

ROOTED IN CHRIST
(8) Calvin's View of the Third Use of the Law

Beloved brethren,

At the last instalment of the series on the theme "Rooted in Christ", we wrote about the three uses of the law: Firstly, the law restrains sin and promotes righteousness in the church and society, maintaining both from lapsing into chaos. Secondly, the law disciplines, educates, convicts and drive us out of ourselves and unto Christ. And thirdly, the law becomes the rule of life for the believer.

And concerning the third use of the law, believers profit by the law when they learn from it what the will of the Lord is. The believer is like a servant, who is committed to do the will of his master and so he begins the day by asking the master, "Master, what are your orders for the day?" And after knowing his master's will, he seeks to do his master's will. He will muster all his planning, ability, strength and energy to do what his master requires of him to perform for the day. And let us add here that the servant has no will of his own for the master's will is his own will. And he will be a satisfied servant when the master's task is done. Calvin confesses that, though the believer is moved by the Holy Spirit to obey the will of God, he is still weak in the flesh and he ends up serving sin rather than God. "The law is this flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to goad, stir, arouse it to work".

And Calvin developed in his understanding of the law, that by the time the last edition of the Institutes was published, he emphasised, firstly, the law "is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it". And secondly, it causes the servant of God "by frequent meditation upon it to be aroused by obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression".

And thus Calvin views the law positively, that it, as a guide that encourages the believer to cling to God and obey Him. This illustrates an instance where Calvin differs from Luther. For Luther, the law is primarily negative, in the second use of the law, namely, convicting men of their sins as a result of knowing God's full requirements of the law. But as for Calvin, he views the law as a positive expression of the will of God. Law and love are not antithetical but complementary. The believer obeys the law, not out of compulsion but out of grateful obedience. Under the Spirit, the law works gratitude in the believer, which results in loving obedience and hatred to sin. In other words, for Luther, the primary purpose of the law is to help the believer to recognise and confront sin. For Calvin the primary purpose of the law is to direct the believer is to serve God out of love.

In this regard, Calvin's understanding the law is correct. For us, this means that the law of God is our rule to obey God, not out of slavish compulsion but out of love for God who saves us through Jesus Christ and gives us all the wonderful blessings of salvation.

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