God or Baal

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Two Letters on the Reformation of Worship and Pastoral Service

John Calvin

Translated by David C. Noe
Foreword by Bruce Gordon

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FOR

Charles Biggs

Reformed pastor, brother, friend

Primum sane iustitiae fundamentum est Dei cultus: quo euerso, reliqua omnia iustitiae membra, velut diuulsi collapsique aedificii partes, lacera & dissipata sunt. (John Calvin, *Institutes* [1559], 2.8.11)

(The primary foundation of righteousness is of course God's worship. When that is overturned all the remaining elements of righteousness, like the parts of a ruined and fallen building, lie torn and scattered.)

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Foreword

"They will know that a prophet has been among them," writes John Calvin, echoing Ezekiel's words to his own readers. That prophet was himself. For a man only just emerging from the obscurity of his refuge in Basel with the publication of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536 and newly arriving in Geneva, these words to his countrymen could not have been more coruscating. There is no greater threat than God's fury "against those who desert His camp." Such abandonment, Calvin laments, was precisely what those supposed Christians had done by claiming the Spirit while outwardly conforming to the old religion. Most abominable was their continued presence at the worst of idolatries, the Mass. Calvin grants that all are haunted by hesitancy—that is the state of fallen humanity—but there can be no license for sin: tenderness of conscience never whitewashes disobedience to God's ordinances, every one of which is holy. Worst of all are those who knowingly choose compromise. They "march toward their own destruction."

At heart, Calvin seeks to address the dilemma faced by his countrymen who profess the gospel in a hostile land. How are they to live in a society where their convictions are violently threatened by adherents to false religion? What does it mean to be persecuted for the faith? Does the struggle for survival permit any form of accommodation? The Genevan reformer is entirely sensible of the demands placed on his people "from which the discipline of true religion has been exiled." The Frenchman himself had chosen flight over persecution or martyrdom. He was neither Jan Hus nor Martin Luther, who risked their lives at Constance and Worms, respectively. The German monk had returned home; the

Bohemian priest had not. Calvin knew their histories well and regarded both as giants of the faith. In 1537 he faced a serious conundrum. He had left France as a young man without family or any particular connections. Were his actions exemplary for those in his native land who might lose everything for their faith? With what authority could he speak to their decisions? He was a foreigner in Geneva, having arrived only the previous year and having been coerced into staying by righteous prophet-turned-friend Guillaume Farel. Calvin had achieved rapid notoriety with his *Institutes*, but little more. He was neither ordained nor regarded by the leading reformers as a principal actor in the Reformation.

We should be astonished by the audacity of these two letters, brimming with confidence that they will have an impact on readers far beyond those to whom they are addressed. Their tone varies considerably: the first is a warm admonition to Calvin's friend Nicolas Duchemin, while the second is for the reviled apostate Gérard Roussel. Yet what makes these works so remarkable is not mere brazen opprobrium but rather Calvin's frequent and acute insights on the mentalities of those under the cross. As he does so frequently in his sermons, letters, commentaries, and doctrinal tracts, the reformer demonstrates a striking sensitivity to the delicate religious conscience. His reputation for denunciation and correction was quickly established during his life and has hardly been dislodged by posterity; we easily find Calvin the censorious, thundering preacher and pastor. But these letters point us to a subtler, more intriguing perspective. His judgments, however scabrous, do not strike home because he had no sense of human weakness or of the complexities of actually living the Christian life. Rather, Calvin was a lawyer, and although by the time of these texts he had not yet learned the craft of a pastor, he was well aware of the labyrinth of emotions and conflicting impulses. When we go beyond the crash of the hammer, we find not a nicer, kinder Calvin but a man with a keen sense of human sensibilities. He observes, for example, the distinction between deceit and idolatry, noting that some believe themselves faithful if they simply refrain from veneration of images. That is not enough, he counters, for "they who commingle that same faith with impure and wicked rites violate, pollute, and tear it to shreds." In a wonderful turn of phrase, Calvin

reflects on the human penchant for equivocation: "It is like someone saying we should not despise stealing and murder just because some people today rail very harshly against these vices while ignoring adultery, perjury, and blasphemy!"

It has been mooted that Calvin, living among the Swiss in these early years, was influenced by the Reformed theology from Zurich and Basel. That is possible, but it is not our immediate concern here. What is striking, however, is his emphasis on the relationship between piety and purity. In his insistence that the Christian life admits of no compromise with that which pollutes the mind or body, Calvin closely follows the words of Huldrych Zwingli, who often invoked Leviticus 11:44: "For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth." Calvin carefully parses possible human interpretations or qualifications of this command while refusing to relinquish the imperative force of the biblical injunction. As he would for decades to come, Calvin looks to the exemplary character of Paul, with whom he closely identified. Like the apostle, Calvin saw himself as cutting off "every avenue of retreat" when he anticipated "the objections of those who could claim as an excuse that an idol is nothing."

Lest we are tempted to view Calvin's first letter as merely a diatribe against ungodliness, we need to be sensitive to complex ethical questions embedded in his words. Notable are his concerns with the nature of community and the obligations of individual Christians. Although by 1537 he had had little contact with Anabaptists (he would soon, in Strasbourg), Calvin was fully aware of the calamity that had recently taken place in Münster, from which both Protestants and Catholics recoiled in horror. The Frenchman sought to make a distinction between being pure and living in a mixed community inhabited by believers and nonbelievers. The faithful are to separate themselves spiritually but not physically from society and are to continue to bear witness in their lives and avoid occasions for offense. Yet, although all are commanded to live faithfully, the nature of that call varies significantly. Calvin's sense of the preaching office, which he would come to hold in such regard after his time in Strasbourg with Martin Bucer, is already evident. Preachers are

to perform the public offices of the church by pronouncing the Word of God and celebrating the sacraments. The duty of individual men and women is to evince rectitude in their lives. They are not charged with the propagation of the gospel. In a climate of persecution, Calvin had raised the question of the degree to which the faithful were to make public their profession of faith and thereby risk retribution. For him, personal piety extends to fidelity in private and rejection of public compromise of true religion. False ceremonies are to be avoided "like a poisonous snake," and those who bow the knee to idols are "pretenders." He invites his readers to imagine a situation all too real: "Therefore, let us weigh for a moment what it means that you participate in the performance of the mysteries of the Mass and stand among the worshipers like one enraptured, so that it does not seem you consider its inviolable grandeur a cause for derision and contempt."

Another distinction Calvin makes with far-reaching implications for the development of the Reformed tradition is between things essential and things indifferent. Again, there can be no confusion. He does not permit any form of spiritual gymnastics in which one receives the host at Mass while imagining the meal to be an act of remembrance in line with evangelical teaching. That, he repeatedly claims, is dishonest and idolatrous. At the same time, however, one should not become so entangled in the externals of religion that it is no longer possible to distinguish the essential from the ephemeral or adiaphoron. Echoing an argument he would make in the dedication of his Romans commentary, Calvin allows for difference and even a degree of disagreement in forms of worship and biblical interpretation. On crucial matters, however, one must not budge, and the idolatrous nature of the Mass is nonnegotiable.

It is easy to forget the context within which Calvin writes. He is responding to a public audience but in particular to a friend who has sought his guidance on matters of faith and marriage. The Frenchman demonstrates the importance of friendship, a spiritual and emotional bond he valued all his life. We find here neither the self-revelation nor the emotional depths of Luther, but the commitments of *amicitia* ran deep for Calvin. Yet even in his most intimate relations, he never forgets his calling: "So now you have the advice you asked of me, or rather you

have it from the Lord through my hand." Following his conversion, Calvin was absolutely confident in his special calling to his age, confident that he spoke with the voice of the prophets and apostles. Nevertheless, the Frenchman does acknowledge that Duchemin might object that Calvin is able to speak with such certainty from behind the walls of a Protestant city.

If the letter to Duchemin is suffused with friendship, he writes to Gérard Roussel as the fallen angel. In Calvin's eyes, Roussel could hardly have been more repulsive if he had joined the ranks of the Sorbonne theologians. Roussel—a member of the Meaux Circle with its humanist, reformist sympathies—had chosen the path of ecclesiastical preferment and had become a bishop. For Calvin, there was no worse example of acknowledging the truth only to embrace darkness, and the Frenchman's prose is suitably bitter, sarcastic, and venomous. Nothing could be more acidic than Calvin's mocking congratulations to Roussel on being "Fortune's favorite son." He then proceeds to contrast the true office of a bishop as a shepherd with the venal ambitions of his erstwhile friend: "I cannot adequately express my shock at the sort of stupor which has gripped you." Whereas Calvin is sympathetic if stern with Duchemin, acknowledging the temptations placed on the path to piety, he pours only scorn on the bishop, drawing from an impressive armory of insults. We find, for example, "What immunity from blood will you boast, since from your mouth hardly even one syllable has ever been heard that would reveal, even obscurely, God's will on a single point?" or "Bid farewell right now to such shrewd duplicity and feigned sophistication!"

Calvin's letter to Roussel is a full-throated assault on good intentions. The polemic is all the more vitriolic on account of the reasonableness of the bishop and other ecclesiastics in France committed to reform of the church. Calvin understood that his position was in the minority and that he was arguing against the greater number who sought to remain within a Roman Catholic Church cleansed of abuses. Had this not been the path of the recently deceased Erasmus? In 1537 the reformer was not arguing from a position of strength. He was fully aware that Roussel, not Calvin, represented the broader swathe of religious sensibilities in his native land. That is why the arrow had to be carefully aimed. Calvin

was a relative nobody, while Roussel enjoyed the patronage of the king's sister, Marguerite of Navarre. In this confrontation, we should not imagine Calvin the superior figure. He was a refugee heretic attacking a leading figure of the Roman Catholic Church. He contrasts himself to Roussel as the one prepared to fight all evil rather than be complicit for the sake of righting only a few wrongs. The letter to the bishop embodies the struggle of Calvin's life to implement his vision of Reformed Christianity against seemingly reasonable alternatives. In the end, his bitterest foe would be the advocate of toleration, Sebastian Castellio.

David Noe's elegant and precise translation has made available letters that reveal a great deal about the young John Calvin. At this point, the Frenchman was yet to emerge as a leading reformer and doctor of the church. These were uncertain and torrid years that led to expulsion from Geneva and further exile. There was still much to learn from his mentors, notably Martin Bucer and Philipp Melanchthon, but the contours of Calvin's thought had begun to form in relief. The religious situation in France would dominate the rest of his life, and he would struggle to impose his ideals on men and women forced into dire circumstances to preserve their faith. Calvin's uncompromising position on fidelity to the gospel was countered by other voices offering a milder balm. In these early years Calvin was already being required to face the realities of religious reform in which doctrine was enmeshed in the world of politics and war. That would be his life for the following thirty years.

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faithful wife, Tara, and my children, Freddie, Jillian (who helped with some French), Lucius, and Sophia. Their patience, love, and help sustain me always. As the psalmist says, "Deus habitare faciens solitarios in familia."

Introduction

This introduction will first rehearse some key moments in Calvin's early biography and the circumstances of composing the *Two Letters*. Then follows a short examination of the character and history of Nicodemism. We will then compare some salient features of Calvin's Latinity in these letters to works both before and after them. This will include looking at the 1536 *Institutes* and a personal letter (i.e., one not meant for broad distribution) from the same decade. Finally, we will explain the editorial subject headings included in the *Two Letters*.

Calvin's Early Life and the Composition of the *Two Letters*

On August 23, 1535, a young Frenchman[1] named John Calvin put the final touches on the bold prefatory letter he had written to his revered sovereign, Francis I of France. This address was an eloquent plea for toleration as well as a defense of the burgeoning Protestant faith within the ancien régime. The defense itself sounded themes familiar since the time of Luther,[2] particularly that the Reformation was not a revolutionary or

1. John Calvin (Jean Cauvin) was born in Noyon, a city of the region of Picardy, in 1509. For details of his life, consult especially the biographies of Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 2009); Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. Wallace M. McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); and Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987). The well-known events of Calvin's life have been covered exhaustively in these important volumes, and it is not my intention here to repeat their work. Nevertheless, the *Two Letters* will lack proper context without rehearsing in briefest outline some of the highlights prior to 1537.

2. For a thorough examination of Luther's motives and the early history of the

reactionary protest but a studied and deliberate return to the sources of historic Christianity from which the Roman Church of the time, in Calvin's view, had seriously deviated. It was above all a contest for the Scriptures and for Augustine. As Calvin argued, "When Paul desired that all prophecy conform to the analogy of faith, he laid down a very sure measure by which scriptural interpretation must be tested. And so if we conduct our arguments according to this rule of faith, the victory is at hand."[3]

Although the dispute had to be conducted primarily, Calvin claimed, according to the analogy of faith, the support of the church fathers was also zealously canvassed. This is why in the prefatory letter Calvin repeatedly cites the testimony of Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and others to demonstrate the weakness of his contemporary opponents' position. "Pater erat, Patres erant, Pater erat, alius pater, ex patribus erat qui negavit, patres erant, pater erat, pater erat, pater erat qui negavit, pater erat qui censuit, Patres omnes." (There was a father, there were fathers, there was a father, another father, one of the fathers denied, there were fathers, there was a father, there was a father, there was a father who denied, there was a father who held, all the fathers.)[4] These words are a common refrain of the letter, and the cumulative effect is clear: Calvin did not intend to yield at all either on the primary, scriptural basis for argument or on the secondary repository of authority.[5]

Reformation, see Martin Brecht's *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521*, trans. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

3. John Calvin, *Christianae religionis institutio, totam fere pietatis summa, & quicquid est in doctrina salutis cognitu necessarium. Complectens; omnibus pietatis studiosis lectu dignissimum opus, ac recens editum* (Basel, 1536), 10. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

4. Calvin, *Christianae religionis institutio*, 21–23.

5. Calvin's reliance on Augustine, and confidence in his support, is memorably expressed in the dictum "Augustinus totus noster." (Augustine is all ours.) See Calvin, *Christianae religionis institutio*, 3.4.33, 4.17.28; and *De Praedestinatione*, in *Calvini Opera Database 1.0*, ed. H. J. Selderhuis (Apeldoorn: Instituut voor Reformatieonderzoek, 2013), 8.266, accessed at the H. Henry Meeter Center at Calvin College. See also Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 38ff. The subject of Calvin's reliance on Augustine is vast and has been extensively canvassed. In sum, no other author outside the Scriptures is cited as

In some ways, although the *Institutes* of 1536 was the first of five editions and the beginning of his career as an internationally influential reformer, this work marked the end of a long process.[6] During this time Calvin moved from being a devout Roman Catholic and the holder of a benefice in Noyon to an avowed Protestant and hunted refugee. Calvin had arrived in Paris in 1521 as an eager student of Latin a mere twelve years old. Over the next decade and a half, he would encounter many of the leading figures of French society and culture and interact with persons of great political and religious significance. His father had set him on a course for a career in law, and six years later, in March 1527, Calvin took the rector's oath for the master of arts and traveled to Orléans and Bourges to study law.[7] But his love for literature and his own nation was driving Calvin in an opposite direction. Sometime during the course of legal studies that extended to 1531, it seems to have become Calvin's intention to champion French humanism and gain international fame, to carry on the tradition of men like Guillaume Budé[8] and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples.[9]

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frequently in the *Institutes*, with Bernard of Clairvaux a quite distant second. For Calvin's library and reading practices, including his familiarity with the church fathers, see also Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2005), 135–78.

6. Alexandre Ganoczy provides a very fine and short treatment in "Calvin's Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3–24.

7. In addition to the aforementioned biographies, throughout this section I am also relying on the unpublished remarks of James K. Farge in his March 2017 lecture at Baylor University during the *Calvin Studies Society Colloquium*.

8. For the circumstances of the composition of the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, and Calvin's early relationship to Budé, see Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, 63–65, 110–13. Cottret suggests that Calvin modeled his prefatory letter after similar efforts of the Roman pedagogue Quintilian in his *Institutio*, Erasmus's *Institutio Christiani principis* (1516), and Budé himself in his *De transitu Hellenismi ad Christianismum* of March 1535.

9. This is the context in which to understand the preface Calvin wrote in 1529 (published 1531) to the work of his friend Nicolas Duchemin, addressee of the first of our two letters. Duchemin wrote a counterdefense of his countryman, the celebrated jurist Pierre de l'Estoile, against the attacks of the Italian Andrea Alciati. To this work, titled *Antapologia adversus Aurelium Albucium*, Calvin contributed a preface. For Calvin's ambition, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 22.

At the same time, the prospects for change in worship and doctrine in France were rapidly shifting. In 1525 the so-called Meaux Circle was broken up. This was a group of men and women interested in reform who had gathered around Guillaume Briçonnet, bishop of the city of Meaux from 1516 to 1534. A village twenty-five miles northeast of Paris, Meaux for a time was alive with promise from the Protestant perspective.[10] Members of the informal circle studied the Scriptures in the original languages, in the vernacular, and in new Latin translations by Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Étaples, as well as the works of the church fathers. Briçonnet also sought to reform the piety and behavior of monks under his authority, even as they kept abreast of currents of reform coming from Germany, Switzerland, and Italy and sheltered under the protection of the king's sister, Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549). Although not a supporter of Lutheranism himself, Briçonnet was charged with heresy by the Parliament of Paris, and the group was disbanded in 1525. Many members of the group, however, including Guillaume Farel and Gérard Roussel (briefly sent into exile in Strasbourg), continued efforts at reform.[11] In the aftermath of this unsuccessful attempt, it was unclear whether Francis I would tolerate *Lutherani*[12] in his kingdom or succumb to anti-reform elements originating in the Collège de Montaigu with, among others, the conservative theologian Nöel Beda (1470–1537).[13]

10. The reader should understand this as a post facto evaluation.

11. One of Calvin's later, trenchant opponents, the pastor of Lausanne, Pierre Caroli, was also a part of this group. See Ganoczy, "Calvin's Life," 11.

12. In the early years of reform, this was the generic name for anyone critical of Rome teaching anything similar to Luther's views on justification. It was wrongly applied to many but rightly applied to some, like Bucer, Calvin, and Zwingli, who were in agreement with Luther on several crucial points. Luther himself strongly disliked the term. See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, trans. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994). See also Erik Alexander de Boer and Frans Peter van Stam, eds., *Ioannis Calvini epistolae scripta didactica et polemica*, vol. 4, *Epistolae duae (1537), Deux discours (Oc. 1536)* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2009), xv.

13. For the roles of Beda and Lefèvre in Paris of the 1520s, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 12ff. See also Guy Bedouelle, "Attacks on the Biblical Humanism of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples," in *A Companion to Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 9, ed. Erika Rummel (Leiden: Brill,

In 1529, as the twenty-year-old Calvin's education in law and literature continued, the high-profile French humanist Louis de Berquin was tried and executed at the stake. The interventions of Marguerite were not able to save the aristocratic de Berquin (whose works have almost completely perished) from the anger he provoked among members of the Sorbonne for his Lutheran ideas.[14] Calvin's exact whereabouts at each stage during this period (he moved several times between Paris, Orléans, and Bourges) as well as his view of these events are not known.[15] But it was after these years that he put off a desire for law and sought renown through literature, a change perhaps precipitated by the death of his father, Gérard, in May of 1531. Although apostolic secretary to the bishop of Noyon, Gérard somehow got himself into financial difficulty and was censured by the church. Whether this was an embarrassment to Calvin, like so much of his early years, is also unknown. His father's death is likely tied closely to the question of the date of Calvin's conversion. Nevertheless, Calvin's literary ambitions revived, and in 1532 he published his commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* (*Political Lenience*), a work addressed to Emperor Nero and itself a pointed plea for toleration.[16] But to his great disappointment and chagrin, the humanist, striving effort of the *Commentary*—at considerable personal

2008), 115–41; and James K. Farge "Noël Beda and the Defense of the Tradition," in Rummel, *Biblical Humanism*, 143–64.

14. For the details of de Berquin's death, see Mark A. Lamport, ed., *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 2:70–71.

15. Gordon sounds an excellent cautionary note: "We cannot attach the adolescent Calvin to any of these movements in the 1520s and we know nothing of his religious disposition." *Calvin*, 17.

16. John Calvin, *Joannis Calvini in L. Annaei Senecae Romani senatoris ac philosophi clarissimi, libros duos de Clementia, ad Neronem Caesarem, commentarii* (1532). See the translation by F. L. Battles and André Malan Hugo, *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's "De Clementia"* (Leiden: Brill, 1969); and Louise Salley, "A French Humanist's Chef-D'Oeuvre: The Commentaries on Seneca's 'De Clementia' by John Calvin," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism II* (1968; repr., New York: Garland, 1992). The just ruler, Seneca says, gains more favor from the people through leniency than harsh treatment. This theme obviously played a large role in Calvin's later address to Francis I. For the circumstances of composition with respect to his father's death, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 22ff. For Calvin's debt to Seneca, and ambivalence toward the classical tradition, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 27ff.

cost—made the smallest ripples among European scholars and in no way established Calvin as the future of French humanism.[17]

The next two years witnessed considerably more turmoil in Paris with Nicolas Cop's sermon of November 1, 1533, and the Affair of the Placards nearly a year later in October 1534. Cop had been appointed rector of the University of Paris, and he, along with his brother Michel, was closely connected to Francis's court, as their father, Guillaume, was the king's physician. Both men had studied at the Collège de Montaigu with Calvin, and several attempts have been made to demonstrate that Calvin was the ghostwriter of Cop's address.[18] The text under consideration that day was from Matthew 5, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Whether Cop wrote alone or with Calvin, the sermon had far-reaching implications for French Protestantism. Hostile Parisian ears perceived this address to be Lutheran, and their response led Calvin, Cop, and others to flee the city within a week's time.[19] In flight, Calvin visited his hometown of Noyon that same year, but he came back to Paris under Marguerite's protection at the beginning of 1534.[20] In May he was back in Picardy renouncing his benefices at the Cathedral of Noyon, which at the age of twenty-five marked a decisive break with the ecclesiology of

17. "The sale of the book, which Calvin printed at his own expense, cost him a great deal of suffering.… The future reformer was forced to borrow from Cop or Duchemin." Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, 74. If Ganoczy's speculation that Calvin borrowed from the latter is true, a new layer of complexity is added to the relationship between him and the addressee of the first letter.

18. Cottret finds these unconvincing and provides a good account of some of the issues involved, specifically the existence of a text of the speech in two different hands. These are Cop's, now housed in Strasbourg, and Calvin's own in Geneva. See Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, 74–75. For a fair discussion, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 37–38: "Calvin's own rapid departure from Paris is the most persuasive evidence for the degree he felt himself to be implicated." A short account with translation is given in appendix 3 in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).

19. For the essentially Lutheran nature of the speech, including obvious allusions to Luther himself and also Erasmus, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 37.

20. See Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). See also Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, 76.

the Roman Church. The priesthood and religious life now closed to him, Calvin would need to seek his livelihood elsewhere.

More broadly speaking, efforts to date Calvin's conversion within these years have been notoriously unsuccessful, in large part due to his own unwillingness to speak of himself.[21] Other than some offhand comments in his 1539 reply to Cardinal Sadoleto, the longest autobiographical account Calvin provides of his conversion is in the prefatory letter of July 22, 1557, to his commentary on the Psalms, eighteen years later, in which he says God drove him to teachability by sudden conversion (subita conversione ad docilitatem subegit).[22] Under the secret bridle of God's providence (arcano fraeno), Calvin's course was bent away from the papal superstitions to which he was stubbornly (pertinaciter) devoted and toward a love of pure doctrine. Despite the paucity of evidence as to when this happened (sometime in late 1532 seems a good guess, although there is an argument for much earlier), the event soon bore literary fruit. Calvin's first work as an open evangelical, the *Psychopannychia* of 1534, was a polemic treatise against the materialist soul sleep of the Anabaptists. It was not printed until 1542, but it contained what Gordon calls "a moving defence of the fidelity of the evangelicals to scripture."[23]

The final work to mention prior to the 1536 *Institutes* is the preface Calvin penned in 1535 for the French translation of the Bible completed by his cousin Pierre-Robert Olivétan. Its significance consists primarily in the extent to which Calvin was developing his own voice as a stylist

21. See especially Heiko Oberman's essay "*Initia Calvini*: The Matrix of Calvin's Reformation," in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Professor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 113–54. See also Barbara Pitkin, who cites with at least some skepticism Neuser's view that Calvin's conversion may have been as early as 1532, and that he was part of a "'secret congregation' of evangelicals in Orléans or Paris *and* that the evangelical congregation was at the time too weak to survive opponents' attacks." "Calvin on the Early Reformation," in *Calvin and the Early Reformation*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 219, ed. Brian C. Brewer and David M. Whitford (Brill: Leiden, 2020), 203, emphasis original.

22. See W. Nijenhuis, "Calvin's *'subita conversio,'*" in *Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation*, ed. W. Nijenhuis (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 2:3–23.

23. Gordon, *Calvin*, 43. See also Pitkin, "Calvin on the Early Reformation," 200–224. Especially of note is section 4, "Preface to *Vivere Apud Christum*," 207–8.

(and polemicist) and displaying the true depth of his theology. Both of these were traits much on display in the *Two Letters*.[24]

Following the rapid and unexpected success of the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin initially planned to make good on his intentions for literary retreat, memorably expressed more than twenty years later (again, in the Psalms commentary): "When by that decision I had abandoned my fatherland, I retreated to Germany to enjoy—secreted away in some inconspicuous corner—the peace long denied me."[25] But as Calvin puts it, the thundering zeal of Guillaume Farel prevailed on him while he was providentially lodging in Geneva en route from Paris to Basel in August of 1536,[26] one year after the *Institutes*' completion.[27] Despite a temporary though fruitful time of exile in Strasbourg (1538–1541), Calvin was to make Geneva his home from that point until his death from sepsis in May 1564.

Yet between the completion of the first edition of his *Institutes* in August 1535 and the inauguration of his first residence in Geneva in July 1536, Calvin seems to have begun work on the subject of this volume—namely, the *Epistolae duae*.[28] Calvin's precise whereabouts when he began composing these letters is not known, but the consensus opinion is that he completed drafts while at the court of Renée, Duchess

24. For good accounts of the two prefaces he wrote to the *Serrières Bible* and their significance in the unfolding of Calvin's thought, see Gordon, *Calvin*, 55. Ganoczy also notes, "The one written in Latin contains Calvin's first explicitly antipapist statement. The other, in French, is a magnificent testimony of Christ-centered piety and fervent Bible scholarship" (*Young Calvin*, 130). Another event worth mentioning in this period is the martyrdom of Calvin's friend Étienne de la Forge on February 16, 1535. For Calvin, return to Paris at this time was out of the question. Although a thorough discussion of the tumultuous and pivotal events of 1535 are beyond the scope of this introduction, a concise summary can be found in Wulfert de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin, Expanded Edition: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 8ff.

25. John Calvin, *Eoque consilio relicta patria, in Germaniam concessi, ut in obscuro aliquo angulo abditus, quiete diu negata fruerer. In librum Psalmorum, Ioannis Calvini commentarius* (Geneva: Robert Etienne, 1557), 3.

26. See Gordon, *Calvin*, 64–65; and Ganoczy, *Young Calvin*, 108–9.

27. See Gordon, *Calvin*, 64ff.

28. I have consulted throughout the extended introduction and fine bibliography in de Boer and van Stam, *Epistolae duae (1537), Deux discours*.

of Ferrara (probably in March or April 1536).[29] Renée, the sister of Francis I, had married the Borgian prince Ercole II d'Este seven years before in April of 1528, and she came to the court with her own independent means. Highly sympathetic to Protestantism, she was accused of this faith by her husband in 1554, tried by the Inquisition, and confessed. The penalty was to recant or be permanently separated from her children. She conceded yet continued refusing to attend the Mass. Calvin's long association and correspondence with Renée continued until the time of his death, and she received from him high praise.[30] After completing these drafts in northern Italy, Calvin moved on to Geneva in the summer of 1536 and spent a very busy autumn acclimating himself to his new responsibilities and conflicts as well as apparently revising the draft publication.[31] The short, prefatory letter (included in this volume) to the *Two Letters*, with its famous reference to Ezekiel 33, is dated January 12, 1537.[32]

The Character and History of Nicodemism

With this summative sketch in mind, we turn to Calvin's concept of Nicodemism and what he believed were the obligations incumbent on those who had developed Protestant convictions. The literature on this topic is relatively small (within the body of *Calviniana* writ large) and largely harmonious. Jonathan Reid has done the most to lay out the

29. Ganoczy (*Young Calvin*, 112) cites Wenle (*Calvin und Basel*, 8) in support. See also de Boer and van Stam, *Epistolae duae (1537), Deux discours*, xivff. See especially the note from one of Calvin's secretaries, Nicolas Des Gallars, xxviii. He says Calvin had written the letters "from Italy to some friends." Nicolas Colladon's 1565 reissue of Beza's *Vita Calvini*, cited by de Boer and van Stam on that same page, is taken as a third piece of evidence for location of composition, although the authors point out that Colladon is likely just copying des Gallars.

30. See de Boer and van Stam, *Epistolae duae (1537), Deux discours*, xvi–xx.

31. For the circumstances of Calvin's earliest days in Geneva, see Scott Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18ff.

32. For important bibliographical and other details, see de Greef, *Writings of John Calvin*, 134ff.

Two Letters of John Calvin,

Professor of Sacred Literature in the Church of Geneva, Dealing with Topics Particularly Necessary to Know in This Age

1 Kings 18
"How long will you waver between two convictions?
If the Lord is God, follow Him: but if Baal, follow him."

Basel, 1537

John Calvin to the Pious Reader, Greetings[1]

Although my letters have already produced among several pious men the kind of effect that makes me somewhat more hopeful for the future, nevertheless, it seems to me that I would be doing something worth more than a little effort[2] if I were to make an appeal here, in a few words, to all good men.[3] For I hear that certain close friends of mine, and many

1. This translation is based on three texts. The critical edition of Calvin's extant work, located in volume 33 of Cunitz, Baum, and Eugen, *Corpus Reformatorum* (hereafter *CR*), served as the primary basis. In addition, for the purpose of comparing editorial decisions across the editions of the works (e.g., the insertion of references to Scripture in the text) or for clarifying the sense of the Latin, at times another Latin edition of the *Duae epistulae* (Geneva: Jean Crespin, 1550) and the *Recueil des opuscules: C'est à dire, petits traictez de M. Iean Calvin* (Geneva: Baptiste Pinereul, 1566) were consulted, respectively. These latter works are referred to throughout as the Crespin edition and the French, respectively. The first letter was previously translated and published by Henry Beveridge in 1851, and this work has also been consulted during the translation and occasionally compared in the footnotes. This translation can be found in *Tracts Relating to the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1851), 3:360–411. Translations from French were made with reference to the vocabulary of roughly contemporaneous dictionaries—namely, Jacques Dupuys, *Dictionaire Francois-Latin auquel les mots François, avec les manieres d'user d'iceulx, sont tournez en Latin, reveu & augmenté du tiers par le moyen des divers escripts de M. Nicot* (Paris: Gaspar de Hus, 1573); and Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611). The critical edition edited by Erik Alexander de Boer and Frans Peter van Stam, ed., *Ioannis Calvini epistolae scripta didactica et polemica*, vol. 4, *Epistolae duae (1537), Deux discours (Oc. 1536)* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2009), has also been consulted.

2. This expression "operae pretium facturus" is taken from Livy's preface to his Roman history *Ab urbe condita*. See *Praefatio*, in *Titi Livi ab urbe condita*, ed. Guilelmus Weissenborn and Marutius Müller (Leipzig: In Aedibus B. G. Teubneri, 1902), Lib 1.1. For Calvin's high view of classical authors, see "The Order of the College of Geneva," appendix to W. Stanford Reid, "Calvin and the Founding of the Academy of Geneva," *Westminster Theological Journal* 18, no. 1 (November 1955): 1–33.

3. By the end of 1536, Calvin had produced or coauthored these works: *Praefatio in Nic. chemini antapologiam* (1531); *L. Annei Senecae…libri duo "De clementia"… comentariis illustrati* (1532); *Concio academica…*(1533); *A tous amateurs de Iesus Christ, et de son S.* Évangile (1535); *Caesaribus, Regibus, principibus, gentibusque omnibus Christi imperio subditis* (1535); *Praefatio in Chrysostomi homilias* (1537); and most importantly his *Christianae religionis institutio* (1536). In the year of this letter's writing, he also would write the *Articles concernant l'organisation de l'eglise…à Genève, confessio de Trinitate*

others who have read these letters—even if they give some verbal assent to what I am saying—nevertheless are not much moved by them. They claim that I have placed on them a difficult and excessively harsh requirement. So, I ask them by that most revered name of God not to accept any of the exhortations they find here—taken from the Word of God—as if some poet were telling them a story. They should not consider it a mere orator's declamation, which we must only receive with applause and flattering approvals. They should remember that the truth and doctrine of life is set before them and that the only way to commend this properly is by obedience. May they also realize that this doctrine is the Word of God. If they treat it like a game, they will not go unpunished. Because I cannot right now develop this position further, I will summarize it briefly with one word from the prophet Ezekiel. There is a well-known passage that sets the Jews before us as an example, a sort of image of our own unhappy time. It should really cast us down with its frightening prospect of divine judgment: "They come to you in mobs," the Lord said to the prophet. "They sit before you, and they listen to your words, but they do not follow them. For it is only a game in their mouth, and their heart is bent on greed. So, you have become to them nothing more than a playful song, a sweet melody, since they keep their ears trained on your words, but do not bother to follow them. Yet when the time comes (which certainly is almost here), they will know that a prophet has been among them."[4] Farewell.

Geneva, January 12, 1537

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propter calumnias P. Caroli (1537); *Confessio fidei de eucharistia, Deux discours…a colloque de Lausanne* (1537); and coauthor *Instruction et confession de foy*…(1537).

4. See Ezek. 33:31–33. Although Calvin is quoting Scripture here, the original text does not contain references to specific passages. Therefore, any biblical citations included have been added by later editors. In the *CR* (see note below) these are added in line, while in the 1537 edition they constitute marginalia. Therefore, in this translation I have adopted the practice of placing the reference at the end of the sentence, according to modern convention, and leaving it to the reader (as Calvin did) to discern from the footnote which phrase or thought is being referenced. Calvin most often gave his own translation from the Hebrew and Greek, although it is clear he was familiar with the Vulgate. Differences between Calvin's Latin translation in these epistles and his Latin in later commentaries are noted when of interest.

THE FIRST LETTER

We Must Flee the Forbidden Rites of the Wicked and Maintain the Purity of the Christian Faith

John Calvin, to the most distinguished gentleman and his close friend N.,[1] *Greetings.*

Opening Comments and the Horror of the Mass[2]

I really am, my dearest brother, filled with the greatest anxiety for you. And so, as I should, I feel compassion for your plight. For you are not yet allowed to get yourself out of that Egypt, where you see so many ominous signs of idols and idolatry, and have them constantly shoved before your eyes. As pious ears recoil just to hear such things, so the offense the eyes take at such a sight must be more deep than can be described. For of course the sense of sight is the most sensitive and is the most profoundly affected. You are compelled to gaze (as you report) at the shameful displays of wickedness among the monks and petty priests, at thousands of superstitions among the people, at countless mockeries of true religion. Everything there oozes and creaks with those activities. I think that people who shield their eyes from these spectacles are happy, in the same way that your distress, as you report, is truly miserable.

And most of all, the Mass, the leading source of all abominations, is presented as something to gaze and gape at, far surpassing all the other examples of wickedness. Whatever we might consider the most heinous of impieties takes place in the Mass. If spectacles of this kind were merely absurd, perhaps you could just laugh at them. As it is, however,

1. N. is a common abbreviation for *nomen* (anonymous). This anonymous friend is Nicolas Duchemin, who had studied law with Calvin. See de Boer and van Stam, *Epistolae duae (1537), Deux discours*, xxff.

2. All section headings are supplied by the translator and are not original to Calvin's letter.

since they are very serious, and represent a most grievous insult against God, I do not doubt (in keeping with your piety) that they pull from you not so much bitterness as anger,[3] or even tears. But as you consider with me what your plan is for keeping yourself pure and unpolluted before the Lord among those unspeakable sacrileges and the filth of Babylon—in which you must live for a time due to your age and the state of your fortunes—I gladly undertake the following. I shall explain to you my own thoughts on this whole topic, and all the more so because I see that in these days there are many who, while they want to seem to have received some taste of God, do not at all maintain their own profession. And yet in this area especially, I see that very many, in fact almost all, are departing from the straight path. But actually, giving advice on this topic is not complicated if you will entrust yourself completely to the discipline of God and allow all your emotions to be ruled by His Word. Yet somehow or another, the great majority of us at times willfully transgress His commands with a wicked recklessness. And when we have despised or merely ignored them (and that too is despising them), we grant ourselves license whenever it suits in those areas that His commands most sharply restrict.

This kind of behavior is especially prevalent in the kind of circumstance you face. Those who are as hard pressed as you notice that they cannot guard their own peace nor maintain harmony with those with whom they live unless they pretend to go along with such persons' idolatry. Since they are overwhelmed and entangled in such great distress, they start to think more about how to make life easier for themselves than how to please to God, more about how to win others over than how to satisfy God. Meanwhile, they also plan a defense to arm their

3. "Bilem tibi magis quam splenem moveant." Like many men of his age, Calvin was fond of biological and physiological metaphors. Calvin's anthropology contextualizes this fondness, demonstrated throughout his work. For a review of Calvin's anthropology in the *Institutes*, see Margaret R. Miles, "Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*," *Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (July 1981): 303–23. For a broader survey that includes his commentaries, see Kyle J. Dieleman, "Body and Resurrection in Calvin's Commentaries," in *Anthropological Reformations: Anthropology in the Era of Reformation*, ed. Anne Eusterschulte and Hanna Wälzholz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 157–65.

consciences before God's tribunal: they will give in to wickedness as little as possible in the inner affection of their heart. But they think that by this small and harmless pretense they are devising a plan to accommodate the ignorance of inexperienced men, making an effort to advise them if there is any hope they can be taught. Certainly it would be foolish to provoke them too boldly at one's own great risk and without success.

But we see that when they start out like this they have prophesied their own destruction. For we remember that such men, after reversing their sails, went right back to the shipwreck from which they had just swum to safety. Right when the moment of crisis appeared, they first thought—if they would candidly admit their intentions, as they should have—that it was no big deal if they acted a little foolish to ingratiate themselves with the people. By this reasoning, though, it would have been a short step to justify even serious offenses. And so they participated indiscriminately in wicked ceremonies along with others. Then, when even that did not allow them to escape men's scrutiny, they advanced one more step. They thought that it would be sufficient if they had good men as witnesses to their faith and that it would do no harm to deceive others by some trick.

In that setting, if one of Christ's enemies had blurted out something against true doctrine, they gave their assent with a look, a nod, the posture of their whole body, and even verbally. When they figured out that no one was cunning enough to succeed as they hoped, they began to be content so long as their conscience was hidden from all human judgment. To gain this, they were careful not to give any indication of their Christian conviction. In that fashion, starting little by little to turn aside from the straight line of duty by a sort of prudent caution (so they thought), and to lose their footing, finally they were blinded and, as it were, forgot who they were. So, they surrendered themselves completely to destruction.

The rod of God's chastisement was then clear. It was just that they were utterly ruined by the shallowness of their own vanity, since they thought they could deceive God and man by their absurd "moderation." This was the closing scene of their charade: not only did they forbid

everyone from hearing or seeing the contents of their heart, as they did at first. But they put all their zeal and effort into making everyone else witness things that every Christian should keep very far away. And the good confession that before they at least kept hidden, they now openly rejected and renounced.

These examples should of course warn us to give up our own scheming and walk circumspectly in the sight of our God, as the prophet says.[4] Otherwise, when this sort of boldness runs riot, we might exempt ourselves from the laws by which God has constrained us. And what He has made tight we might loosen. In addition, we also must be afraid not to be wise in our own eyes, for God rebukes the wise in their own scheming and overturns the plans of the prudent.[5]

Clarity on These Topics Is Difficult, but Loyalty to God Must Take First Place

But the very thing I complained about at the beginning is obviously truer than I would wish: a large portion of people can gain no clear perspective on this topic, can judge nothing accurately, can decide nothing sincerely. And that while from a proper and genuine respect for divine law they see that dangers threaten, when perplexed and dismayed by fear of those dangers they then search for a way simultaneously to keep men's goodwill and God's favor. In following this strategy they are concerned about nothing except their own panic and blind confusion, and throw everything into disorder and chaos. For it is an unspeakable outrage to subject to our own calculation what God has once decreed and marked as holy with His own voice. Likewise, the man who seeks advice from his own timidity and cowardice in matters of such great importance has left himself no hope of a good outcome. From such an attitude (as the saying goes) only depraved children are born.[6] And so, an equally

4. Mic. 6:8.

5. Job 5:13; 1 Cor. 3:19.

6. Thomas Aquinas uses a very similar expression in book 1, lectio 4 of his commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*. Here he draws a contrast between a natural succession, in which the good follows good, and when, on account of some hindrance, the bad follows good. Compare Calvin's "ex quo affectu *turpes semper (ut ille inquit) filii nascuntur*"

bad plan follows this twisted calculation: with their eyes turned away from the Word of God they require of themselves nothing, except what they can offer while keeping their own persons and interests safe. They give themselves easy license to ignore whatever involves any danger and excessive difficulty. And in the meantime they are totally deaf to the frightening vengeance God has decreed against those who despise His protection and abandon their post just to improve their own condition. Note how the Lord rebukes the Jews through His prophet. They distrusted the resources that God had supplied and had ordered them to rely on. So they tried to get Egypt's forbidden help. "Woe unto you," He says,[7] "Wayward children! Following a plan that I did not make! Starting something that did not originate with My Spirit! You, piling sin upon sin, get ready to go down to Egypt. Yet you do not seek My face. You hope for help in the strength of Pharaoh, placing your confidence in the shelter of Egypt. Yet Pharaoh's strength will be your confusion, and your confidence in Egypt's shelter your disgrace." When God breaks out against the Israelites so harshly, why do these people[8] expect something more mild and gentle? Why do they behave shamefully, grumble that God's will has exposed them to all hatred and danger, and dismiss His commands? Why do they on their own initiative fashion for themselves new and forbidden sources of safety?

Of course, I realize that the weakness of our flesh welcomes these evasions—because they seem to remove any danger—with much greater joy than it does simple obedience to the Word of God. For this

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to Aquinas's "sed propter aliquod impedimentum quandoque defecit; et ideo ex bonis parentibus nascuntur multotiens boni filii, set propter aliquod impedimentum non potest natura semper hoc facere: et ideo quandoque ex parentibus bene dispositis ad virtutem oriuntur filii male dispositi, *sicut ex parentibus pulchris turpes filii, et ex magnis parvi*" (emphases added). Note that where Aquinas describes the basis for the bad arising from the good as "aliquod impedimentum" (some hindrance), Calvin specifically refers to sinful persons, *turpes*. See Thomas Aquinas, *Opera omnia*, tom. 48 (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1971), A 93, 1255a39.210-225, lib. 1, cap. 4. The French gives "& d'une telle affection tousiours precedent (comme dit quelqu'un) enfans laids." (And from this emotion always arises, the saying goes, ugly children.) See Calvin, *Recueil des opuscules*, 60 (hereafter simply referred to as "the French" or "the French edition").

7. Isa. 30:1–3.

8. That is, those evangelicals who hide among Roman Catholics.

obedience is subject to so much danger. But there is no trouble so great that one who hardens himself with the following conviction will not overcome: that there is no greater threat in human experience than the one the Lord levels—in the prophecy I just quoted—against those who desert His camp.

The Example of Cyprian from Augustine

It is worth the effort here to go back to what Augustine says in a certain passage about Cyprian: "After he had been condemned to death, he was given the choice to ransom his life if he would just in one word deny that religion for whose sake he was facing death. Not only was he given that opportunity, but when he had arrived at the place of punishment, he was officially asked by the governor of the province to consider whether or not he would prefer control over his own life (since imperial pardon allowed this) to suffering the punishment for his foolish stubbornness. Cyprian, on the contrary, answered all these questions briefly. He said that he 'Didn't even have to think twice about something so holy.' If anyone is amazed that the holy man did not despair at all these frightening torments—the instruments of torture in plain view, the hangman threatening with a grim and savage face, the blows of the sword about to fall on his neck, and the mournful prayers of the crazed people mixed in with insults all around—that he would surrender himself to torture as eagerly as a victim offered on the altar, he understands the situation properly. But at the same time we must realize that Cyprian maintained his greatness of soul unbroken to the end by this one thought: that his mind and thoughts were deeply fixed on God's command that called him to confess his faith. So at the same time he turned all his attention away from those terrible spectacles that could have made him waver. Therefore, he made a statement for us to keep sacred for all eternity, one that we ought to follow and not merely praise."[9] Exactly so!

9. Calvin paraphrases from Augustine's sermon "On the Birthday of Cyprian." Augustine, *Tractatus de Natale Cypriani II*, in *Miscellanea Augustiniana*, ed. D. Germani Morin (Rome: Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1930), 1:534ff.

Whenever anything comes against us to pull us away even a hair's breadth from obedience to our heavenly Father—even if it appears good or profitable—then we must immediately go back to our first thought: something so holy (as we ought to consider every command of God to be) is not only beyond all controversy, but we don't even stop to think about it. For as soon as we let ourselves think about such a question,[10] we have already, in that very moment, jumped beyond the proper limits. And once those are broken, it is a quick downhill slide to further transgression and wandering away even farther.

Calvin's Purpose in Writing

Before proceeding to answer you, I wanted to make some prefatory comments in light of the hesitancy we all share. Because I notice (so I would say) that our minds are more hindered by a kind of blurred vision that keeps us from seeing the truth in this matter than by any ignorance. And maybe I have gone longer than the subject required. But I have certainly been more brief than the practices of this age require, since I see that in our day many are deaf to all doctrine unless someone pulls and scolds them harshly almost to the point of shedding blood. Now this is a fault of our age just as it is of all others: the enticements of the flesh are so subtle, attractive, deceptive, and decorated with lovely titles that the first step of becoming wise consists in expelling the flesh and driving it away from our thinking. But I am not so distrustful of your character that I would put such emphasis on exhorting you with words, if I were here thinking only of you. For it is more than sufficient simply to admonish and instruct someone that is so mild and easily taught, as I have learned by a variety of proofs you are. But while I intend to comply with your requests privately, still, because what you ask belongs to that category where sin is both dangerous and common, I thought there would be some value and advantage if I adapted my plan, at the same time, to teach all those entangled in that same error. So then, if any of them should perhaps notice this letter (I grant that all might easily find it, and I also fervently hope they will), they should think that it was

10. I.e., whether there is anything as sacred to us as the commandment of God.

written for them as well. And if indeed they are willing to heed it, they should consider how they may obey this summons to their duty. But if they aim lower, then let them take this letter as bearing witness against them. May the letter irrefutably persuade them that they march toward their own destruction knowingly, deliberately, and even willingly.

In the first place, it is our obligation always to look intently, as though with our eyes fixed, on what Christ sets before all His disciples when He initiates them into the tutelage of His school. For when He has taught them to start by denying themselves and carrying their cross, He at the same time also gives them this task: "Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words before men, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of His Father and the holy angels."[11] Therefore, let us remember that Christ our Lord, when we are first enrolled in His family, gives us this command. This is a lasting edict to those who want to be counted in His kingdom, published for their whole lives: if they have embraced His teaching with true piety of heart, they must proclaim that piety of heart with an external profession.

And really, how wicked would it be not to profess before men the One men want to acknowledge them before angels? And to deny on earth the truth of God that they want to stand firm in heaven? So, why should anyone fool himself here by some clever pretense or flatter himself with a false estimation of his own piety, pretending that he cherishes a doctrine in his heart that he utterly demolishes by his external testimonies? For true piety gives birth to a true confession. Likewise, we should not disregard what Paul says: "Just as one believes with the heart and is justified, so he confesses with his mouth and is saved."[12]

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11. Luke 9:26. Calvin uses this passage to similar effect in "A Short Treatise concerning What the Faithful Man Must Do When He Is among the Papists and He Knows the Truth of the Gospel" (1543), in John Calvin, *Come Out from among Them: "Anti-Nicodemite" Writings of John Calvin*, ed. Seth Skolnitsky (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001), 51.

12. Rom. 10:10. The epistle has, "Quemadmodum corde ad iusitiam creditur, ita ore fieri confessionem ad salutem," while the commentary reads, "Corde enim creditur in justitiam, ore fit confessio in salutem." The slight differences between these are undoubtedly occasioned by the syntax of quotation. John Calvin, *In omnes Pavli apostoli epistolas, atque etiam in epistolam ad Hebraeos* (Geneva: Jean Crespin, 1557), 74. Calvin

Finally, the Lord calls His own to the kind of confession that, if they refuse it, they must seek for themselves another teacher, since He will not tolerate them for their insincerity.

Some Objections Answered, and the Extent of Obligation to Christian Witness

Here someone might ask, "Surely, then, the faithful and scattered few that live in the midst of a wicked and superstitious mob—to testify to their faith properly—must these not complain against the wickedness of their own people in season and out of season and publicly as well as privately? Shouldn't they fill up the streets preaching God's truth? Shouldn't they climb onto the speakers' platforms and convene assemblies?" Definitely not! Instead, because the Lord specifically summons apostles, prophets, or messengers (whatever name we give those whose voices He wants to resound publicly) to the ministry of His Word, there is no need at all for everyone to adopt the same indiscriminate approach. This would end up completely hindering the work and be altogether improper. Consequently, it ought to be done more like this: each person should examine privately what is conducive to his individual calling and social rank.[13] Each will then best fulfill those obligations that are most consistent with his position. The Lord has placed on those whom He has set apart for the ministry of His Word a public role. He wants their voice out in the open, to soar above the rooftops like a trumpet's blast. He has placed on others, however, the duty to refrain from what the apostles did in public, and to make their Christian profession through the duties of a private life.

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used this verse frequently and to the same effect in "A Response to a Certain Dutchman Who, under Pretence of Making Christians Really Spiritual, Suffers Them to Defile Their Bodies in All Sorts of Idolatries." See Calvin, *Come out from among Them*, 255, 262, 280.

13. "Suae vocationi" and "suo oridini," respectively. For a concise history of the concept of vocation in Protestant and humanist circles, see Richard M. Douglas, "*Genus Vitae and Vocatio*: Ideas of Work and Vocation in Humanist and Protestant Usage," in *Rapports III Comissions*, XII Congres International des Sciences Historiques (Horn, Austria: Verlag Ferdinand Berger and Söhne, 1965), 75–86, esp. 81.