

Foreword by W. Robert Godfrey

The
NECESSITY
of
REFORMING
the
CHURCH

with A Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto

JOHN CALVIN

Translated by Casey Carmichael

“Every generation has the responsibility to pass on the evangelical heritage of the Reformation to the next generation. At the core of this heritage is the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. However, no less central to the Reformation are the divine authority of Scripture alone and worship to the glory of God alone. Even in this day of resurgent Calvinism, many Christians might be surprised to learn that Calvin placed worship according to God’s commandment alongside the gospel as the two chief doctrines by which Christianity maintains its vital force—the very soul that animates the church. At a time when many evangelical Christians relegate the methods of the church to the pragmatism of ‘whatever works,’ Calvin’s treatise is a silver trumpet sounding a clarion call to return to simple obedience to God’s Word.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE
President and professor of systematic
theology and homiletics
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Among Calvin’s many treatises and letters, these two are outstanding and deserve your close attention. They were written at a turning period in his ministry and at a crucial point in the history of the Reformation. They reveal his gifts as a humanist scholar, as a defender of the Reformation, and as a pastor who cared for the spiritual well-being of the flock. He knew that the Reformation had recovered the gospel and that Rome sought to persuade evangelicals to sell their birthright for a pottage of salvation by grace and works. These are truths we need to hear and learn again.”

—DR. R. SCOTT CLARK
Professor of church history and historical theology
Westminster Seminary California
Escondido, Calif.

“For those who wrestle with the place of the church in the midst of change and challenges, this new translation of *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* will be a welcome guide. Though it was written in a time so different from ours, its pastoral and practical teachings on the Word of God and the church remain relevant as it offers clarity and priority, qualities we often lack in the present-day church.”

—REV. JOEL E. KIM
President
Westminster Seminary California
Escondido, Calif.

“I am delighted that these tracts by Calvin are now available in convenient form and fresh translation. Both his *A Reply to Sadoletto* and *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* direct us to the heart of Calvin’s pursuit of reformation: the worship, doctrine, discipline, and sacraments of the church. Here we do not find the eloquent prose of the *Institutes*, honed through several decades in five editions, but the passionate rhetoric that is reminiscent of Luther’s 1520 tracts. Calvin’s question must be pondered by today’s officers of Christ’s church: ‘since God . . . openly hates what we support for worshiping Him beyond His command, what do we profit by doing anything to the contrary?’ Now as then, the ‘infinite forest’ of corruptions in worship and polity entails ‘monstrosities of idolatry’ and exercises ‘harsh and especially harmful tyranny over souls.’ This is essential reading for understanding Calvin’s faithfulness in serving Christ’s church.”

—JOHN R. MUETHER
Dean of libraries and professor of church history
Reformed Theological Seminary
Orlando, Fla.

“Written in the mid-sixteenth century, these two works by John Calvin are as relevant today as they were in those days. The twenty-first century church must hear Calvin’s arguments about the need for reformation according to the Word of God. Unfortunately, many churches in the Protestant tradition have fallen back into the theological deviations and errors of the Roman Catholic Church during the medieval period. Not a few have swerved from the simplicity of worship that God revealed in the Scriptures and introduced other gospels, such as the theology of prosperity, the movement of signs and wonders, and the modern apostolic movement with its Judaizing teaching. On the other hand, churches that were once Reformed have adopted theological liberalism and let themselves be seduced by modern culture, accepting immoral behaviors clearly condemned in the Scriptures. Let us heed Calvin’s call for a reformation in our day.”

—DR. AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES
Vice president of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil
Assistant pastor of First Presbyterian Church
of Recife, Brazil

“What a great treasure Reformation Trust has opened to us with this wonderful new translation by Casey Carmichael of two of Calvin’s most important works. Here speaks the well-trained lawyer pleading for the case of Christ’s church in his impressive letter to Sadoleto and his formidable exposition on what the church of Christ needs to be alive and dynamic. These words were written down long ago, but every reader will see that they are as relevant for today’s church as never before. Calvin wanted to serve God and His people, and he still does, as this work shows. So, let’s start using this rich, scriptural material for the well-being of the church and for the glory of God.”

—DR. HERMAN SELDERHUIS
President, Theological University Apeldoorn
Director, Refo500

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**THE NECESSITY
OF REFORMING
THE CHURCH
(1544)**

A Supplication

to the most invincible Caesar, Charles V,
the most illustrious princes, and other ranking officials,
now holding an assembly of the empire at Speyer,
to determine sincerely to address the concern
of reforming the church

Published in the name of all who want
Christ to reign

By John Calvin
1544

A Supplication

to the most invincible Caesar, Charles V,¹
the illustrious princes, and other ranking officials:

This assembly was ordered by you, O Caesar Augustus. In it we are all deciding on the present condition of the church, which is most wretched and nearly regarded as lost. To correct it for the better, may you at last enter and settle on a method with the very distinguished princes of the empire and the other noblemen. Therefore, because you are now sitting down in a public assembly for this deliberation, on my knees I ask and beg of you first, O Caesar, and at the same time of you, O distinguished princes and noblemen, to read and weigh carefully what I am publishing in your midst, so that you may not feel troubled. It is the size and weight of the cause that should stir you up with eagerness to listen. But

1 Charles V (1500–1558) served as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1519 to 1556. Calvin addresses him as “Caesar” throughout, harking back to the early Roman emperors. Only in the first sentence does Calvin call Charles “Caesar Augustus,” after the first Roman emperor, who ruled from 27 BC to AD 14.

THE NECESSITY OF REFORMING THE CHURCH

I am bringing the matter before your eyes, so that you may be able to determine easily what your part is. Whoever I may be, I profess that I am here supporting the protection of holy doctrine and the church. In this name I seem to deserve at least this one thing: that you do not deny me an audience, until it is apparent that either I falsely make use of such a title or faithfully display it and show in the matter itself that I bring before me. Moreover, although I know that I am by no means a match for such a burden, I nevertheless have no fear that, when the reason for my attendance has been heard by you, I will be accused of negligence or rashness because I have been bold to come to the aid of this magistracy. There are two matters about which people usually take action to commend or indeed to defend something. For we regard both what is done with sincere and godly devotion worthy of praise and what is expressed by public necessity as at least worthy of justification. Because both of these factors apply to me, I have no doubt, given your fairness, that I can easily defend this counsel of mine to you. For where better or more sincerely, where even at this time, is it allowed for me to devote myself in a matter more necessary than if I try to be present with my strength to the church of Christ, to which it is lawful to deny nothing at all and which is now struggling greatly and in extreme danger? Nevertheless, there is no reason to say much about myself in advance. Therefore, receive what I am saying as if one voice of all those who have already taken care to reform the church or who desire that it be restored to true order were shouting. There are several princes of the highest rank and many state officials present in this cause. I speak for all these in such a way that they all speak at the same time with one voice more truly through me. Add to these the infinite multitude of godly people who, scattered throughout various parts of the Christian world, nevertheless with common consent back me in this action. Finally, consider this the shared pleading of all who so seriously grieve over the present corruption of the church that they are no longer able to endure it and will not give up until they see some change. I know that we have been marked for infamy by hateful names. But by whatever name it may please you to call us at last, hear our cause in the meantime and then afterward judge in what place we should be regarded.

THE NECESSITY OF REFORMING THE CHURCH (1544)

First of all, there is no question that the church struggles with many very terrible diseases. All people agree about this, even those who judge moderately. But the question is whether the diseases are the sort that attention to them may not bear longer delay, so that it is neither useful nor permitted to wait for remedies that are too slow. We are accused of rashness and wicked innovation because we have dared to move anything at all in the church from its former condition. What? Even if it was done reasonably and rightly? There are those—so I hear—who do not hesitate to condemn us even in this because they think that we should have desired correction but were not allowed to attempt it. From those people I desire to ask nothing else now except that they suspend judgment for a while until I show from the matter itself that we did not rush before the time was right, did nothing rashly, did nothing outside our duty, and did nothing unless we were driven by utmost necessity. In order to prove this, I will articulate the matters about which we contend.

When in the beginning God stirred up Luther and others who carried the torch before us to find the way of salvation, by whose ministry our churches were founded and established, we affirm that those heads of doctrine, in which the truth of our religion, the pure and lawful worship of God, and human salvation are contained, had been very nearly abolished. We affirm, moreover, that at that time the use of the sacraments had been marred and corrupted, and the government of the church had been turned into a form of ugly, unbearable tyranny. Perhaps these issues are not yet sufficiently prevalent to arouse certain people until they are expressed better. Therefore, I will do not so much what the subject requires as what my ability will allow. It is not my plan, however, to recount and examine every controversy. For that would require a long disputation for which there is now no place. I only want to set before you how righteous and necessary the causes were that compelled us to this change, which is being attributed to us as vice. This cannot be accomplished, however, unless I undertake three things at the same time. First, I must briefly mention the vices that urged us to seek remedies. Second, I must discuss how suitable and salutary were the very remedies that our people applied. Third, I must make clear how it was

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not permitted to delay with further hesitation, since the matter required immediate change. Because I only touch on that first matter to make way for the rest, I will try to touch on few things. In clearing up the crime of sacrilege, audacity, and sedition, with which we are burdened as if with unfavorable haste (we falsely acquired it, for it did not belong to our party), I will dwell on it longer.

If one should ask on what things Christianity chiefly stands among us and retains its truth, the following not only certainly hold first place but also comprehend under themselves all the remaining parts and to that degree the whole force of Christianity: that people may know (1) how God is rightly worshiped and (2) whence they must seek salvation for themselves. When these things are taken away, even if we boast the name of Christ, our profession is empty and useless. After these things follow the sacraments and the government of the church. Just as the latter were established for the preservation of the former doctrines, so they should not be applied to anything else, nor can they be judged from elsewhere (whether they are administered in a holy and orderly way or otherwise), except when they are considered for this end. Here is a clear and familiar analogy: the government in the church—the pastoral office and the rest of the orders—together with the sacraments represent the body; however, that doctrine which prescribes the rule for rightly worshiping God and which shows where people's consciences should place their trust for salvation represents the soul, which breathes into the body itself, rendering it alive and active, and preventing it from being a dead, useless corpse. What I have said so far is not under dispute among godly people of a right, sound mind.

Now let us define the lawful worship of God. Indeed, its chief foundation is to acknowledge Him just as He is—the only source of all virtue, righteousness, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life, and salvation. It is, moreover, to attribute and assign the glory of all things entirely to Him, seeking all things in Him alone. Finally, it is, when we have any need, to lift it up to Him alone. Invocation is born from this, and from it flow praises and thanksgiving, which are testimonies of that glory that we attribute to Him. This is the true hallowing of His name,

which He requires of us above all. Adoration is connected to this, by which we show to Him reverence that is worthy of His greatness and excellence. Ceremonies serve this, whether as props or means, so that the body may be exercised together with the soul in the profession of divine worship. The denial of ourselves follows next, so that renouncing the flesh and the world, we may be transformed unto the newness of mind. The purpose of this is that we may no longer live for ourselves but resign ourselves to Him to rule and lead us. Moreover, by this self-denial we are made ready for obedience and deference to His will, so that the fear of God may reign in our hearts and guide all the actions of our lives. These elements contain the true and sincere worship of God. The Holy Spirit approves of and delights in this alone, which He teaches everywhere in Scripture. The very notion of godliness teaches the same without a long disputation. Moreover, from the beginning there has been no other method for worshipping God than what this spiritual truth, which is plain and simple before us, entailed in types under the Old Testament. This is also what Christ's words mean in John 4, "The time has come when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). To be sure, with those words He did not mean to deny that worship had existed in that spiritual manner among the Patriarchs but only to indicate a distinction in outward form. For, although they had foreshadowed the Spirit with many types, it is simple among us. Otherwise, this always prevailed: it is necessary that God, who is Spirit, be worshiped in Spirit and in truth.

Therefore, the rule that distinguishes pure worship of God from its corrupted form is universal: we must not mix in what has seemed good to us but must observe what He requires who alone has the authority to command. Therefore, if we want Him to approve our worship, we must carefully keep this law that He enforces with utmost severity. The reason is twofold that the Lord, by forbidding and condemning all man-made worship, calls us back to obedience to His voice alone. For (1) this greatly applies to establishing His authority, so that we may not serve our own wills but rely entirely on His will, and (2) we are so proud that, if freedom is left to us, we can do nothing but go astray.

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Moreover, once we have turned aside from the way, afterward there is no end as long as we are buried in a multitude of superstitions. Therefore, the Lord, so that He may claim the full right of lordship for Himself, rightly commands us to do what He wills, so that He refuses whatever humans have devised that is beyond His command. He also rightly does this because He blocks off limits for us with His mouth, lest by inventing corrupt worship, we provoke God's wrath toward us. This is so difficult to persuade the world of: God disapproves of all worship that has been established beyond His Word. Instead, this persuasion prevails and is as it were formed in the bones and marrow of all people: whatever they do they have sufficiently just approval for it, provided they display some zeal for the glory of God. But since God not only considers empty but also openly hates what we support for worshiping Him beyond His command, what do we profit by doing anything to the contrary? These are the clear and distinct words of God. Obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22). He is worshiped in vain through the commandments of men (Matt. 15:9). Whatever is added to His Word is a lie, especially in regard to mere will-worship (*ἐθελοθησκείαν*), which is emptiness. Once the judge has made a pronouncement, there is no longer any time for dispute.

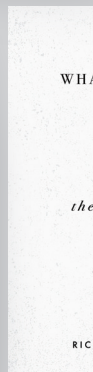
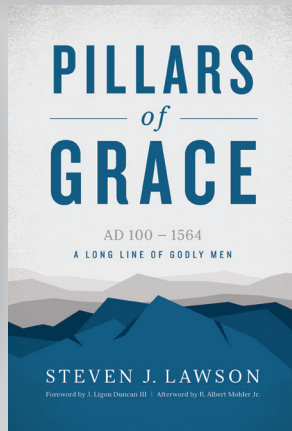
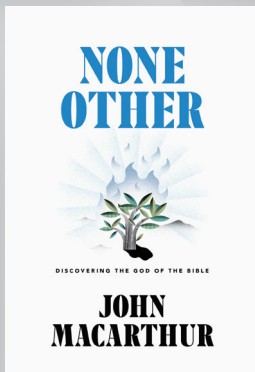
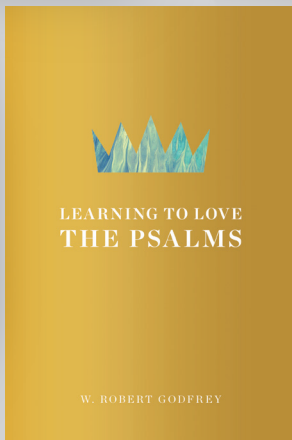
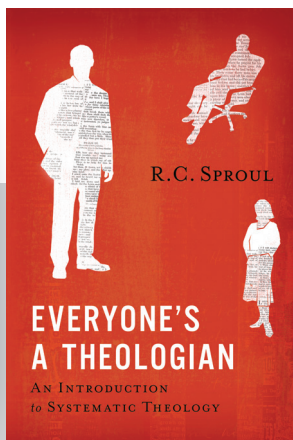
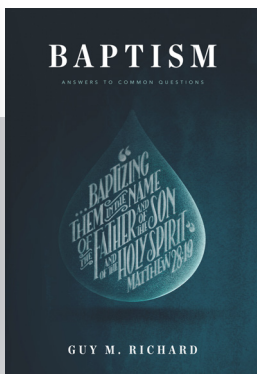
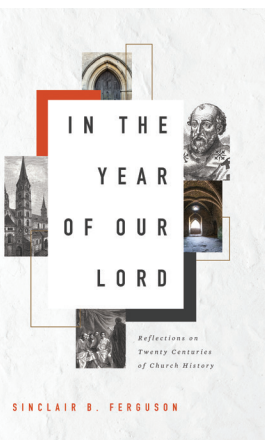
Now, O Caesar, may your majesty and very distinguished princes consider me here and give me your attention. Today everything everywhere in which the Christian of the world puts the worship of God differs from this method. Indeed, in word they concede the glory of all goods to God, but in deed they concede only half or a majority to Him when they share His virtues with the saints. Let our enemies finish playing as they want. For they falsely accuse us of excessively magnifying their trivial errors, which they themselves do. Therefore, I will simply set forth the matter itself as it is clear to everyone. The offices of God have been distributed among the saints in such a way that they have been regarded as added to the Most High God by supporting His aims, in the multitude of which He lies hidden. To be sure, I am not complaining about anything other than what the whole world confesses in a popular proverb. Indeed, what do they mean when they say that the Lord was

not known before the Apostles, except that the Apostles are raised to that height where the majesty of Christ is either covered over or at least made obscure? According to this wickedness, the world, having abandoned the living source, was instructed to dig scattered, open graves (Jer. 2:13). Indeed, where do they seek salvation and good, if not in God alone? But all common life openly cries out against this. For they say that they seek salvation and all goods in God. But since they seek these things elsewhere than in Him alone, a false pretext exists.

Vices will make the credibility of this matter manifest. The invocation of God was first corrupted in them, and then nearly overturned and extinguished. As we have said, by invocation people bear witness to whether they attribute glory to God. Therefore, from this it will also be possible to observe whether people transfer the glory due to Him to creatures. Indeed, for the invocation of God, more is required than prayer of any sort. That is to say, let the human soul certainly establish that it is God alone in whom it should take refuge, because He alone can help in time of need and has taken it upon Himself to do so. Moreover, no one can have that sense except the person who considers the command by which God calls us to Himself and the promise that He joins to the command about hearing our prayers. But the method of His command has not been observed, so that the masses have indiscriminately invoked angels and dead people at the same time as God. But if the wiser people were not invoking angels and people in the place of God, they were at least regarding them as mediators by whose intercession they might obtain what they were seeking. Where, therefore, was the promise at that time that was supported by the intercession of Christ alone? And so, abandoning the only mediator, Christ, everyone took himself to his own patrons whom he had made for himself. Or, if indeed place was given to Christ, He was nevertheless lying hidden, like some sheep in the midst of a flock.

Now, since nothing opposes the true invocation of God more than hesitation and lack of confidence, it has so taken hold that it has nearly been received as the law of praying rightly. But how did that happen? Well, the world did not understand why all those vices prevailed.

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This new translation by Dr. Casey Carmichael, with a foreword from Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, also includes *A Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto*, Calvin's letter defending the work of reformation as it was applied in the city of Geneva.

John Calvin (1509–64) was a French theologian and pastor in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation. One of the most influential minds in the history of the church, Calvin labored to define the principles and theology of the Reformation and to defend the movement to both secular and church authorities.



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