

March 29, 2009

**Dear Friends of the Foundation:**

As we continue to celebrate and observe the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Calvin by reading through his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, we have arrived this week at Book II, chapter 8. As you know, this has to do with his explanation of the moral law, or the ten commandments.

The previous chapter sets forth the three uses of the law: the theological use, which is to say that the law drives us to seek forgiveness; the civil use, by which human societies are organized and constrained; and the third but principal use, by which believers are guided in their behavior.

The current chapter interprets the law expansively, so that for example the commandment against murder also prohibits lesser harm and even thoughts of harm and also requires acts of positive aid and assistance and even the inner intent to save the life of the other. This, of course, forms the background of the yet more detailed treatment of the ten commandments in the Westminster Larger Catechism, questions 91-148.

Of particular interest to me during this rereading has been Calvin's exposition of the sufficiency of the law in section 5:

The Lord, in giving the rule of perfect righteousness, has referred all its parts to his will, thereby showing that nothing is more acceptable to him than obedience. The more inclined the playfulness of the human mind is to dream up various rites with which to deserve well of him, the more diligently ought we to mark this fact. In all ages this irreligious affectation of religion, because it is rooted in man's nature, has manifested itself and still manifests itself; for men always delight in contriving some way of acquiring righteousness apart from God's Word. (p. 371)

Ostensibly, this has to do with the human propensity to imagine that we can make ourselves pleasing to God by our own self-determined good works instead of by obedience to the ten commandments. But by including "various rites" and "this irreligious affectation of religion," Calvin makes it clear this includes the human propensity to make up our own ways to worship God, as if those would be more appropriate than the way God has told us we are to worship.

Proper worship consists of the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word of God, the right administration of the two sacraments, and prayer (adoration, confession, supplication, intercession, thanksgiving, prayers associated with the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word as well as with the sacraments, and, especially, the singing of the psalms). Some other things we do in worship can be comprehended under these categories, so that the opening sentences and the benediction are both readings from the word of God, the offering is an act of thanksgiving, and so forth.

But why do we hurry to pollute worship with our own inventions, as if worship were primarily

entertainment or group therapy or even mass evangelism? Why do we turn away from our chief end of glorifying and enjoying God and instead revel in personal preference or the inane celebration of diversity? Why are we not content with what the Lord has set forth for us? Do we not realize that to seek to establish our own righteousness is to reject and to forfeit the forgiveness he extends to us, and that to attempt to devise our own worship is to throw as it were into his face the good gift he has graciously given us?

Many of you have heard me say half-jokingly but only half-jokingly (if that much!), “Innovation is heresy.” I think Calvin says that innovation is a violation of the ten commandments and a perversion of worship. Sanctification has to do with obedience, and that includes proper worship.

Grace and Peace,

*Jim*

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