

Note

In the first two of these Appendices you will not find John Calvin or C.H.Spurgeon dealing with today's 're-engineering' of the *ekklēsia*. How could they? It has only arisen in the past few years. So why am I quoting them here? By way of reply – although it may appear to be a digression – I am reminded of J.I.Packer's opening to a paper he gave at a Puritan Conference in the 1960s – a paper dealing with John Owen on the spiritual gifts. The Charismatic movement had just erupted, and Packer was dealing with the way he thought Owen would have responded to it. But, as he had to admit, Owen did not really have to face the issue in his own day. So Packer was trying, quite rightly, to tease out – from Owen's works – what he would have been thinking in the 1960s (if he were alive then) when faced with the Charismatic revolution. I am doing something similar with Calvin and Spurgeon over the current issue. I am convinced that the words of these two men, though strictly not on the subject in hand, do make an invaluable contribution to it. What is more, both men were making their comments while preaching/commentating on Isaiah 30. And the words of the prophet are always up to date.

Appendix 1

Calvin on the Passage

Calvin, in his Commentary on Isaiah, has left us an excellent exposition and application of Isaiah 30:1-18. This Appendix comprises an annotated selection from that work.

Judah had sinned. Calvin saw two strands to God's exposure of Judah's sin:

First, it is no light offence, but wicked obstinacy, [for the people of Israel] to disregard and even despise God's government, and follow their own inclinations. [Moreover,] God had strictly forbidden [Israel] to enter into any alliance or league with the Egyptians (Ex. 13:17; Deut. 17:16). There were chiefly two causes of this prohibition. One was general, and related to alliances and leagues with other nations; for God did not wish that his people should be corrupted by the superstitions of the Gentiles (Ex. 23:32; 34:15; Deut. 7:2).

Following that understated way of expressing Judah's rebellion against God's explicit command, Calvin applied the doctrine to us today:

We are gradually infected, I know not how, by the vices of those with whom we have intercourse and familiarity; and as we are more prone by nature to copy vices than virtues, we easily become accustomed to corruptions; and, in short, the infection rapidly spreads from one person to another.

Calvin was making a very important point here; indeed, for my purposes in this book, he has put his finger right on the spot. Paganism, the love of paganism, the hankering after it in principle and practice, is the root of the problem. Moreover, it is a virus – highly contagious, it spreads like a pandemic. It was so for Judah, and it is so for us. And it comes at a price! Do not miss Calvin's use of 'infection'. Judah might look to pagans for help, but as a consequence paganism would infect Judah (Ps. 74:4-8; Isa. 64:10-11; Jer.

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51:51; Lam. 1:10)! This was the inevitable outcome. Maybe Judah saw it along the lines of the law of unintended consequences, but, all the same, it was inevitable. The same goes for us. So far, we have only witnessed the first signs of it in the evangelical world.

Calvin continued, speaking of the second strand in God's thinking:

The *second* reason [for God's command for Israel's separation] was special and peculiar to this nation [that is, Egypt]; for, since the Lord had delivered the Jews out of [the slavery of] Egypt, and commanded them to remember so remarkable a benefit, he forbade them to have any intercourse with the Egyptians. And if they had entered into an alliance with the Egyptians, the remembrance of that benefit [that is, the exodus] might easily have been obliterated; for they would not have been at liberty to celebrate it in such a manner as had been commanded (Ex. 13:3,8,14). [Consequently,] it was excessively base [of Judah] to disregard the glory of God for the purpose of cultivating friendship with an irreligious and wicked nation.

Calvin, generalising the point, spelled out the issue:

Since God intended also to testify to his people that he alone was more than sufficient to secure their safety, they ought to have valued that promise so highly as to exclude themselves willingly from other assistance. It was a very heinous crime to endeavour to gain the favour of heathen nations on all sides, and to deprive God of the honour due to him; for if they had been satisfied with having God's protection alone, they would not have been in such haste to run down to Egypt. Their noisy eagerness convicted them of infidelity. Yet I have no doubt that the prophet directed his indignation against that sacrilege, because, by labouring earnestly to obtain the assistance of the nations around them, they withheld from God the praise of [his] almighty power. Hence also the Spirit elsewhere compares that ardour to the extravagances of love, and even to licentious courses (Jer. 5:8).

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By going to Egypt, Judah was disobeying God, robbing him of his glory, doubting his power and promise; it was spiritual depravity. What a catalogue!

Isaiah was not alone in his warnings to Israel and Judah. Calvin, having cited Jeremiah, moved on to Ezekiel:

Ezekiel shows that, by joining the Egyptians, [Judah] acted as if a woman, shamefully transgressing the bounds of decency, not only ran furiously after adulterers, but even desired to associate with horses and asses (Ezek. 16:26).

Now for a nuance. Calvin, returning to Isaiah 30, stated:

And yet here [the prophet] does not absolutely condemn all leagues that are made with idolaters, but has especially in view that prohibition by which the law forbade them to enter into alliance with the Egyptians.

The point is, whatever God in his word commands his people to do, they must do it; if not, they are transgressors (Matt. 15:3; Rom. 4:15; Jas. 2:11; 1 John 3:4). In all their dealings with the world – and some are legitimate – they must, at all times, remember and apply this principle. The point is subtle. Paul faced it:

Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings... I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved (1 Cor. 9:19-23; 10:33).

While Paul was certainly prepared to eat gravel that he might preach the gospel, and he always bore in mind the people he was addressing, to suggest that he would tamper with the

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gospel, or entertain hearers with carnal activities, in order to make himself popular, is highly offensive to the apostle's memory. Such passages surely carry an inbuilt – though unstated – limit. If not, the passage could be abused to justify any and every principle or activity.¹

Calvin continued:

It is chiefly on account of the prohibition that he kindles into such rage; for it was not without pouring grievous contempt on God that they ran trembling into Egypt. For this reason he calls them obstinate and rebellious... [In saying this, the prophet] denotes men of hardened wickedness, [men] who knowingly and willingly revolt from God, or whose obstinacy renders them objects of disgust, so that no integrity or sincerity is left in them. At first he reproves that vice on this ground – that they neglected the word of God, and were devoted to their own counsels.

This is the point! The people of Judah were turning away from God's word, disobeying God's word, working out their own scheme of defence and expansion, whereas the only answer to their plight – both then (and now, for us) – was (and is, for us) to trust God and rely upon his promised power. As Isaiah declared in the name of the Lord:

For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: 'In returning [to me] and rest [in me and my word] you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength' [Isa. 30:15].

Alas, the Jews were determined in their rebellion, their stubbornness. Remember the opening verse of Isaiah 30 and my remarks on it; Judah would not listen to God's voice through the prophet (see also Jer. 6:16-17; 7:26; 13:10; 16:10-13; 19:15; 22:17,21, for instance).

¹ Including, I shouldn't wonder, 'flirty fishing' (self-explanatory), which was used by the cult Children of God from 1974-1987 (Wikipedia). Take: 'Rejoice always... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you' (1 Thess. 5:16-18). Is there no limit?

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Calvin set out the way God addressed his people, the way God spelled out the consequences of their apostasy:

But you were unwilling, and you said: ‘No! We will flee upon horses’; therefore you shall flee away; and: ‘We will ride upon swift steeds’; therefore your pursuers shall be swift. A thousand shall flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you shall flee, till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill (Isa. 30:1-17).

In short, as Calvin commented on the opening verse of Isaiah 30:

Let it be held as a settled principle that, whatever we undertake or attempt without the word of God, must be improper and wicked, because we ought to depend wholly on [the word of] his mouth. And indeed, if we remember what febleness of understanding – or rather, what lack of understanding – is found in all mankind, we shall acknowledge that they are excessively foolish who claim for themselves so much wisdom that they do not even deign to ask at the mouth of God!

Calvin moved to the way in which we are warranted to devise ways to carry out God’s commands; namely, that nuance I mentioned earlier. It is clear that God’s word does not instruct us in everything we are entitled to use – computers, for example. But there is a limit. The modern evangelical way of remodelling the *ekklēsia* for evangelism has struck at the root of the gospel, and this puts it beyond the pale. Calvin set out the principle:

If it be objected that the Scriptures do not contain everything [we might like to know], and that they do not give special answers on those points of which we are in doubt, I reply that everything that relates to the guidance of our life is contained in them abundantly. If, therefore, we have resolved to allow ourselves to be directed by the word of God, and always seek in it the rule of life, God will never allow² us to remain in doubt, but in all transactions and

² Calvin had ‘suffer’.

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difficulties will point out to us the right way.³ Sometimes, perhaps, we shall have to wait long, but at length the Lord will rescue and deliver us, if we are ready to obey him. Although, therefore, we are careful and diligent in the use of means, as they are called, yet we ought always to attend to this consideration: not to undertake anything but what we know to be pleasing and acceptable to God.

And where shall we find that? In Scripture. But not in Scripture prostituted to justify our pre-devised schemes!⁴

Calvin:

The prophet condemns the presumption of those who attempt unlawful methods, and think that they will succeed in them, when they labour, right or wrong, to secure their safety [success in attracting pagans to church, today – DG], as if it could be done contrary to the will of God [revealed in Scripture]. It is certain that this proceeds from unbelief and distrust, because they do not think that God alone is able to protect them unless they call in foreign, though forbidden, assistance. Hence come unlawful alliances⁵... There are innumerable instances of this unbelief in every department of human life; for men think that they will be undone if they are satisfied with [that is, trust in] the blessing [that is, the promised power] of God and transact all their affairs with truth and uprightness [that is, biblically].

In other words, we are prone to think that God's way revealed in Scripture – preaching the biblical gospel, relying upon his power – is not sufficient. Of course, we would never admit it, never own up to it, but our actions betray us. We are guilty of unbelief, even though we are so strongly warned against it:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God (Heb. 3:12).

³ Calvin had 'conclusion'.

⁴ See my *Relationship; Dilemma*.

⁵ Calvin had 'leagues'.

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Paul made his determination in this area as clear as noon day (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2; 9:16; 2 Cor. 4:5; Col. 1:28-29).⁶

Calvin continued:

But we ought to consider that we are forsaken, rejected, and cursed by God whenever we have recourse to forbidden methods and unlawful ways. In all our undertakings, deliberations and attempts, therefore, we ought to be regulated by the [revealed] will of God. We ought always to consider what he forbids or commands, so as to be fully disposed to obey his laws, and to submit ourselves to be guided by his Spirit, otherwise [to put it mildly] our rashness will succeed very ill.

God used Isaiah to respond to Judah's rebellion. Calvin, commenting on Isaiah 30:15, declared:

This verse consists of two clauses: a command and a promise. [God] enjoins the people to be of a quiet disposition, and next promises that their salvation shall be certain.

But, despite this assurance, the people would not trust God, would not rely upon his promise (see Isaiah 10:24), and this led to disobedience. Calvin:

The people do not believe this promise, and consequently they do not obey the command; for how would they render obedience to God, whom they do not believe, and on whose promises they do not rely?

Their rebellion brought its inevitable consequences. Calvin:

We need not wonder, therefore, that they do not enjoy peace and repose; for these cannot exist without faith, and faith cannot exist without the promises, and as soon as the promises have been embraced, souls that were restless and uneasy are made calm. Thus, unbelief alone produces that uneasiness; and therefore the prophet justly reproves it, and shows that it is the source of the whole evil.

Calvin came to application:

⁶ See my *Dilemma*.

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Though our condition be not entirely the same as⁷ that of the Jews, yet God commands us to wait for his assistance with quiet dispositions, not to murmur, or be troubled or perplexed, or to distrust his promises. This doctrine must belong equally to all believers [and their assemblies]; for the whole object of Satan's contrivances is to distress them, and to cast them down from their [stable] condition.

Calvin commented on Isaiah 30:16, Judah's rank refusal to obey God in his word:

We now perceive more clearly what is the fault which Isaiah describes. By [their] distinct reply: 'No', he shows how obstinately they refused to comply with the advice [far too weak: 'command' is the right word – DG] which was given to them by the prophets, and chose rather to provide for their safety in another manner.

Quite! Calvin went on:

Thus, by despising God, they gave a preference to a groundless appearance of safety, which they had allowed themselves to imagine.

Calvin applied the teaching:

We ought, therefore, to turn away our minds from looking at present appearances and outward assistance, that they may be wholly fixed on God; for it is only when we are destitute of outward aid that we rely fully on him. It is lawful for us to use the things of this world for our assistance, but we altogether abuse them by our wickedness in forsaking God.

Calvin was returning to the nice point I drew attention to just now. He was remaking the same fine nuance. Of course, we have to use our mind, and reason things out, but this does not warrant us playing fast and loose with the word of God and 're-engineering' the *ekklēsia* in order to evangelise. We can use 'the things of the world' – electricity, printing, transport, whatever – but what we dare not do is to rely on worldly principles, use pagan ideas, adopt pagan methods of running

⁷ Calvin had 'with'.

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a business and the like, and apply them to the remodelling of the *ekklēsia* in a vain attempt to advance the gospel by such a scheme.

Calvin went on to address the consequences of Judah's disobedience:

It is proper also to observe how unhappy is the end of those who rely more on outward aids than on God; for everything must be unsuccessful and contrary to their expectation; as we see that these men, in their attempts to find safety [success in attracting pagans to church, today – DG], are constrained to undertake a flight which is highly disgraceful, and from which they obtain no advantage. At first there is some appearance of prosperity.

Just so! At first, worldly schemes seem to produce the goods: 'Look at the numbers attending our activities, attending church!', might well be trotted out these days. As Calvin said, however:

But the only effect is that the change of condition makes the final result more bitter and distressing. And yet Isaiah does not affirm that they will receive no assistance from Egypt, but forewarns them that the Lord will find new methods of thwarting that assistance, so that they will not be able to escape his hand; for, although all men agree together, yet they will not succeed in opposition to God and to his purposes.

God was blunt. Isaiah was blunt. Judah had laid their plans, drawn up their schemes, but it was all their own doing – not God's; to stop calling a spade a horticultural implement, to give it its proper name, we are talking about sin, rebellion against God and his word. The people of Judah had no scripture for what they were doing. Indeed, they had been warned not to do it (Isa. 20:5; 30:2-3; 31:1-6): taking the road to Egypt would end in disaster. They would have to pay twice for it: first, they would have to pay upfront; and then, even more disastrous, reap the harvest, the legacy of their sin, and endure the after-taste for a long time to come.

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God wanted all this recorded for later generations – even for our generation, for us, now! Will we listen? Will we return to God's word and obey him? *That*, contrary to Hamlet, is ***the*** question.