

Hosea on Holiness

From John Calvin's Commentary on the Prophet Hosea¹

Hosea 3:1 "Then the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the LORD for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans."

Scripture Alone and Historic Christianity

This strange disposition is ever dominant in the superstitious—that they wander here and there after their own devices and have nothing fixed in them. Lest, then, such charms deceive us, **let us learn to cleave firmly and constantly to the word of the Lord.**

The Roman Catholics of Calvin's day claimed that Biblical Christianity was a new, novel religion.

Indeed the Papists of this day boast of their ancientness, when they would create an ill-will towards us; as though the religion we follow were new and lately invented. But we see how modern their superstitions are; for a passion for them bubbles up continually, and they have nothing that remains constant. And no wonder, because the eternal truth of God is regarded by them as of no value.

God calls us to live by every word of God—to live by Scripture alone.

If, then, we desire to restrain this depraved lust, which the Prophet condemns in the Israelites, **let us so adhere to the word of the Lord, that no novelty may captivate us and lead us astray.**

Hosea 13:2 "And now they sin more and more, and have made for themselves molded images, idols of their silver, according to their understanding; all of it is the work of craftsmen. They say of them, "Let the men who sacrifice kiss the calves!"

But what the Prophet adds ought to be especially observed, *According to their own understanding.* Here he severely reproves the Israelites, because they had not subordinated all their thoughts to God, but, on the contrary, followed what pleased themselves. It was then *according to their own invention.* The word which the Prophet uses is not unsuitable, though "understanding," the word which the Prophet adopts, is among the Hebrews taken in a good sense. But what is treated of here is the worship of God, with respect to which all the prudence, all the reason, all the wisdom of men, and, in short, all their senses, ought to be suspended. For if, in this case, they of themselves adopt any thing, be it ever so little, they inevitably corrupt the worship of God. How so? Because obedience, we know, is better than all sacrifices. This then is the rule, as to the right worship of God—that men must become foolish, that they must not allow themselves to be wise, but that they are only to give ear to God, and to follow what He commands. But when men's presumption intrudes, so that they devise a new mode of worship, they then depart from the true God, and worship mere idols.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 125, 165-166, 170-174, 452, 454-455.

“Reformed tradition” is an oxymoron. Manmade tradition is never appropriate.

The Prophet then by the word, *understanding*, condemns here whatever pleases the judgement and reason of men; as though he said, **“The true rule of religion, as to the worship of God, is, that nothing human is to be mingled, that no one is to bring forward what is his own, or what seems good to himself.”** In short, the understanding of men is here opposed to the command of God; as though the Prophet said, “One great difference between the true worship of God and all false and degenerated modes of worship, is **obedience to the word of God**; if we be wise according to our own judgement, all we do is corrupt.” How so? **Because whatever men devise of themselves is a pollution of divine worship.** Hence Paul, in Colossians 2, refutes all the fancies of men by this one argument, “They are,” he says, “the traditions of men, though they may have the show of wisdom.”

We now apprehend what the Prophet meant, and why he added the word “understanding;” it was, that the Israelites might learn, that all the worship which was in use among them, was perverted and vicious; for it was not founded on the command of God, but flowed from a different source, even the understanding of men. It then follows, as we have said before, that **in religion nothing is to be attempted by us, but we are to follow this one law in worshipping God — simply to obey His word. . . .**

Human inventions and traditions are often strange and absurd.

But we learn from this and similar places, that we ought to notice those absurdities in which wretched men involve themselves, when they are lost in their own devices, after having left the word of God. For this word is to be to us as a bridle to keep us from going astray with them in their monstrous devices; for when we observe these delirious things which even nature itself abhors, it is evident that God thereby restrains and preserves us as it were by His outstretched hand. With this design the Prophet now shows how stupid the Israelites were, and how prodigious was their frenzy when they kissed the calves with great reverence, and also sacrificed men.

So at this day with respect to those under the Papacy, we ought not only to adopt this argument, that they departed from the true God when they sought for themselves new and strange modes of worship, without the warrant of His word, but we ought also to bear in mind that their puerilities are to be ascribed to the same cause. And we see how God has given them up to a reprobate mind, so that they throw aside no kinds of absurdities. And this consideration, as I have said, will serve to awaken those who are as yet healable, when they understand that they have been infatuated; having been in this manner admonished, they may return to the right way.

And that we ourselves may give thanks to God, and detest more and more that filth in which we were for a time involved, and remember that there is nothing more to be dreaded than that the Lord should allow us loose reins, the very example of His vengeance as to all idolaters is made known to us; for as soon as they departed from the pure worship of God, they gave themselves up, as we have stated, to the most shameful stupidity.

Hosea 4:13 “They offer sacrifices on the mountaintops, and burn incense on the hills, under oaks, poplars, and terebinths, because their shade *is* good. Therefore your daughters commit harlotry, and your brides commit adultery.”

Pictures in Worship and Church Buildings

It seemed apparently a laudable thing in the Israelites to build altars in many places; for frequent attendance at the temples might have stirred them up the more in God's worship.

Such is the plea of the Papists for filling their temples with pictures; they say, "We are everywhere reminded of God wherever we turn our eyes; and this is very profitable."

So also it might have seemed to the Israelites a pious work, to set up God's worship on hills and on tops of mountains and under every tall tree. But God repudiated the whole; He would not be in this manner worshipped. In fact, we see that He was grievously displeased. He says, that the faith pledged to Him was thus violated; He says, that the people basely committed fornication.

Though the Prophet's doctrine is at this day by no means plausible in the world, so that hardly one in ten embraces it; we shall yet contend [dispute] in vain with the Spirit of God. Nothing then is better than to hear our Judge; and He pronounces all fictitious [false] modes of worship, however much adorned by a specious guise [deceptively attractive; having the appearance of truth], to be adulteries and whoredoms.

And we hence learn that **good intention**, with which the Papists so much please themselves, is the mother of all harlotry and of all filthiness.

How so? Because **it is a high offense against heaven to depart from the word of the Lord**. For God had commanded sacrifices and incense to be nowhere offered to Him but at Jerusalem. The Israelites transgressed this command. But obedience to God, as it is said in 1 Samuel 15, is of more value with Him than all sacrifices.

The Prophet also distinctly excludes a device in which the ungodly and hypocrites take great delight: *good*, he says, *was its shade*; that is, they pleased themselves with such devices. So Paul says that there is a show of wisdom in the inventions and ordinances of men (Colossians 2:23).

Hence, when men undertake voluntary acts of worship—which the Greeks call superstitions, being nothing else than will-worship [humanly-invented worship]—when men undertake this or that to do honor to God, there appears to them a show of wisdom, but before God it is abomination only.

At this practice the Prophet evidently glances, when he says that the shade of the poplar, or of the oak, or of terebinth tree, was good; for the ungodly and the hypocrites imagined their worship to be approved of God, and that they surpassed the Jews, who worshipped God only in one place: "Our land is full of altars, and memorials of God present themselves everywhere." But when they thought that they had gained the highest glory by their many altars, the Prophet says, that the shade indeed was good, but that it only pleased harlots, who would not acknowledge their baseness.

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, that inasmuch as we are so disposed and inclined to all kinds of errors, to so many and so various forms of superstitions, and as Satan also ceases not to lay in wait for us, and spreads before us his many snares—O grant, that we may be so preserved in obedience to You by the teaching of Your word, that we may never turn here and there, either to

the right hand or to the left, but continue in that pure worship, which You have prescribed, so that we may plainly testify that You are indeed our Father by continuing under the protection of Your only-begotten Son, whom You have given to be our pastor and ruler to the end. Amen.

Hosea 4:15 " Though you, Israel, play the harlot, let not Judah offend. Do not come up to Gilgal, nor go up to Beth Aven, nor swear an oath, *saying*, 'As the LORD lives'. . .

The Contagion of False Religion

We here see first, how difficult it is for those to continue untouched without any stain, who come in contact with pollutions and defilements. This is the case with any one that is living among Papists; he can hardly keep himself entire for the Lord; for vicinity, as we find, brings contagion. ["Bad company corrupts good morals", 1 Corinthians 15:33.]

The Israelites were separated from the Jews, and yet we see that the Jews were corrupted by their diseases and vices. There is, indeed, nothing we are so disposed to do as to forsake true religion; inasmuch as there is naturally in us a perverse lust for mixing with it some false and ungodly forms of worship; and everyone in this respect is a teacher to himself. What then is likely to take place, when Satan on the other hand stimulates us? **Let all then who are neighbors to idolaters beware, lest they contract any of their pollutions.**

We further see, that the guilt of those who have been rightly taught is not to be extenuated [excused] when they associate with the blind and the unbelieving. Though the Israelites boasted of the name of God, they were yet then alienated from pure doctrine, and had been long sunk in the darkness of errors. There was no religion among them; in fact, they had hardly a single pure spark of divine light.

The Prophet now brings this charge against the Jews, that they differed not from the Israelites, and yet God had to that time carried before them the torch of light; for He suffered not sound doctrine to be extinguished at Jerusalem, nor throughout the whole of Judea. The Jews, by not profiting through this singular kindness of God, were doubly guilty.

This is the reason why the Prophet now says, *Though Israel plays the harlot, yet let not Judah offend. . . .*

I return to the reproof he gives to the Jews: he condemns them for leaving the legitimate altar and running to profane places, and coveting those strange modes of worship which had been invented by the will or fancy of men. "What have you to do," he says, "with Gilgal or Bethel? Has not God appointed a sanctuary for you at Jerusalem? Why do you not worship there, where He Himself invites you?"

We hence see that a comparison is to be understood here between Gilgal and Bethel on the one hand, and the temple, built by God's command on mount Zion, in Jerusalem, on the other. Moreover, this reproof applies to many in our day. So to those who sagaciously [with wisdom] consider the state of things in our age, the Papists appear to be like the Israelites; for their apostasy is notorious enough: there is nothing sound among them; the whole of their religion is rotten; everything is depraved. But as the Lord has chosen us peculiarly to himself, **we must beware, lest they should draw us to themselves, and entangle us: for, as we have said, we must ever fear contagion; inasmuch as nothing is more easy than to become infected with their vices, since our nature is to vices ever inclined.**

We are further reminded **how foolish and frivolous is the excuse of those who, being satisfied with the examples of the Fathers [i.e., church tradition], pass by the word of God, and think themselves released from every command, when they follow the holy Fathers [i.e., tradition].**

Jacob was indeed, among others, worthy of imitation; and yet we learn from this place, that the pretense that his descendants made for worshipping God in Bethel was of no avail. **Let us then know that we cannot be certain of being right, except when we obey the Lord's command, and attempt nothing according to men's fancy, but follow only what He bids.**

It must also be observed, that a fault is not extenuated [excused] when things, now perverted, have proceeded from a good and approved origin. As for instance the Papists, when their superstitions are condemned, ever set up this shield, "O! this has arisen from a good source." But what sort of thing is it? If indeed we judge of it by what it is now, we clearly see it to be an impious abomination, which they excuse by the plea that it had a good and holy beginning.

Thus in baptism we see how various and how many deprivations they have mixed together. Baptism has indeed its origin in the institution of Christ. But no permission has been given to men to deface it by so many additions. The origin then of baptism affords the Papists no excuse, but on the contrary renders double their sin; for they have, by a profane audacity, contaminated what the Son of God has appointed.

But there is in their mass a much greater abomination. For the mass, as we know, is in no respect the same with the holy supper of our Lord. There are at least some things remaining in baptism; but the mass is in nothing like Christ's holy supper. And yet the Papists boast that the mass is the supper. Be it so, that it had crept in, and that through the craft of Satan, and also through the wickedness or depravity of men. But whatever may have been its beginning, it does not wipe away the extreme infamy that belongs to the mass. For, as it is well known, they abolish by it the only true sacrifice of Christ; they ascribe to their own devices the expiation which was made by the death of the Son of God.

And here we have not only to contend with the Papists, but also with those wicked triflers, who proudly call themselves Nicodemians. For these indeed deny that they come to the mass, because they have any regard for the Papistic figment; but because they say that there is set forth a commemoration of Christ's supper and of His death.

Since Bethel was formerly turned into Beth Aven [the house of iniquity], what else at this day is the mass? **Let us then ever take heed, that whatever the Lord has instituted may remain in its own purity, and not degenerate; otherwise we shall be guilty, as it has been said, of the impious audacity of those who have changed the truth into a lie.**

We now understand the design of what the Prophet teaches, and to what purposes it may be applied.

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, that since You have at this time condescended in Your mercy to gather us to Your Church, and to enclose us within the boundaries of Your word, by which You preserve us in the true and right worship of Your majesty—O grant, that we may continue contented in this obedience to You. And though Satan may, in many ways, attempt to draw us here and there, and we be also ourselves, by nature, inclined to evil, O grant, that being confirmed in

faith, and united to You by that sacred bond, we may yet constantly abide under the guidance of Your word, and thus cleave to Christ Your only-begotten Son, who has joined us forever to Himself, that we may never by any means turn aside from You, but be, on the contrary, confirmed in the faith of His gospel, until at length He will receive us all into His kingdom. Amen.