



John Calvin on Preaching the Law

STEPHEN W. RAMP

“Let us remember that we are full of nothing but shit and corruption until God purges us.”

Calvin’s Sermon on Christmas Day, 1551

SOME LUTHERANS WORRY THAT CALVIN’S FAILURE TO DISTINGUISH LAW AND gospel undermines justification by faith, compromises the freedom of the Christian, and effectively turns the gospel into a new moralism. Conversely, some Calvinists worry that Luther’s dualistic approach effectively pits law against gospel, Old Covenant against New Covenant, Jew against Christian, God against God, and turns faith into a trust relationship without the moral compass of God’s eternal law. These polemics score debating points but miss the complexity, depth, and sophistication of Luther’s and Calvin’s theological reflections on the law. With deep appreciation for the strengths of the Lutheran and Reformed positions, this article offers a sympathetic summary of Calvin’s uses of the law as a preacher.

I. COMMON GROUND

The popular notion that Luther and Calvin held diametrically opposed views of the law is simply wrong. While significant differences exist, Calvin’s sermons—his operational theology—frequently display a deep affinity with Luther’s position. When Calvin speaks of the bare law (*nuda lex*), as opposed to the whole law or the entire law, his views are completely sympathetic with Luther’s. The bare

Like Luther, John Calvin held a pessimistic view of human nature apart from Christ. Humans fall, therefore, under the condemnation of God’s law. Unlike Luther, Calvin saw a pedagogical use of the law, to illumine and motivate believers in well-doing.

law only accuses, vexes the conscience, and is always antithetical to the gospel. “[T]he gospel promises are free and dependent solely upon God’s mercy, while the promises of the law depend upon the condition of works.”¹ For Luther and Calvin, the impossibility of satisfying the law’s demands destroys Erasmus’s argument for free will and its optimistic belief that humanity contributes slightly towards its own salvation. In his bones—and in his preaching—Calvin embraces Luther’s dialectical viewpoint: apart from faith in Christ, the law humiliates and condemns, establishing universal guilt, vindicating God’s righteous judgment against humanity, and leaving no one with cause to complain.

Calvin felt preachers should terrify sinners with threats of God’s eternal wrath as well as console the elect with the relief of God’s mercy, rescue, and peace. Homiletically, Calvin and Luther were of one mind on the accusing, damning, punitive nature and use of the law.

II. CALVIN’S THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS REGARDING THE LAW

If the bare law condemns, the whole law, or the moral law, blesses and guides Christians. The enduring value of the moral law reflects Calvin’s covenant theology, his philosophical understanding of natural law, his view of Scripture and progressive revelation, and his thoroughly pessimistic appraisal of human nature. To help orient the reader to Calvin’s theological agenda, I will present a series of propositions that undergird Calvin’s homiletical uses of the law.

Calvin’s sermons focus on the sovereignty, holiness, and righteousness of God and on the sinful nature of humanity. Whatever God does is good; whatever humans do is bad. The law is a good thing because it is a gift revealing the mind of God and the way of perfection. The reason the law condemns is not due to any defect in the law but to flesh’s inability to observe the law. Theoretically, the law offers a path to salvation. According to one scholar, a great hypothetical “if” undergirds Calvin’s view of the law:

God shows us in his law how we could and should arrive at life if our nature were such that there was nothing to impede us....If the integrity of our nature had remained pure, the law would not bring death on us, nor oppose the man who is of a sound mind and who shrinks from sin....If our will were completely conformed and composed to obedience to the law, its knowledge alone would suffice to gain salvation.²

God, being perfect, neither errs nor changes. God’s gift of the law was not a mistake but an eternal blessing. Calvin’s principal opponent was the Anabaptists’ penchant to treat all things Jewish as irrelevant or bad. This effectively eliminated the witness of the Old Testament; worse, it made God fickle and inconstant. Foremost

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 20 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 3.11.17.

²I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1992) 200.

for Calvin are the holiness, majesty, and constancy of God.³ Calvin ridiculed the Anabaptists for regarding “the Israelites as nothing but a herd of swine...without any hope of heavenly immortality.”⁴ This view not only distorts the biblical witness, which abounds with God’s grace towards the Jews, it renders God double-minded. “[T]hat there exists a different rule of life [for Christians] with respect to the moral law—as it is called—than the people of old had is a false opinion.”⁵ In his *Treatises against the Anabaptists and against the Libertines*, Calvin wrote:

We worship the same God that the fathers of old did. We have the same law and rule that they had, showing us how to govern ourselves in order to walk rightly before God. It thus follows that a vocation that was considered holy and lawful then cannot be forbidden Christians today, for a vocation is the principal part of human life and the part that means the most to God. From which it follows that we should not deny ourselves the vocation of civil justice, nor drive it outside the Christian church. For our Lord has ordained it and approved it as good for the people of Israel. And He has appointed His most excellent servants to it and even His prophets.⁶

Law and gospel are historical manifestations of a single covenant of grace. For Calvin, there is one God, one covenant of salvation, and Jesus Christ is the heart and soul of it from the beginning and always. The moral law, mediated through Israel, continues and constitutes a permanent revelation of the unchanging will of God. “The will of God is the origin and foundation of the law. Hence to regard the law lightly is to refuse to take God seriously.”⁷ Law and gospel, at their core, reflect a single “covenant that [God] once established as eternal and never-perishing. Its fulfillment, by which it is finally confirmed and ratified, is Christ.”⁸ Against those claiming that the Old Covenant was superseded, Calvin thundered, “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation.”⁹

The civil laws and the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were given uniquely to Israel and no longer apply. The Ten Commandments reflect the moral law, which is universal. The moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments and in Jesus’ commandments to love God and love neighbor. These two pillars, worship and love, rest on natural law or a universal principle of equity, which, in turn, reveals

³“Thus, God’s constancy shines forth in the fact that he taught the same doctrine to all ages, and has continued to require the same worship of his name that he enjoined from the beginning. In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, he does not show himself subject to change. Rather, he has accommodated himself to men’s capacity, which is varied and changeable” (*Institutes*, 2.11.13).

⁴*Institutes*, 2.10.1.

⁵Calvin, *Treatises against the Anabaptists and against the Libertines*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982) 77.

⁶*Ibid.*, 78.

⁷Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept*, 19.

⁸*Institutes*, 2.11.4.

⁹*Institutes*, 2.10.2.

the character and will of God. Therefore, the moral law (requiring perfect worship and perfect love) is eternal and unchanging.

Christ did not abolish the law; rather, Christ is the heart, soul, and fulfillment of the law. The “gospel did not so supplant the entire law as to bring forward a different way of salvation. Rather, it confirmed and satisfied whatever the law had promised, and gave substance to the shadows.”¹⁰ Here we see the importance of Calvin’s distinction between the *bare* law and the *whole* law: “where the whole law is concerned, the gospel differs from it only in clarity of manifestation.”¹¹

The law teaches the elect how to live as Christ’s disciples. God elects and adopts some to be spared his wrath. The elect are justified solely on the basis of God’s decision. The elect also begin a life-long process—“struggle” would be more descriptive—of sanctification to purge their sinful nature and to embody and embrace the moral law (perfect worship, perfect love). Calvin is often misconstrued at this point. Sometimes his language suggests that justification is conditional upon one’s obedience to the law, much like paying dues enables one to remain a member in good standing. But this is not Calvin’s point. Calvin is much more pessimistic about human nature than his critics realize. For believers, the law serves as “a whip to an idle ass.” God elects a remnant who truly become set apart in morals and manners over time from the reprobate. The life of the elect will bear some fruit. The fruit is not required by God as a condition precedent or subsequent. It is a sign, evidence, if you will, that you are in fact God’s elect. It isn’t about works. It’s about God. How do you know if you are adopted? Check your heart. Check your behavior. Do you delight in keeping the law of the Lord? Does it deeply grieve you when you fail?

III. CALVIN’S THREE FORMAL USES OF THE LAW SUMMARIZED

As a means of grace, the law serves God’s purposes in three ways: (1) *theologically*, it accuses and condemns everyone; (2) *politically*, it restrains unbelievers; and (3) *pedagogically*, it illumines and motivates believers in well-doing. In the language of the pulpit, the law is a mirror, a bridle, and a whip to an idle ass.¹² Luther speaks of the civil or political use of the law, which governs human responsibility (first use), and the theological use of the law, which drives us to Christ (second use). Calvin’s schema is different. In Calvin’s sermons, the moral law is preeminently punitive and accusatory, terrifying souls and condemning every form of human pride. Preaching the law teaches the sinner the awful truth, frightens the conscience, and bids the hearer to shape up.¹³ The law’s mirror shatters all self-confidence in vain attempts to demonstrate righteousness before God. It reveals

¹⁰*Institutes*, 2.9.4.

¹¹*Institutes*, 2.9.4

¹²*Institutes*, 2.7.12.

¹³In the 1559 *Institutes* (2.7.12), Calvin called the pedagogical or third use of the law its “principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law.” However, this assessment is not reflected in his preaching. As a preacher, he leaned equally if not more heavily on the theological (punitive) use of the law to disabuse sinners of the notion that they have any hope of salvation based on merit and to send them fleeing to the mercies of Christ.

that God is perfectly holy and humanity is perfectly contemptible, loathsome, and lost. The mirror establishes universal guilt and heightens sinners' gratitude that God deigns to rescue *any* from damnation. The first use of the law is punitive precisely to reveal humanity's true condition before God and to motivate sinners to flee to Christ's mercy naked and empty-handed.¹⁴ This theme is sounded repeatedly from the pulpit.

Second, as a bridle restrains a horse, the law regulates and restrains wicked behavior for the public good. Here, the law protects the community by constraining the reprobate and those who are not yet regenerate. God desires order and peace and appoints kings, princes, and magistrates to keep law and order in the realm. They may use force when necessary to preserve the peace. This use of the law receives only passing attention from the pulpit, primarily in polemics against the Anabaptists, who taught that a Christian could not be a civil servant and that the use of force violates God's commandments.

The third use of the law is reserved for believers "in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns."¹⁵ The moral law of worship and love illumines and guides the Christian life. Christ, and he alone, perfectly fulfilled the law. We cannot, because we are encumbered with a body, but we should make every attempt to purge the evil that is in us and grow in charity and grace.

IV. HOMILETICAL USES OF THE LAW

It is often impossible to tell from Calvin's sermons which of the three uses he was deploying. He preached with certitude, conviction, and power. His aim was always to teach and persuade his hearers to honor God and obey Christ's commandments. Preaching is more than exposition and explanation; it is Christ's way of guiding his flock. Exhortation and practical application are central in Calvin's preaching. Calvin's sermons are a curious blend of biblical exegesis and evangelical dogmatics. They are somber, sober, direct, plainspoken, dogmatic expositions of the text at hand. His practice of *lectio continua* led him to work through a book of the Bible carefully, verse by verse. This remarkable textual fidelity emphasizes the teaching office of the pulpit and gives his sermons a very didactic and somewhat repetitious character. However, considering that he preached twice and often three times on Sundays and at least five other times during the week, without notes or any written record, for at least forty minutes, we can forgive some redundancy.¹⁶

¹⁴Calvin believed that even in a completely fallen state, each person must "be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God." Humanity "cannot seriously aspire to [God] before we begin to become displeased with ourselves" (*Institutes*, 1.1.1).

¹⁵*Institutes*, 2.7.12.

¹⁶Before 1549, Calvin preached three times during the week at five in the afternoon, and three times on Sundays, at daybreak, nine in the morning, and three in the afternoon. After 1549 he preached twice on Sundays and once a day in alternate weeks. He preached in French without notes and without any written record of what he said. He was critical of lifeless preaching "read from a written discourse." Fortunately, the Waldensians appointed copyists to record and transcribe Calvin's sermons. See the publisher's introduction, John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) v-xvi.

Calvin's method is *explicatio/applicatio*: he tells the hearers what the text (God) said and what the author was trying to convey; then he explains matter-of-factly what God requires today of the hearers.

Calvin's sermon on Christmas Day, 1551, based on Mic 5:7-15, illustrates his method.¹⁷ Taking up the verses that call the remnant of Jacob dew and a lion, Calvin applies this to Christians: "[I]f we are the children of God, then we must come to resemble Him; otherwise, we would not be His children." Normally, Christians are gracious—like dew—but when aroused by the wicked, Christians become "savage beasts." They act this way because this is what God expects. "God's children are the ambassadors of His grace; they are responsible for its dispensation; it is through them that the Lord multiplies and expands His grace throughout the world."

Calvin reminds his congregation that the remnant is small. "We, then, must be very careful how we act; for God will not shed His mercy upon all those who call themselves Christians and bear the sign of baptism." Immediately following this cheery news, Calvin consoles his hearers with this:

Let us remember that however His wrath may be kindled everywhere, He will take pity upon us and number us among this small remnant....The reason is that absolutely everything depends upon the grace of God. Micah, then, is revealing the true calling of the faithful: They are to share with their neighbors the grace God has shed upon them. The children of God, I say, must be of a charitable nature....So if we wish to really prove that we are Christians, each and every one of us must dedicate himself to serving the neighbor.¹⁸

Serving the neighbor is a command (third use) which, if obeyed, confirms one's election. For Calvin, the children of God reveal the path of salvation to others "through their doctrine and behavior." But there's a problem:

We wish God would leave us alone and not call upon us, for our nature is totally contrary to Him. How many of us can stand being admonished and exhorted to come to God? The vast majority of us only grumble, gnash our teeth, and become very vexed against God and against those who admonish us for our own benefit. This comes from our ingratitude, which blinds us to the fact that God rains on us in order for us to bear fruit.¹⁹

If the hearers refuse to receive the dew of God's grace, all hell will break loose upon them. "In God Himself, who is the fountain of all mercy and kindness, we will find only harsh and severe treatment if we reject His grace." This is a horrible threat that deserves careful consideration, for "it amounts to Micah saying that if we do not obey God, we will be destitute of everything, as in fact we are, what was ordained for our life and salvation will become our condemnation, the very bread we eat will become mortal venom."

Calvin now returns to the tough part of the text, in which God promises to

¹⁷John Calvin, *Sermons on Micah*, trans. Blair Reynolds (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990) 308-324.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 310-311.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 312-313.

root out false gods and “execute vengeance in anger and wrath on the nations which have not obeyed.” Micah says that God will tear down horses, chariots, cities, and the like. The problem is not with the cities and fortresses, per se, but the way people abuse them. These things act like bandages covering our eyes and preventing us from following God.²⁰ The bandages number in the thousands, and Calvin names some of them: loan sharking, rapine, gluttony, drunkenness, materialism.

Calvin’s main point is that God must and will purge, cleanse, and correct the elect so they will depend not on things but on him. “Let us be very careful how we act. Let us remember that we are full of nothing but shit and corruption until God purges us. Let us recognize that God must purge us not only of our vices but also of beautiful things in order to thoroughly cleanse us.” Having scandalized those who came to hear a nice Christmas sermon, Calvin delivers the *coup de grace*:

I see that there are more of you out there than are accustomed to attending my sermons. Why is this? It is Christmas Day....What treachery, that you would celebrate Christmas today! Do you think you are honoring God by this? How truly obedient do you think you are to God?...True, you think you honor God, but in point of fact you honor Satan....Days do not matter when it comes to speaking of our Lord’s nativity; we can speak of it on Wednesday, Thursday, any day. But when you are so wicked that you wish to serve God according to your whims, that is blasphemy; you have forged an idol, however you may think you are acting solely in the name of God.

V. THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND SANCTIFICATION

We have already shown Calvin’s very pessimistic view of human nature. “St. Paul has wrapped Adam’s children together, as it were, in one bundle. For in all mankind he finds nothing but wickedness and corruption.”²¹ This explains why Calvin did not worry about distinguishing first and third uses of the law from the pulpit. Both the reprobate and the elect must battle the temptation of the flesh to hypocrisy:

In short, it is a very hard battle when a man must both lay down all the wisdom he prided himself on having in governing himself after his own fancy, and also tame his affections, that he may be subject to God and have nothing in himself that will be repugnant to God. For our flesh is insolence itself, and we hear how it is said...that all a man’s thoughts and all he can even conceive is enmity against God.²²

This brings us to the issue of sanctification. Election is something that God does. It effects justification and regeneration. Regeneration begins our sanctifica-

²⁰“Our Lord, seeing that we are prone to trust in worldly things, says that He will strip them from us in order to give us a clear path to Him. Worldly things are like bandages over our eyes....We know that our survival depends upon God governing us....Yet, we are unable to follow God one single step of the way because our eyes are bandaged” (ibid., 317).

²¹Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 408.

²²Ibid., 406.

tion, a process (struggle) by which believers renounce self and allow the Holy Spirit to reign in their flesh. The behavioral aspect of this is a constant struggle, which is precisely why Calvin insists on a pedagogical use of the law:

[H]ere we see that there are two sides to the ruling of our life, and to our coming to God. The one is the forsaking of ourselves, and the other is that we must be governed by God's Spirit....Jesus Christ has been sent to us in order that we should be restored to the image of God. True it is that he has reconciled us to God his Father by his death and passion, and that the shedding of his blood washes us from all filthiness, and sets us free from damnation and endless death....But yet we must not separate the second point from it, which is that we must be sanctified by his Holy Spirit, according to the saying that he has received the fullness of all grace in order that we should take from him....If then we desire to be received to mercy at God's hand, by the death and passion of his only Son, and not to have our sins imputed to us, because he has made satisfaction and payment for them, let us also learn that he is given to us for our sanctification, in order that we should be governed by his Holy Spirit. So, then, if we intend to begin to rule our life well, we must deny ourselves and fight against our own nature.²³

Calvin felt that believers “need reminding constantly” that their lives are to be living proof that they have been set apart “from all the pollutions of the world” and the tyranny of Satan. Therefore, Calvin used the law to cultivate godly fear, humility, carefulness, and what he called “little victories.” For the elect, the problem is not how one is justified but how one lives under the authority of the Holy Spirit. Calvin was concerned that the elect observe, however imperfectly, the moral law—love of God and love of neighbor—as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, to the glory and honor of God. Preachers could do worse. ⊕

STEPHEN W. RAMP is a licensed attorney, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and an associate professor of homiletics at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

²³Ibid., 427-428.