

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 *Corinthians* 10:3-6)

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Armed for the Fight Against Grave and Serious Error by John Calvin

Editor's Note: The following is a sermon by John Calvin originally preached in French between November 1557 and May 1558 and translated by Kathy Childress for the Banner of Truth title John Calvin's Sermons on Galatians (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997). It is used by permission. American spelling and usage have been used.

Note how apropos this sermon is for today. It is time for churchmen to act like men and defend the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ against all its enemies, especially those enemies within the church, regardless of what titles may follow their names or what institutions at which they teach. God's people are to hear His voice and not listen to any impostors. It is well past time for those elders who have been given the responsibility to rule in the church to rule well according to the Word of the Lord, protecting the Lord's sheep from ravening wolves. Calvin encourages us to do just that in this sermon.

But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision.

And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.... (Galatians 2:11-14)

We have seen that Paul's teaching was based upon the fact that the ceremonies of the law had been abolished. Yet those who opposed him seemed to have good grounds for doing so, for they said that the law had been given by God and that because God was its author, it was not lawful to alter it in any way. However, they

needed to consider the purpose for which the ceremonies had been given to the people of old. Whilst it is true that God is unchanging and that his Word abides forever, it does not follow that God will not prescribe for men what he knows to be right for them. The ceremonies were temporary, suited to the needs of the Jews. A further aspect to this which we have already touched upon is this: before the coming of Jesus Christ there were certain "types and shadows" which served to strengthen and direct believers as they awaited the promised Redeemer. From this we may conclude that God did not intend the ceremonies to last forever or to be a permanent practice, but they were only intended for those days. They were to serve the people as a pledge of what we now possess in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the body and the substance of the shadows that existed under the law. This is what we ought to believe. We cannot argue that God has changed, as those given to fantasy allege. Would we dare to say that God is changing his mind when he turns summer into winter? We are familiar with the different seasons of the year – the grass turns green, the trees blossom and perhaps yield their fruit; yet subsequently, in the winter, everything dies. Yes, God gave the law for man's sake (as we have already said), but the Jews needed visual aids in the form of ceremonies, because they did not have the revelation that we now have in the Gospel. This is why they were necessary, but they are no longer required today because we have seen the fulfillment of those things which God promised. We are, therefore, so much more privileged than the Jews.

Paul defends his proclamation of our new "liberty" in this passage. This is why he had to rebuke Peter, because the yoke that God had placed upon our fathers of old had been removed at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. If Christian people were supposed to maintain the same

kind of service as the Jews, then Peter could certainly have defended his actions with all his might. Yet he allows himself to be rebuked and confesses his failing. Since Peter does this, he reveals that the apostles knew that the ancient types and shadows were to cease and be abolished at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what Paul tells us about the situation: he rebuked Peter at Antioch, where he had lived amongst the Gentiles (not unbelievers but those who had been converted through coming to hear the Gospel). Peter lived amongst them and counted them as members of the church. Then certain Jews came from Jerusalem, sent by James. Peter, worried that they might pass on a bad report of him, withdrew and pretended that he had no personal acquaintance with the Gentiles, even though they had a common faith in the Gospel. He treated them as strangers, in case anyone thought he was defiling himself by keeping their company. What an awful pretense! In doing this, he was creating a split in the church. As it says in another passage, the Lord Jesus Christ was not sent for the Jews alone, for he is the light of God for the salvation of the whole world, and he broke down the dividing wall between us (*Ephesians* 2:14). If, therefore, those who had once been excluded and were far away from the church had now been called into the flock, Peter was, in effect, denying the grace of God. We know what a precious thing church unity is! There is no excusing those who disrupt it. Peter's sin was that he was breaking the alliance between Jews and Gentiles, all of whom belonged to the body of the Lord Jesus Christ and were God's children. We have the same Lord and the same Redeemer, and we all gather in his name as his servants until we are welcomed into our heavenly inheritance; but Peter seemed to be trying to reduce the household of God to Jews alone. He also committed a second sin: he was denying the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. For he came to this world to be the perfect fulfilment of all the former types and shadows. If we had to sacrifice today, as in the times of the law, we would not know that cleansing comes through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone can pay for sin, because he lived a life of perfect righteousness on our behalf. We would not be aware of any of this. Peter's failure, therefore, was serious because he was bringing back the veil which hid the Lord Jesus Christ from view and prevented him from being known. Then there is a third failing: that of confirming the Jews in their error. Yes, we must bear with those who are ignorant and weak and not offend them above measure, even when they sin; their faults can be addressed gradually, rather than breaking the legs from under them (as we say). Yet, to encourage and nurture ignorance by seeming to approve of it is a terrible thing. When Peter withdrew from the

company of the Gentiles in order to please those of his own nation, he was confirming the Jews in their wrong attitudes, since he was implying that the Gentiles were, indeed, defiled and unclean. Thus, he added to the evil that was already far too prevalent. This is why Paul says that Peter "was to be blamed."

We must diligently remember this, for in days gone by some have thought that all this happened by prior arrangement. They have said that Peter was angry that those of his own nation were so difficult to please, and that he had secretly agreed to this public rebuke by Paul. But all this is nonsense! Paul expressly says that Peter is blameworthy and that he felt he had to take direct action when he saw Peter was not walking in the straight and narrow way. This reveals that there had not been a secret agreement or pact; rather, Paul simply used the liberty which had been granted to him to rebuke Peter. Although he held Peter in great esteem as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he was unwilling to let the matter drop. This passage ought to teach and instruct us just how precious our liberty is, as we have already been saying. This is not only a matter which affects our actions, but one which also concerns our consciences and asks whether we are at peace with God. If it had only been a question of whether or not to eat pork (which is one of the things included in the ceremonial law), it would have been a trivial matter and it might have been overlooked. The same applies today to matters of a secondary nature. But we need to return to the root of the matter, as we have said. The shadows were there to act as a kind of schoolmaster, just as little children have governors, and cannot yet enjoy liberty. But at the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, with the emphasis on faith, there was no longer any need for such methods to instruct the Jews. Paul, therefore, did not strive over external issues, for he willingly avoided all such conflicts. Rather, he wanted people to realize the true significance of the ceremonial law – that it was not to continue forever, but to be practiced until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

From this we draw the conclusion that for the Jews to abstain from eating pork or to observe various feast days, was not, in and of itself, vital to the service of God, but was intended to help people to exercise faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, the ceremonies themselves had no inherent virtue to impart; it was only that they pointed to a spiritual fulfilment. We can see clearly that God did not establish them in vain, but for the profit of his church. If we separate the ceremonies from Jesus Christ, they are of no more value than children's toys; but if we consider the one to whom they direct believers, then we will admit their great worth. Even today we can derive great

benefit from them. Although no longer practiced, we can better appreciate what is taught us in the Gospel if we understand the ceremonial law. How is this? It is written that only the priest may enter the sanctuary, and not without a sacrifice (*Exodus 30:10; Leviticus 16:2-3*). From this, we learn that neither man nor angel is worthy to approach God, and that we would all be banished if it were not for the entrance that has been opened for us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is one thing. Secondly, we ought also to remember that we could not please God, nor have confidence or liberty to call upon him, unless blood had been shed. This has been accomplished through the sufferings and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, by which he secured grace and favor for us. All our prayers must be offered in his name, or else God will not accept them. Also it is written that the book of the law itself was sprinkled by the blood, as well as the sanctuary (*Exodus 24:8; Hebrews 9:19*). We learn from this that everything is unclean unless sanctified by the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we see that we can have no salvation unless they have been sealed with the signature of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, when we read that God is our Father, and that if our sins have been forgiven he accepts us as righteous and innocent in his sight, this and suchlike promises are of no effect, and cannot benefit us unless the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ is before our eyes. It is almost as if (in a manner of speaking) the Word of God must be written in red letters in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is something of the way in which we can profit from the ceremonial law today. However, these ceremonies have now been abolished, and even if they were still in use, we could not receive such good teaching by them as we have now, for we would be resting upon base and corruptible things. But if we understand the heavenly "pattern," like that which was committed to Moses, as it says in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, and as Stephen declares so plainly, then we will know why God ordained such ceremonies (*Exodus 25:40; Acts 7:44; Hebrews 8:5*). The main thing we have to realize is that we are not speaking about things of no consequence here. We need to understand the ways in which these ceremonies assisted our fathers in days gone by, and also why God abolished them at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Following on from this, we noticed that Paul did not spare Peter, despite the fact that they were friends, and despite the dignity and nobility of Peter's office, which might have led him to overlook the fault. Notwithstanding, Paul rebuked him sharply about the matter. We can well imagine that if this had been a small or a light thing, Paul would not have stirred up such a

contention. Therefore, it proves that this was highly important. We have been warned that if God's truth is being undermined, or if any are turning from the simplicity of the Gospel, we are to spare nothing and no one. Even if the whole world were to crumble as a result, we must maintain God's cause with unshakeable constancy, without bending for anyone in any way. If anyone's fault ought to have been overlooked, it was Peter's, for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ had been poured upon him abundantly to enable him to hold such an office. Paul might easily have fallen into line with Peter, and yet he found his sin intolerable. This ought to serve as an example to us, so that instead of being blinded by the authority of a man who is undermining God's truth, we must enter into combat, without fear.

This lesson should be most beneficial to us today because there are many who seek to avoid extremes. Although they see the abuses and corruptions around them, they prefer to steer a middle course, all to purchase peace and harmony, they say (whereas, in fact, they are in a state of great confusion when any conflict arises between the two parties!). In order to settle all disputes, such people desire both sides to join together in a union where each side compromises. But will God leave his cause to the whim of man? And can we gather ourselves against him and prosper? Today we are called upon to fight against the unyielding Papists, who have corrupted, perverted and falsified the truth of the Gospel, and yet who continue to blind us with their honorable titles, veiling the truth with masks. Indeed, whenever we hear terms such as "the holy Catholic Church," or "the holy Apostolic See," or "the Prelacy," or "Christendom," or "the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy," let us not be thrown off our feet by any of it. Why? Because God is on our side, and the defense of the truth of his Gospel is so precious to him that he would not have us spare any creature in his cause. It is just as Paul said, when he told us to account angels accursed, and reject and detest them, if it were possible that they should endeavor to turn us away from pure doctrine. Why, then, should we seek to please mortal men if they are undermining the purity of the Gospel by adding their own inventions? Not only this, but they even treat the Lord Jesus Christ as a subordinate in order to maintain their errors. Should we give place to such people? Woe to such a compromised peace, for it will always be the object of God's curse. Therefore, let us have such steady and constant minds that when once we are sure that the cause we are supporting is of God, we are not thrown off course by any worldly pretensions of grandeur or nobility. This is what we ought to learn.

Yet, notice furthermore how foolish the Papists really are, for these villains have the audacity to exempt themselves from all correction. The Pope seeks to magnify himself by claiming to be Peter's successor, yet he is not willing to be subject to any chastisement whatsoever! In fact, he claims that it is his role to correct everyone else, and that it is not lawful to apply this correction to himself. And where does he get this exemption from? If he claims to stand in place of Peter, we can see quite the opposite here in this passage. Peter was rebuked and he bore it; indeed, he even willingly condemned himself because he was convinced that he had done wrong. This leads us to conclude that, whichever way we see to color it, there is no position of dignity in this world where a man is not subject to the Word of God. However, the Pope would have us believe that our Lord Jesus has raised up "idols" in his church (under the name of pastors), that are permitted to teach and rebuke, even to corrupt and falsify everything, without anyone uttering a word against it. The church of God would be no better than a pigsty if this were the case. She would be infected by wickedness beyond remedy. Therefore, let us take good note of this fact: God does not intend anyone in his church to enjoy the kind of pre-eminence which prevents his Word from having free course, for his Word must control even those who have a degree of superiority over others. We must give heed to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has been given authority by God the Father. Indeed, we must rally around him, and not seek for any excuse for exemption. This is what is being taught us through this incident involving Peter.

Notice also the way in which our sins ought to be rebuked; that is to say publicly, and not only in secret. This is worthy of our attention. Many people do scandalous things, and when they have upset everything and everyone, wish to be told that they have done wrong simply by a whisper in the ear. This is the common theology of the day. One asks: "Does it not say that we should rebuke one another secretly? (*Matthew 18:15*). It cannot be right for a man to be publicly disgraced if he falls." Yes, this is so, if his offence will not cause strife in the church. Our Lord Jesus Christ made that distinction when he said that if someone sins, and I know about it, I must rebuke him privately: but that if his sin is blatant and open, and would set a bad example if it were not dealt with, then we are no longer under an obligation to whisper secretly in the offender's ear. The rebuke must reflect the magnitude of the sin, so that others may learn from it. This not only applies to the congregation at large, but also to those in positions of the highest dignity, for they ought to set a good example

to others. Indeed, Paul says in that other passage to Timothy, that those who have sinned, though they be pastors who are responsible for teaching and guiding the flock, should be rebuked before all (*1 Timothy 5:20*). He put this into practice himself here in the case of Peter! This was a grave and serious error which could have been a cause of great turmoil in the church, since it was undermining the Gospel, and many were still very weak. Paul knew that Peter needed to be scolded, and did so. Let us remember all these points.

One final thing we learn is Peter's humility. The Lord Jesus Christ himself had told him that besides his ordinary name of Simon, he would be called Peter because of his firm faith. He was outstanding amongst the apostles, yet still hangs his head when he realizes that he has sinned, and does not take refuge in the fact that he has attained such a high degree of honor. Because the Word of God is provided for our correction, Peter is concerned that we should always submit to it; if we do not, we are rebelling against the One who will finally destroy man's pride. Peter shows that the best a man can do is to submit to chastisement when he has done wrong, and therefore he yields to the rebuke of the apostle Paul.

When we draw together all these various lessons, we find we have a most instructive account. Firstly, we all know how important it is to feel at peace with the world. (This is why many of us are blind to our faults, because the world flatters us.) We are like this because we think we will have no friends unless we tolerate our neighbors. Well, there is, indeed, a kind of forbearance which is commendable, as we have said; it involves being gentle when we rebuke those who have fallen, and always seeking to draw them back in a friendly way. We must not be too harsh; after all, some faults can be overlooked, and do not always merit being fully exposed. If we are constantly ready to reprove others, we only make them feel exasperated. Too many people are continually on the prowl to see whether there is anything they can attack; their holiness amounts to nothing more than mocking one person or chiding another. In short, these are the world's greatest critics! We must keep ourselves from such attitudes, and not always be waiting to reprove others. However, the kind of flattery which surrounds us today is a sin which we ought to shun as we would a deadly plague. Let us, then, learn that in order to love our neighbor, we must speak freely to him, as Paul does here, especially when God's truth is at stake. We must not fear anyone, for the zeal of God must rise up within us and overwhelm us. Even if it means that we acquire a bad reputation and become the object of all kinds of calumny and slander, nevertheless, we must

enter into combat. There is no excuse for treacherous dissimulation whereby we deny the truth of the Gospel. Therefore, we must follow the example set for us here by Paul – what he did to his companion Peter ought to serve as a law and a rule for us. We must prove that we desire people to listen to God, and not to exchange his truth for a lie; also that none should obscure his truth, or add leaven to it. It must remain in its purity and simplicity.

Furthermore, those who are great in this world are taught here that when rebuked they are to be submissive, responding in all humility and meekness. For God did not lose any of his power when he elevated them; he always has sovereign authority over us, which he exercises through his Word. Therefore, even the greatest amongst us must bend his neck, realizing the devilish confusion that results when a man believes himself to be above reproof. This is to rob the Word of God of its authority over us, which is why it is absolutely vital that we take this teaching to heart. Today, when we see man's foolish boldness in setting himself against God, let us strengthen ourselves against this, so that we will not be taken by surprise. We need to be sure of the cause which we uphold and for which we must fight. Let us rigorously despise that pestilential den containing the Pope and all his clergy. May such stinking vermin be nothing to us, since they exalt themselves above the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, though they use his name and seek to hide their mischief behind it, in his name, they actually tread his Gospel underfoot, and even seek to bury it. Or they create such a confusing mixture of truth and error that no one knows what is right. Seeing that they are thus possessed by the devil, let us not be afraid to arm ourselves for the battle and to fight to the end. Indeed, of all causes for battle, ours seems more favorable even than Paul's must have seemed in his day. Whilst it is true that the cause is one and the same and proceeds from the same source, yet Paul opposed ceremonies which God had appointed with his own mouth. Why was this? Well, because the Gospel had been obscure as yet to them; the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ had been overshadowed and they began to stress the doctrine of man's merit instead. They had not understood the purpose for which God had given the law. Today, for the same reasons, we are fighting against the abominations which have arisen in Popery, yet with this added reason: that their doctrine has been invented by Satan and by men. We know for certain that when men rule according to their own desires, all is vanity and lies, because they do not yield themselves in obedience to God. This being the case, let us fight all the more courageously, because our Lord Jesus Christ has given

us ample reason not to fear men's lofty titles, which are nothing less than Satanic delusions. This is summary of what we need to learn.

Next, we must also notice what Paul goes on to say: that is, that he rebuked Peter when he saw that he and his friends "walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel." It was this that caused him to reprove them; he saw that this sin already had far-reaching consequences. If he had allowed them to continue in their pretense, it would probably have become too late to apply the remedy. There are two points here that we would do well to observe. As for this phrase "the truth of the gospel," we have already said that this refers to the maintenance of its purity. Paul could just as well have said, "They walked not uprightly according to the gospel," but he speaks of it as the "truth." (He has used this same expression before.) The reason he says this is because men preferred to have half a gospel, thinking they would be justified in God's sight simply if the word "Christianity" was found often enough upon their lips. It is just the same in Popery today: they regard the term "Gospel" highly enough, yet theirs is an illegitimate gospel because of all the trimmings they have added to it. They have made the Gospel unrecognizable by adding what suits their tastes; indeed, they have used such license that now Jesus Christ is treated like a hired servant in their pay. For they make their pronouncements as if they came from heaven itself! In fact, they are not even ashamed to say that the gospel only contains the ABC of Christianity, or that it is but an introduction to it, and that the great mysteries and the important things have been revealed to them subsequently, through their councils and from the See of Rome. In this way, they mock the Lord Jesus Christ, as if they were crucifying him afresh. For what greater offense could we cause him than to suggest that he is but a schoolmaster teaching us our ABC, whilst over and above him, we have the Pope who can bring us into a state of perfection! In reality, it is quite the reverse. Thus the word "Gospel" is open to the wicked abuses of the Papists, and also to those liberals who want us to agree to their many superstitions. The latter group are content to have a little of the Gospel, as long as they can keep their falsehood and error too. Such people have served to cloud the pure doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why Paul speaks of "the truth of the gospel" in particular: because he wants us to accept all of it and not just half. Paul would not have us add to, or take away from, what the Son of God has taught, but instead to be satisfied with the fact that he has spoken and declared it with his own mouth. For our part, let us open our ears and be attentive to what he has to say to us. None of us

may say, "This would be good," or, "What we need is this...." We must hold the pure doctrine of the Gospel in such reverence that none amongst us would presume to change anything at all, but that we would all willingly accept it. This is the main point that is being brought to our attention. To summarize, we must to persevere as true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. If anyone should seek to turn us aside even just a little to make us stray into the doctrines and inventions of men, our duty is continually to resist them. Why? Because Paul's sole aim was that the Gospel should remain in its purity. Let us today follow him in this respect, and we will not fall. This is the first lesson.

Secondly, we must take good note of the fact that when a sin is deepening and spreading because of silent acquiescence in it, we must deal with it. If we only respond when the illness is deep-rooted, we will be too late. When those who corrupt God's truth by adding their own inventions are drawing men to themselves and attracting a large following it is time to arm ourselves for the fight. For if we tolerate it, we will surely be responsible for the ruin of the church which will result. Then, if after we have shown ourselves cold and indifferent, we decide to act, God will not bless us with his grace. Let us be warned, therefore, that when evil increases and becomes contagious, that is to say when one person corrupts another, we must vehemently oppose them and not allow the tares to grow, leaving the wheat choked in their midst. No, we must pull out the tares in good time. This not only applies to errors which corrupt pure Gospel doctrine, but also to all corruption and vice.

However, when it comes to heresies and wicked perversions of the truth which distort everything, we should react as if we have been punched or stabbed in the stomach or neck. For in what does the life and well-being of the church consist, if not in the pure Word of God? If someone came and poisoned the meat which we needed for food, would we tolerate it? No, it would make us strike out! The same reasoning applies to the Gospel. We must always raise our hands to defend the purity of its doctrine, and we must not allow it to be corrupted in any way whatever. Therefore, if sin reigns we must deal with it at the appropriate time, for if we tolerate it, or make it a laughing matter, and then subsequently try to deal with it, we will be surprised to find that God has shut the door on us and that Satan has won. This is a just reward for our cowardice and coldness, if we are not prepared to heal the sicknesses which corrupt and infect the body of the church the moment we see them arise within her.

Here, then, is a summary of what we should learn from this passage. Firstly, we must not be so foolish or frivolous as to accept liberal teaching, which says that as long as the most prominent errors are corrected, we ought to be satisfied. No, we must not stop until the Gospel's purity and integrity are restored, so that it is just as our Lord Jesus delivered it to us, without any human additions. Secondly, whenever we see evil gaining a foothold, we must take those who have gone astray and lead them back to God. But we must also seek to obstruct those who are leading others to perdition, and who seek to distort the truth. Indeed, we must rebuke such people; may all those who are zealous for God declare themselves their mortal enemies. Anything that might hold us back must be cast aside, even if it involves family or friends, or those joined by the closest possible ties in this world. All such things must be disregarded if souls purchased by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ are being led astray to be ruined and lost forever, and if things that were once well established are being overturned. Otherwise, we will have a state of total confusion, to the extent that no one will know that the Gospel came from Jesus Christ. Little by little, the devil's ways will become the order of the day and he will drag us along with him if he once takes hold of our loose reins. If we see evil growing to this degree, each of us has a duty to stop its spread by showing that we prefer to go to war in the service of God than to have all the friends in the world and to please and gratify mortal creatures. Let us even make ourselves blind or remove an eye rather than offend God. May his truth and his glory be so precious to us that everything else is as nought in comparison. This is how we ought to apply this doctrine; the rest we can reserve until after lunch!

Now let us fall before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins and asking him to be pleased to make us increasingly aware of them. And, as he desires us to come to him in repentance, may it please him to draw us to himself by his Holy Spirit, and to bear with our infirmities, until he has altogether purged and cleansed us of them, and brought us to that state of perfection to which he calls and exhorts us. Thus we all say, Almighty God, *etc.*