

John Calvin's Anti-Anabaptist Baptism Polemic

First: "We believe that the Baptists are the original Christians. We did not commence our existence at the Reformation, we were reformers before Luther or Calvin were born; we never came from the Church of Rome, for we were never in it, but we have an unbroken line up to the apostles themselves. We have always existed from the very days of Christ, and our principles, sometimes veiled and forgotten, like a river which may travel underground for a little season, have always had honest and holy adherents. Persecuted alike by Romanists and Protestants of almost every sect, yet there has never existed a Government holding Baptist principles which persecuted others; nor, do I believe, anybody of Baptists ever held it to be right to put the consciences of others under the control of man. We have ever been ready to suffer, as our martyrologies will prove, but we are not ready to accept any help from the State to prostitute the purity of the Bride of Christ to any alliance with Government, and we will never make the Church, although the Queen, the despot over the consciences of men." Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1861) Volume 7, Page 225.

Charles Spurgeon

*Of course, with each passing trend a new one emerges. With the trend known as John's Calvinism, many Baptists today are calling themselves "Calvinists." Certainly, in recent history, Baptists ventured so far as to consider themselves "calvinistic" with reference to "particular" redemption (as with J.R. Graves, and C.H. Spurgeon), but much more is the controversy today becoming- That is, an **entirely new embrace of reformed theology**: A complete acknowledgement of all things Calvin.*

However, as ardent as the claims that Baptists are Calvinists might be, **the unconcealed reality of the issue is settled when one allows Calvin to speak for Calvin**: He never considered himself an Anabaptist or Baptist of any kind; for such consideration would have found him simply submitting to Scriptural Baptism, and entering into the Body of Christ being in his local vicinity.

Many had repented of their sins prior to John Calvin; multitudes had received baptism into Christ at the faithful hands of baptized believers, and so would have become of a man named John Calvin.

But, as the historical record indicates, he renounced those that preached the correct message [The gospel was before John Calvin, as well as Baptism, Communion, and Churches, and the New Testament].

The article below is written by a disgruntled Presbyterian against the compromises of his contemporary colleagues. Find it interesting that it is Calvin's support of "Romish" Baptism that finds his articles necessary.

For Review:

"Calvin was so determined to uphold the validity of Roman baptism (and to oppose the Anabaptists) that he not only concocted a ridiculous argument that depended on the possibility of re-circumcision (an obviously impossible act), but he also denied that Paul had the disciples in Ephesus re-baptized, despite the clear statement in Scripture that 'When they heard this, there were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus' (see Acts 19:1-7). For the reference, see the Institutes, Book 4, chapter 15, paragraph 18. Rather than taking a Biblical position, Calvin defended Romish baptism against the arguments of the Anabaptists."

"One of his errors was asserting that Roman Catholic baptism is Christian baptism, and many other Reformed theologians, aping Calvin, have defended Romanist baptism ever since Calvin's time."

"One of Calvin's arguments is so laughable that one wonders if Calvin wrote it tongue in cheek. In the Institutes (Book IV) he wrote:

“Thus it did not harm the Jews that they were circumcised by impure and apostate priests. It did not nullify the symbol so as to make it necessary to repeat it. It was enough to return to its genuine origin. The objection that baptism ought to be celebrated in the assembly of the godly does not prove that it loses its whole efficacy because it is partly defective. When we show what ought to be done to keep baptism pure and free from every taint, we do not abolish the institution of God, though idolaters may corrupt it.”

“Circumcision was anciently vitiated by many superstitions, and yet ceased not to be regarded as a symbol of grace; nor did Josiah and Hezekiah, when they assembled out of all Israel those who had revolted from God, call them to be circumcised anew.”

That is an argument offered in defense of Roman Catholic baptism by one of the most brilliant Protestant theologians of the last 500 years.

“In the 19th century, American Presbyterian churches overwhelmingly, if not unanimously, took the Biblical position and held that Roman baptism was not Christian baptism. In the 20th century, the century of growing apostasy, they began to reverse their position. Today most American Presbyterian churches hold that Romish baptism is valid Christian baptism. This view explains in part the growing ecumenism and alliance with Rome.”

“One of the clearest statements on Romanist baptism was made by General Assembly of 1845 in a nearly unanimous vote, 169-8. Here is the statement in full. Report of the 1845 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (Old School):

"The question presented to this Assembly by Overture from the Presbytery of Ohio, 'Is Baptism in the Church of Rome Valid?' is one of a very grave character, and of deep practical importance."

“The answer to it must involve principles vital to the peace, the purity, and the stability of the church of God. "After a full discussion carried through several days, this Assembly has decided, by a nearly unanimous vote, that baptism so administered, is not valid. Because, since baptism is an ordinance established by Christ in his Church (Form of Gov., chap. vii; Matt. xxviii. 19, 20) and is to be administered only by a minister of Christ, duly called and ordained to be a steward of the mysteries of God (Directory, chap. viii, sec. 1), it follows that no rite administered by one who is not himself a duly ordained minister of the true Church of God visible, can be regarded as an ordinance of Christ, whatever be the name by which it is called, whatever the form employed in its administration.”

“The so-called priests of the Romish communion are not ministers of Christ, for they are commissioned as agents of the papal hierarchy, which is not a Church of Christ, but the Man of Sin, apostate from the truth, the enemy of righteousness

and of God. She has long lain under the curse of God, who has called his people to come out from her, that they be not partakers of her plagues.”

“It is the unanimous opinion of all the Reformed churches, that the whole papal body, though once a branch of the visible church, has long since become utterly corrupt, and hopelessly apostate.”

“It was a conviction of this which led to the Reformation, and the complete separation of the Reformed body from the papal communion. Luther and his coadjutors, being duly ordained presbyters at the time when they left the Romish communion, which then, though fearfully corrupt, was the only visible church in the countries of their abode, were fully authorized by the Word of God, to ordain successors in the ministry, and so to extend and perpetuate the Reformed churches as true churches of Christ: while the contumacious adherence of Rome to her corruptions, as shown in the decisions of the Council of Trent, (which she adopts as authoritative), cuts her off from the visible Church of Christ, as heretical and unsound.”

“This was the opinion of the Reformers, and it is the doctrine of the Reformed churches to this day. In entire accordance to this is the decision of the General Assembly of our Church, passed in 1835 (see Minutes of General Assembly, vol. 8, p. 33) declaring the Church of Rome to be an apostate body.”

“The decision by the Assembly of 1835 renders the return of a negative to the inquiry proposed by the Presbytery of Ohio indispensable on the ground of consistency; unless we be prepared to admit, in direct contradiction to the standards of the Presbyterian Church, that baptism is not an ordinance established by Christ in his Church exclusively and that it may be administered by an agent of the Man of Sin, an emissary of the prince of darkness; that it may be administered in sport or in blasphemy, and yet be valid as though administered by a duly commissioned steward of the mysteries of God.”

“Nor can it be argued that the papal hierarchy is improving in her character, and gradually approximating to the Scriptural standard. She claims to be infallible; her dogmas she promulgates as the doctrines of Heaven; and she pronounces her heaviest anathema against any and every man who questions her authority, and refuses to bow to her decisions. She cannot recede from the ground she has assumed.”

“She has adopted as her own the decisions of the Council of Trent, which degrade the word of God; which claim equal authority for the Apocrypha as for the New Testament; and which declare the sense held and taught by holy mother church, on the authority of tradition and of the Fathers, to be the true and only

sense of Scripture. All who deny this position, or who question her authority, she denounces with the bitterest curses.”

“She thus perverts the truth of God; she rejects the doctrine of justification by faith; she substitutes human merit for the righteousness of Christ; and self-inflicted punishment for gospel repentance: She proclaims her so-called baptism to be regeneration, and the reception of the consecrated wafer in the eucharist to be the receiving of Christ himself, the source and fountain of grace, and with him all the grace he can impart. Is this the truth? Is reliance on this system, true religion? Can, then, the papal body be a Church?”

“The Church, (i.e., the church visible,) as defined in our standards, is the whole body of those persons, together with their children, who make profession of the holy religion of Christ, and of submission to his laws. (Form of Gov. chap. ii, sec. 2). As certainly then, as the dogmas and practices of papal Rome are not the holy religion of Christ, must it be conceded, that the papal body is not a Church of Christ at all; and if not, then her agents, be they styled priest, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, or pope, are not ministers of Christ in any sense; for they have no connection with his true visible Church; and not being true ministers of Christ, they have no power to administer Christian ordinances, and the rite they call baptism is not, in any sense, to be regarded as valid Christian Baptism.”

“Further, by the perverted meaning they affix, and the superstitious rites they have superadded to the ceremonies they perform under the name of baptism and the eucharist, the symbolical nature and true design of both the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are lost sight of and utterly destroyed -- so that, could we by any possibility assign to her the name of a church, she would still be a church without the two grand ordinances of the Gospel: she neither administers Christian Baptism, nor celebrates the Supper of our Lord.”

“Moreover, since, by the 11th canon of the Council of Trent, she declares the efficacy of her ordinances to depend upon the intention of the administrator, no man can know with certainty that her form of administration in any ordinance is not a mere mockery: no consistent papist can be certain that he has been duly baptized, or that he has received the veritable eucharist: he cannot know, that the priest who officiates at his altar is a true priest, nor that there is actually any one true priest, or any one prelate rightly consecrated in the whole papal communion. The papal hierarchy has by her own solemn act shrouded all her doings in uncertainty, and enveloped all her rites in hopeless obscurity.”

“Even on this ground alone, the validity of her baptism might safely be denied. Nor is the fact that instances now and then occur of apparent piety in the

members of her communion, and of intelligence, zeal, and conscientiousness in some of her priests, any ground of objection against the position here taken by this Assembly. The virtues of individuals do not purify the body of which they are members.”

“We are to judge of the character of a body claiming to be a church of Christ -- not by the opinions or practices of its individual members, but by its standards and its allowed practices. Bound as he is by the authority of his church - - and that on pain of her heaviest malediction -- to understand the Scriptures only in the sense in which his church understands and explains them, a consistent papist cannot receive or hold the true religion, or the doctrines of grace. If he does, he must either renounce the papacy, or hypocritically conceal his true sentiments, or he must prepare to brave the thunders of her wrath. True religion and an intelligent adherence to papal Rome are utterly incompatible and impossible. The [Christian] Church and the papacy are the repelling poles of the moral system. Difficulties may possibly arise in individual cases. It may not be easy at all times to say whether an applicant for admission into the Church of Christ has, or has not been baptized: whether he has been christened by a popish pastor or not.”

“In all such doubtful cases the session of a church must act according to the light before them. But it is safer and more conducive to peace and edification, to embrace a well-established principle for our guidance, and act upon it firmly in the fear of God, leaving all consequences with him than to suffer ourselves, without any fixed principles, to be at the mercy of circumstances.”

“While some other churches may hesitate to carry out fully the principles of the Reformation, in wholly repudiating popish baptism, as well as the popish mass, we, as Presbyterians, feel bound to act on the principle laid down by our Assembly, so long ago as 1790, (see Digest, pp. 94, 95) that, so long as a body is by us recognized as a true church, are her ordinances to be deemed valid, and no longer.”

“In 1835 the Assembly declared the papacy to be apostate from Christ, and no true church. As we do not recognize her as a portion of the visible Church of Christ, we cannot, consistently, view her priesthood as other than usurpers of the sacred functions of the ministry, her ordinances as unscriptural, and her baptism as totally invalid. That, friends, is the Biblical and Presbyterian view of the matter: Calvin erred; and he erred badly on the whole question. Contemporary Presbyterian churches that accept Romish baptism as valid commit a serious error and lead many people astray.”

Cordially,

John Robbins: The Trinity Foundation

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