

The mass is not the Lord's Supper; rather, it is an abomination, a great deception, a fatal vortex.

18. What remains but for the blind to see, the deaf to hear, children even to perceive this abomination of the mass, which, held forth in a golden cup, has so intoxicated all the kings and nations of the earth, from the highest to the lowest; so struck them with stupor

and giddiness, that, duller than the lower animals, they have placed the vessel of their salvation in this fatal vortex.

Certainly Satan never employed a more powerful engine to assail and storm the kingdom of Christ. This is the Helen for whom the enemies of the truth in the present day fight with so much rage, fury, and atrocity; and truly the Helen with whom they commit spiritual whoredom, the most execrable of all.

I am not here laying my little finger on those gross abuses by which they might pretend that the purity of their sacred mass is profaned; on the base traffic which they ply; the sordid gain which they make; the rapacity with which they satiate their greed. I only indicate, and that in few and simple terms, how very sacred the sanctity of the mass is, how well it has for several ages deserved to be admired and held in veneration! It were a greater work to illustrate these great mysteries as they deserve, and I am unwilling to meddle with their obscene impurities, which are daily before the eyes and faces of all, that it may be understood that **the mass, taken in the most choice form in which it can be exhibited, without any appendages, teems from head to foot with all kinds of impiety, blasphemy, idolatry, and sacrilege.**

19. My readers have here a compendious view of all that I have thought it of importance to know concerning these two sacraments [i.e., Baptism and the Lord's Supper], which have been delivered to the Christian Church, to be used from the beginning of the new dispensation to the end of the world.

Baptism being a kind of entrance into the Church, an initiation into the faith, and the Lord's Supper **the constant aliment** by which Christ spiritually feeds his family of believers.

Wherefore, as there is but one God, one faith, one Christ, one Church, which is His body, so Baptism is one, and is not repeated. But **the Supper is ever and presently dispensed**, to teach us, that those who are once allured into the Church are constantly fed by Christ.

Besides these two, no other has been instituted by God, and no other ought to be recognized by the assembly of the faithful. That sacraments are not to be instituted and set up by the will of men, is easily understood by him who remembers what has been above with sufficient plainness expounded — namely, that the sacraments have been appointed by God to instruct us in His promise, and testify His goodwill towards us; and who, moreover, considers, that the Lord has no counselor (Isaiah 40:13; Romans 11:34); who can give us any certainty as to His will, or assure us how He is disposed towards us, what He is disposed to give, and what to deny? From this it follows, that no one can set forth a sign which is to be a testimonial of His will, and of some promise. He alone can give the sign, and bear witness to Himself. I will express it more briefly, perhaps in homelier, but also in clearer terms, — There never can be a sacrament without a promise of salvation. All men collected into one cannot, of themselves, give us any promise of salvation, and, therefore, they cannot, of themselves, give out and set up a sacrament.

20. With these two, therefore, let the Christian Church be contented, and not only not admit or acknowledge any third at present, but not even desire or expect it even until the end of the world. For though to the Jews were given, besides His ordinary sacraments, others differing somewhat according to the nature of the times (as the manna, the water gushing from the rock, the brazen serpent, and the like), by this variety they were

reminded not to stop short at such figures, the state of which could not be durable, but to expect from God something better, to endure without decay and without end.

Our case is very different. To us Christ has been revealed. In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3), in such richness and abundance, that **to ask or hope for any new addition to these treasures is truly to offend God and provoke Him against us.**

It behooves us to hunger after Christ only, to seek Him, look to Him, learn of Him, and learn again, until the arrival of the great day on which the Lord will fully manifest the glory of His kingdom, and exhibit Himself as He is to our admiring eye (1 John 3:2). And, **for this reason, this age of ours is designated in Scripture by the last hour, the last days, the last times, that no one may deceive himself with the vain expectation of some new doctrine or revelation.** Our heavenly Father, who “at various times, and in diverse manners, spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us” by His beloved Son, who alone can manifest, and, in fact, has fully manifested, the Father, insofar as is of importance to us, while we now see Him through a mirror.

Now, since men have been denied the power of making new sacraments in the Church of God, it were to be wished, that in those [sacraments] which are of God, there should be the least possible admixture of human invention. For just as when water is infused, the wine is diluted, and when leaven is put in, the whole mass is leavened, so **the purity of the ordinances of God is impaired, whenever man makes any addition of his own.** And yet we see how far the sacraments as at present used have degenerated from their genuine purity. There is everywhere more than enough of pomp, ceremony, and gesticulation, while no account is taken, or mention made, of the word of God, without which, even the sacraments themselves are not sacraments. No, in such a crowd, the very ceremonies ordained by God cannot raise their head, but lie as it were oppressed. In Baptism, as we have elsewhere justly complained, how little is seen of that which alone ought to shine and be conspicuous there, I mean Baptism itself? The Supper was altogether buried when it was turned into the Mass. The utmost is, that it is seen once a year, but in a garbled, mutilated, and lacerated form.