

Come Out From Among Them

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BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

Come Out From Among Them:

Anti-Nicodemite Writings of John Calvin

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Introduction

At the time of the Reformation, there were certain would-be Protestants who wilfully dissembled by attending Roman Catholic worship to avoid persecution. History has come to call these people Nicodemites, because they sought to justify themselves by appealing to the example of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night.¹ This book contains the major treatises Calvin wrote against the Nicodemite error, most of them only recently published in English.

In 1537 Calvin wrote a treatise called *On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly*. His last Anti-Nicodemite work, *An Answer to a Certain Dutchman* was penned in 1562, just two years before his death. In this publication, the first treatise *Shunning* is not included. It would have made the book complete to have all the treatises together, but in this volume we can discover the mind of the Reformer on this important issue. Can one dissemble in worship? To make the issue more relevant to today's Reformed Christian: Can one attend a church where Arminian hymns are sung, and as a Calvinist pretend to sing along, while "abhorring the hymns in one's heart?"² Can one listen to false preaching and pretend to agree in

¹Calvin disliked the name "Nicodemite" because he felt this was a slur on righteous Nicodemus, who, although, before his enlightenment he sought out the shadows, when the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2) shone upon him he no longer remained in his hiding place (p. 118). Calvin points out that Nicodemus was later bold in defending Christ before the Sandhedrin and in claiming his body for burial, when it was extremely perilous to do so. "Here then is the true way of Nicodemising. It is to grow stronger with time, advancing daily to the glory of God" (p. 119).

²This reviewer remembers to his shame times when he sang along in such a way, even trying to substitute "Calvinistic words"—such as "His elect" for "all"—while the rest sang the Arminian lyrics. He now sees that such was an evasion. Surely, there is Nicodemitism in all of us.

order to get along in that church?³ This review outlines the main arguments of the Nicodemites and Calvin's responses. The order in which they are treated is mine.

A. The Nicodemites' Excuses

1. *No Idolatry Without Devotion*

The Nicodemites claimed that, although they bowed down before idols, secretly their hearts were not involved. Calvin rejects this false dichotomy. If Daniel's three friends had been able to make this excuse, it would not have been necessary to confess the faith before Nebuchadnezzar and be subsequently thrown into the burning fiery furnace. They could have said, as the Nicodemites, "We know there is one true God and that this image is nothing. We know in our hearts that we are not worshipping the idol, however it may appear on the outside". Calvin rejects this evasion: "If a man secretly mocks the idol, while pretending to honour it, he is still guilty of having transferred the honour of God to the creature" (p. 56).

2. *We Dissemble to Avoid Giving Offence*

Calvin retorts that they ought rather to fear offending God and points out how their dissimulation offends in the biblical sense of the word. He also points out that their true motive is to avoid danger:

We now see what our goal must be in avoiding giving offence. It is to give no occasion to our neighbour to be torn down in his faith by us; not to set him a bad example; nor to say or do anything to cause him to fall. It is easy to judge whether those who bow down before idols, dishonouring God by hiding their Christianity, thereby avoid giving offence. First they demonstrate that they have no zeal for the glory of God, which they thus profane. Then they lead others to do likewise: I mean the small and the weak, who already have had some taste of the truth. There, where they would otherwise scruple at staining themselves through idolatry, they embolden them by their example. Finally, they confirm the unbelievers and harden them in their errors. If this is not giving offence, I confess that I am at my wit's end (p. 78).

³One can be guilty by association and connivance.

3. *We Believe in Christ in Our Hearts*

The Nicodemites wanted to be secret believers. They thought it enough to believe the truth in their hearts. However, God is not satisfied if we believe in our hearts. True faith confesses with the mouth:

If God cannot draw us to himself by sweetness, must we not be more than mad, if threats fail to do the job? Jesus Christ arraigns before God his father all who have denied the truth through fear of physical death, and he says that body and soul shall suffer perdition [Luke 9:26]. In another passage, he says that he will renounce all who have denied him before men [Matt. 10:33]. *Unless we are very much bereft of our senses, these words ought to make the very hairs of our heads stand on end* (pp. 165-166; italics mine).

4. *Idolatry is Not as Serious as Calvin Says*

The Nicodemites viewed idolatry less seriously than Calvin did. “Look at all the social ills—violence, sexual immorality, drunkenness and the like. What is idolatry in comparison to these things?” they said. Calvin responds:

If one were to pass over them [i.e. other sins] lightly, in order to amuse oneself with this one sin of outward idolatry, this would be a bad way to do things. If I were to spare the whoremongers, drunkards, thieves and deceivers, liars and others; were I to pardon avarice, cover over rapine, pomp and pride, being utterly addicted to reprove this one vice of which I am presently speaking, that would be doing badly on my part. And then one might rightly reprove my poor judgment, as if I were leaving many wounds hidden in order to treat one. However, since that is not the case, *who will hinder me from reprov[ing] each vice in its turn, not neglecting any of them?* (p. 80; italics mine).

He further warns them that “it is a pernicious fantasy to imagine that it is a tolerable and pardonable offence to transgress any commandment of God at all ... I really would like to know what reason there is to call outward idolatry one of the lesser offences committed” (pp. 82-83).

5. *We do it for the Good of the Church*

The Nicodemites claimed that they dissembled in order to win their neighbours and preserve the church. "If we came out into the open, they claimed, we would be executed as heretics, and the church would be destroyed. Is it not therefore better, they reasoned, to dissemble to stay alive and be of some use to the Christian church?" Calvin answers that, first of all, experience shows that their dissembling has not succeeded in building the church. Second, the church is built through preaching, which must be bold. Thirdly, Calvin perceives that it is not a love of the church which moves them but a carnal fear:

What honour do they render the apostles, saying that it would be ruining everything, and the undoing of the church to imitate the boldness they showed in planting the kingdom of Jesus Christ? And if they were not ashamed to accuse the apostles of imprudence, what will they say of the results that our Lord gave to their faithfulness and to the ardour of their zeal. Can they boast of having established a church of ten persons in a village by means of their great discretion and circumspect wisdom? The simple preaching of the gospel gained the world. I turn back to their consciences: is that what guides them? Is it not rather the fear they have for their skins? (p. 114).

6. *Calvin Has it Easy*

Knowing that they could not take refuge in feeble excuses, the Nicodemites resorted to attacking Calvin. They accused him of cruelty and over-strictness, comparing him to the captain of an army, who was safe in the background while he gleefully sent his troops on the front line to their deaths. Calvin responds to such sentiments:

If I were in a place where I could not flee from idolatry without danger, I would pray to our Lord to confirm me and give me the constancy to prefer his glory to my own life, as reason would have it. And I hope he would not abandon me. However, let us leave talking about what I would do, for I am not interested in bragging. Rather I show what anyone should do, including myself (p. 90).

7. *The Cost is Too High*

The Nicodemites complain that if they openly confess Christ in the way that Calvin demands that they shall suffer loss. Calvin exhorts them to die rather than commit idolatry. He reminds them that faithfulness to Christ and persecution are inseparable. He urges them to remember the martyrs and laments that they have less zeal —although more knowledge — than they, and he reminds them of God’s promises in order to offer them solace and to encourage them:

“What!,” they say, “Shall we all depart to run away to an unknown place? Or indeed, shall we risk our lives?” If we reduce everything that can be said of this argument, and everything which in fact they have customarily culled and presented, it is as if they were to say, “What! Can we not serve God, and follow his word, without suffering persecution?” If they wish to be good Christians on that condition, they must devise an entirely new Jesus Christ (p. 111).

8. *We have examples from Scripture*

In order to excuse their own dissimulation, the Nicodemites appealed to others in Scripture, who, they claimed also dissembled. The most notable examples here are Nicodemus himself, Naaman the Syrian and even the Apostle Paul. The most interesting of these, and one cited by modern day Nicodemites (this reviewer has heard it at least twice in recent history) is Naaman, the Syrian, who was cured of leprosy after washing in the river Jordan seven times. After being cleansed he asks the prophet Elisha,

In this thing the LORD pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon thy servant in this thing (II Kings 5:18).

Since Elisha’s response is “Go in peace” (II Kings 5:19), the Nicodemites argued that since Elisha allowed Naaman to worship in the temple of the pagan god Rimmon, Calvin should not condemn them participating in Romish worship. The first thing Calvin says about this is that it is a fool-

ish and dangerous practice to turn aside to isolated examples instead of following the clear commands of God.

My friend, seeing you have the whole word of God, like a great and travelled road that you cannot miss, I am astounded that you prefer to turn aside to a particular example, which is like a narrow, and lightly beaten path upon which it is easy for you to lose your way. Why are you so subtle to seek subterfuges ... it is a very uncertain thing to follow personal examples without any other approbation. For, our Lord occasionally permitted some of his believers, as by way of special privilege, to do what he prohibited concerning them all in general (p. 71).

Calvin next points out that Naaman in the Old Testament and as a Gentile had “only a small glimmer of truth” (p. 72). The responsibility of Christians in the New Testament is therefore greater and they are expected to confess their faith more clearly than Naaman. Calvin then goes on to deny that Naaman was asking permission to worship in the temple of Rimmon. Naaman, argues Calvin, had very different intentions:

It must first be observed that a lieutenant of the king (in his idolatry) was accustomed to make many sacrifices ... And what does Naaman promise? Among other things, he expressly declares that he will never offer sacrifice again, except to the God of Israel alone. Now certainly this amounted to a notorious public profession (to all the world) that he was no longer an idolater, as if he had had it published with the sounding of trumpets (p. 72).

The word “worship” means to bow down or lower oneself. Why is it that he says, noteworthy,

if the king, leaning on my shoulders, worships? Namely to indicate that he will not bow down except by way of courtesy, so as not to impede the king. So, his bowing his body was not to pretend to honour the idol, but to render his usual aid to the king (p. 73).

In Acts 18 Paul shaves his head, takes a vow and keeps a religious (Jewish) feast in Jerusalem. The Nicodemites seized upon this example to excuse themselves. Calvin refutes their misappropriation of this text. First of all they greatly wrong God “by comparing a ceremony he had instituted with an entirely wicked and abominable idolatry, such as the popish Mass” (p. 74). Then Calvin argues that the ceremonies cited in Acts 18 were “still indifferent for that time, until the gospel was better and more fully brought to light” (p. 75). Finally Calvin defends Paul’s motives (while exposing the cowardly intentions of the Nicodemites) that Paul used the ceremonies lawfully for edification to win the Jews (I Cor 9:20).

B. Answering “Madame Carnal Wisdom”

The Nicodemites were weak, and instead of seeking strength from God as Calvin urges, they resort to excuses: “Now, once all these subterfuges have been cast down, Madame Carnal Wisdom butts in to play her role” (p. 87).

1. The Church Would Be Destroyed

If everybody openly confessed Christ as they ought, reasoned the Nicodemites, Christians would be exterminated in France and other parts of Europe. It is safer for the church if we remain silent. Your fear, says Calvin, that by openly confessing the Protestant faith, the wrath of the Papists would fall upon the poor church in France, and therefore the church would be destroyed, is unfounded. We ought rather trust in the promises of God. It is true that persecution may come, but God’s church is not destroyed by persecution, rather she is weakened by compromise:

We should do God the honour of committing to him whatever might come of it ... If we could cast our care upon God, not doubting but that he is wise enough to prepare us for a good end when we are bereft of counsel and in perplexity, he would no more fail us that he did with his servant Abraham ... When our Lord commands us to do something, do we think he does not foresee the dangers, or that he does not consider them? ... Therefore, instead of saying, “What shall become of us if we serve God?” let us learn to say, “Since all counsel fails us, God will have some for us. Are we in a strait that seems to

have no way out? He shall enlarge our road. Let us only do what he says, and God will succour us no matter what peril we are in" (pp. 87-88).

2. *If All Believers Emigrated to Join a True Church, There Would be no Witness Where it is Sorely Needed*

Calvin urged those who could not worship God purely to do everything in their power to relocate to a place where they could. The Nicodemites retorted that if every believer left France to be near the true church what would become of those places the believer had forsaken? Geneva would not be able to contain them. This is quite a common objection today: If all the scattered Reformed believers moved to one place, then what? Calvin calls such fears frivolous. He sees in such objections a lack of faith in the promises of God:

I do not say that there is no need to doubt but that everyone should promptly pack his luggage in order to get underway. It will always be the case, that some will have their eyes blinded and not perceive the filth and garbage in which they dwell. Others, although they recognize the wretched estate in which they dwell, nonetheless will be held back ... if everyone of those who are here and there were to do half his duty in his place, there would be no corner of the world not filled with them. The problem is that most have neither boldness nor courage. Yet even if all those who cannot live in a country in peace of conscience were to depart, do we suppose that the seed of God would therefore be snuffed out? One ought rather to hope that in the place of every one who left God would raise up four. In conclusion, we will always be ridiculous when we argue against God (p. 89).

C. Calvin's Advice

What does Calvin advise those who live in areas where it is impossible to worship God purely, because all the churches are wicked and apostate and the believer cannot in good conscience have fellowship with them or take part in their worship? The simple answer is move to where there is a church which worships God aright:

Someone will therefore ask me what counsel I would give to a believer who thus dwells in some Egypt or Babylon where he may not worship God purely, but is forced by the common practice to accommodate himself to bad things. The first advice would be to leave if he could (p. 94).

It is interesting that Calvin counselled people to relocate from France or other parts of the world in order to be near the true church. He knew what hardships that entailed. In those days, a journey from Paris to (say) Geneva was long and perilous. Yet, he did not hesitate to give that advice. What would he say to the believer today who lives in isolation, far from the fellowship of the saints, far from the preaching of the Word and the sacraments? Today, relocating for the sake of a better job with a bigger salary is common enough. It seems a lot more radical to modern Christians to uproot oneself to join a church.

Calvin could see that the Nicodemites had the wrong priorities. They did not see the importance of the church. They were quite happy to live far away from the church as long as they could live comfortably. They wanted to keep their worldly prosperity, although that meant being away from the people of God, the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments. Calvin felt so strongly about this that, in 1552, he published sermons to show believers the importance of the church in their lives.

D. The Example of David

In the Psalms there is abundant proof of the importance of the means of the grace in the Old Testament. Using David as his example, Calvin demonstrates the importance of having these means of grace, and he urges all believers to do all in their power to “seek God’s face” in the church. Reformed believers are used to singing about the Lord’s house (Psalm 5:7; 26:8; 27:4; 36:7-8; 42:1-4; 65:4; 84:4; 122:1). In the Old Testament, the LORD was especially present in “His house,” the temple. In the New Testament, although the LORD dwells in the heart of every believer, He is in the midst of His church in a special way: when the Word is preached, Christ the Good Shepherd speaks to His sheep and calls them by name (John 10:27; Eph. 4:21), and when the sacraments are administered Christ is there by His Spirit. Yet, today (as in Calvin’s day) many believers are content to be away from God’s house; they are content to be without

the Word and the sacraments. Some are even content to remain in places where they hear false preaching and where they are forced to take part in impure worship for the sake of friends and family. Calvin rebukes such an attitude in the Nicodemites, and urges them to learn from David, the man after God's own heart.

1. *David's Misery Being Away from God's Temple*

Calvin writes,

[David] was a fugitive from the land of his birth and was banished from his father's house and from the society of his relatives and friends. He had been stripped of his goods, rank and honours, which had been great. His wife had been taken from him. In sum, this was a man grieved in everything and by everything. Nevertheless, he longs for just one thing: to have access to the temple (p. 185).⁴

[David] complains that his condition is worse than that of sparrows and swallows, who find a place to make their nests. [Psalm 84:3] Why is that? Does he not have bed and board? He is not saying that at all. Rather, he finds no abode either good or fit as long as he is far from the altars of God (p. 188).⁵

2. *Comparison of the Attitude of David and of the Nicodemites*

As we discussed above, the Nicodemites placed membership in a true church far down their priority list. Some did not even feel the hardship of being away from the means of grace. Such he calls "more stupid than the dumb beasts" (p. 184) because even the animals "having neither sense nor reason, will low for pasture" (p. 181).

If one speaks of the ills that may come, everyone fears being ravaged by war, suffering losses, troubles and griefs. How-

⁴Psalm 27:4: "One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I look after, that I may dwell in the house of the LORD, all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple."

⁵Psalm 84:1-3: "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God."

ever, losing the preaching of the doctrine of salvation, the pure use of the sacraments, and such helps as are designed to bring us to God—this is not mentioned, and one does not see people who are deprived of these things being concerned about it. If their income does not take them to the end of the year maintaining things as their ambition makes them desire to do, if their profit and volume of business decrease, if they lose credit, their self-torment knows no end. However, the ordinary feeding of the children of God (for which they ought to hunger) is of no consequence to them (pp. 186-187).

Yet none cry out, “Thine altars, LORD, where are Thine altars, my God, my King?” The fact is that they are too much governed by the vanities of the world to obey God (p. 188).

3. Dealing With Excuses Why the Nicodemites Will Not Move

Calvin shows above how the Nicodemites would move under other circumstances (such as if they had no food; if they had the offer of a higher income elsewhere), but to be away from the means of grace is of no consequence to them:

I only ask them if they would be stopped by such a scruple if they had nothing to eat or drink at home. There are none who would not boldly permit themselves to leave their country in order not to die of hunger. Now I offer a case which is not so clear. If they were offered six times as many goods in a foreign country, they would have no great problem leaving to take possession (p. 202).

However, when all is said and done, the only thing that holds most people back is pure defiance (p. 210).

If this desire [of Psalm 84:10] reigned in all believers, they would not have so much trouble disentangling themselves, and would not spend so much time haggling about the loss.⁶ They must take leave of their homes and come to the church of

⁶Psalm 84:10: “For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.”

God. Yet there are precious few who are willing and able to suffer losses. Everyone would like to be carried on a litter to worship God when there is freedom to do so, and would like for lands and possessions, goods and business connections and all other assets to follow right along. Now if they act this way, how highly do they esteem Jesus Christ? (pp. 215-216).

Especially because of such exhortations Calvin is mocked by the Nicodemites and accused of teaching that Geneva is the only way to heaven. To this he replies:

As for those babblers who ridicule us, wondering if one cannot get to paradise except by way of Geneva, I answer: would to God they had the courage to gather in the name of Jesus Christ wherever they are, and set up some sort of church, either in their houses, or in those of their neighbours, to do in their place what we do here in our temples!⁷ But what do we find? Not deigning to use the means God provides them, they still want to be saved (p. 192).

However, although some scoffed, others undertook the journey and moved to Geneva or other places where God could be worshipped in a faithful Reformed church.⁸

⁷*Le temple* in French usually refers to a Protestant church building whereas the more common word *l'église* more commonly refers to churches in general.

⁸This book is available for £16.50 (inc. P&P) through the CPRF Bookstore, 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, Ballymena, N. Ireland, BT42 3NR, tel. (028) 25891851.