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Calvin's reply to Sadolet as an extension of his pastoral ministry

Abstract

Calvin's Reply to Sadolet as an extension of his pastoral ministry

In his concise autobiography in the dedication to the Psalms commentary Calvin made it plain that his role was primarily as a pastor; he compared his role in the church to that of King David in Israel: "And yet, as he [David] was elevated from the sheepfolds to the highest position of authority, so God took me [Calvin] also from obscure and small beginnings and honored me with the office of herald and minister of the gospel." (Calvin, 1958:51.) Beza (1564:9), Calvin's contemporary biographer, in ***Life of John Calvin*** *also described Calvin as primarily engaged in pastoral ministry. This paper will investigate and analyse the theological acumen and the pastoral tone in Calvin's treatise,* ***Reply by John Calvin to the Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva****. This reply to Sadolet exudes outstanding intellectual brilliance and an unwavering pastoral concern that characterised Calvin's entire ministry and literature. A study of this treatise reveals that even in this theological work, Calvin was practising his pastoral ministry.*

Key Concepts: *Calvin, Reply to Sadolet, Extension of pastoral ministry*

1. Introduction

In an article published in 2009 which aimed to prove that John Calvin was, above all, a pastor, Wright made an interesting observation about Calvin's reply to Sadolet, the Italian Roman Catholic Cardinal, circa 1500 CE. After pointing out about five genres of Calvin's works, which according to Wright (2009:4-5) demonstrate that Calvin was a pastor at heart, he adds "Sixth, we could notice several of Calvin's occasional treatises that are at heart pastoral in nature. For example, his *Reply to Sadoleto [sic]* may be the best short introduction to the pastoral flavor of Calvin's thought" (2009:5). There is no doubt that both Sadolet's letter and Calvin's reply were polemical treatises expressing the Catholic and Protestant positions respectively. As Olin (2000:1) notes, the letters "...constituted one of the most interesting exchanges of the Catholic-Protestant views during the Reformation era". Sadolet and Calvin also seem to have viewed their letters as polemic since it becomes clear in their introductions that their aim was to defend their positions (Sadolet, 1539:23-25; Calvin, 1539:221-224). There is also no doubt that both letters were of high intellectual standard. From the outset of his reply, Calvin acknowledged Sadolet as a distinguished academic (Calvin, 1539:221), which becomes apparent as one reads Sadolet's letter to the Genevans. On the other hand, Reid (1954:220) notes that Calvin's reply is considered one of the most notable of his works. And yet, one of the striking features of both letters is their pastoral tone. Sadolet (2000:25) stated from the beginning that above all he desired the salvation of the Genevans and so we would expect Calvin's reply to match Sadolet's concern for it to be an adequate response.

Nonetheless Olin notes that after the victory of Calvin's reply in defending the course of the Reformation, the letter "...remained [an] academic and [an] ineffectual exercise" (2000:18) as regards the public although it seems to have been instrumental in the Genevans' decision to call Calvin back to ministry in that city after banishing him as it had won him new respect. Was Calvin's reply to Sadolet pastoral or just another academic treatise? If it was pastoral as Wright suggests, how do we see that in the contents of the letter? The aim of this article is therefore to investigate the pastoral nature of Calvin's *Reply to Sadolet*.

To do this we shall first focus our attention on the background to the reply, which will be telling in respect of any pastoral intentions in the letter. Secondly, we shall note Calvin's reference to his pastoral obligation in the introduction to his reply. And lastly, we shall conclude with the concern for the salvation of the Genevans which is a prominent feature of both Calvin and Sadolet's letters.

2. Background to Calvin's reply to Sadolet

First, the background to Calvin's reply affords us some insight into the pastoral nature of his treatise. As already observed, this reply to the Bishop of Carpentras, Jacopo Sadolet, is among the most notable of Calvin's works (Reid, 1954:220). Beza (quoted by Olin, 2000:20) remarked that in his reply to Sadolet Calvin wrote: "with so much eloquence that Sadoleto [sic] immediately gave up the whole affair as desperate." Parker (2006:104) also notes that "this is one of that brilliant set of writings which emerged from his [Calvin's] stay in Strasbourg and which, purely as literature, he never surpassed". The treatise is dated the 1st of September 1539. Bishop Sadolet had, in a letter dated March 18, 1539 (Sadoleto, 1539:42), written to the Genevans, that is, the Magistrate, Council and ordinary citizens of Geneva, to persuade them to return to the Catholic Church (Olin, 2000:5). Geneva, formerly a city that had adhered to Catholicism as the other Swiss cities did, had, three years prior to Calvin's arrival, begun to embrace Protestantism and through the work of Farel and Viret had formalised its adherence to the Reformation before Calvin's arrival (Olin, 2000:8). Farel was instrumental in securing Calvin to remain and assist with the Reformation in Geneva. Recalling that memorable appeal by Farel, in his dedication of his Psalm commentary, Calvin said:

> Then Farel, who was working with incredible zeal to promote the gospel, bent all his efforts to keep me in the city. And when he realized that I was determined to study in privacy in some obscure place, and saw that he gained nothing by entreaty, he descended to cursing, and said that God would surely curse my peace if I held back from giving help at a time of such great need. Terrified by his words, and conscious of my own timidity and cowardice, I gave up my journey and attempted to apply whatever gift I had in defense of my faith (Calvin, 1557:53).

Calvin remained in Geneva but it was not long before he and Farel were banished from Geneva on the basis of their unwelcome Reforms. In April 1538, the Genevan council ordered Calvin and Farel to leave the city (Olin, 2000:12). In Strasbourg, Calvin settled into a new office as pastor of the French refugee church (Parker 2006:91-92). It was during his exile that Sadolet wrote to the Genevans calling them back to Catholicism, a move which could not have come at a better time from the Catholic point of view. Olin (2000:6) remarks that "In 1539 that city [Geneva] was at a critical juncture in the course of its Reformation. Protestantism had been established, but in April, 1538, its two prime reformers, Guillaume Farel and John Calvin, had been banished for refusing to abide by certain decisions of the municipal authorities concerning liturgy".

With the Reformers, having been expelled from the previously Catholic city, which was still in its infancy with regards to the Reformation, the Genevans were more likely to accept the Bishop's supposedly peaceful request. Beza (1564:7), observing Sadolet's skilful timing of this letter, declared:

> He [Sadolet], observing the opportunity then offered, and thinking he would easily lead away a flock deprived of such distinguished pastors, adducing also as an excuse his vicinity to Geneva, for Carpentras is a city in Dauphiny, which joins on Savoy, sent letters addressed to his dearly beloved brethren, as he termed them, the magistracy, council, and people of Geneva, in which he omitted nothing that might be useful in recalling them to the bosom of Rome, that great harlot.

But it seems that Calvin was not about to allow Geneva to be won back to Catholicism. Although it appears he was initially reluctant when asked by the Genevan authorities to reply on their behalf (Olin, 2000:13) probably because of the way Geneva had treated the Reformers, in his response, Calvin said he found it necessary for him to reply otherwise he would be abandoning his duties (Calvin, 1539:221). It becomes apparent in the introduction to his reply to Sadolet that Calvin was alluding to his pastoral obligations to the Genevans when he refers to "abandoning his duties".

3. Calvin's pastoral obligation to the Genevans

Second, Calvin's view of his pastoral obligation to the Genevans sets the tone of the rest of the letter. We know that his primary role in Geneva was one of pastoral ministry. In the introduction to his reply, he states that in Geneva he initially held the office of doctor and then that of the pastor (Calvin, 1539:22). The Geneva registers show that Calvin was initially appointed reader in Holy Scripture and then later a pastor of St. Pierre Cathedral (Parker, 2006:80). Although Calvin was released from his pastoral duties by being banished from Geneva, it seems as if he still considered himself as having an obligation to pastor the church from a distance whenever needed; in the reply, he states:

> For though I am for the present relieved of the charge of the Church of Geneva, this circumstance ought not to prevent from embracing it with paternal affection; for God, when he charged me with it, bound me to be faithful to it forever (Calvin, 1539:222.)

Calvin's impression of his pastoral obligation to the Genevans is also apparent in his brief defence of the genuineness of his labours in Geneva: "But when I see that my ministry, which I feel assured is supported and sanctioned by a call from God, is taken and wounded in the flank, it would be perfidy, not patience, were I here to be silent and disregard what you say" (Calvin, 1539:222). According to Calvin, he felt obliged to reply to Sadolet because neglecting to do that would be deserting his pastoral duty. This seems to be Calvin's stance towards Geneva throughout his reply.

That Calvin viewed defending Geneva as part of this duty is not surprising, since to him, there were two aspects to pastoring: firstly, to instruct the congregation by preaching the Word of God and secondly, to defend the truth of God's Word by refuting error. He made this point in his reply to Sadolet by arguing that "...pastors edify the Church only when, besides placidly leading as with the hand docile souls to Christ, they are also armed to repel the machinations of those who strive to impede the work of God" (Calvin, 1539:224.) In *The Institutes,* we find an extensive description of Calvin's twofold role of the pastor:

> Here, then, is the sovereign power with which the pastors of the church, by whatever name they be called, ought to be endowed. That is that they may dare boldly to do all things by God's Word; may compel all worldly power, glory, wisdom, and exaltation to yield to and obey his majesty; supported by his power, may command all from the highest even to the last; may build up Christ's household and cast down Satan's; may feed the sheep and drive away the wolves; may instruct and exhort the teachable; may accuse, rebuke, and subdue the rebellious and stubborn; may bind and loose; finally, if need be, may launch thunderbolts and lightning, *but do all things in God's Word* (1559:115.)

As we read Calvin's reply to Sadolet we are confronted by the former's emphasis on the Word of God as a primary source of defending the truth. We see this in practice in his reply, as he frequently quotes Scripture to support his points, unlike Sadolet. Consequently it would appear that, in this reply, Calvin was fulfilling the "refuting error" aspect of his pastoral duties.

4. Calvin's concern for the salvation of the Genevans

Third, a key feature in both Sadolet's letter and Calvin's reply is their chief concern for the salvation of the Genevans. It is clear as one reads both Sadolet and Calvin's letters that the two men both bore this concern. Hence the subject of justification is a significant discussion in both letters alongside the subject of the authority of the church (Olin 2000:13). In his effort to entreat the Genevans to be restored to the Catholic Church, Sadolet seemed to think it appropriate to begin by pointing out his concern for the salvation of the Genevans. After assuring them of his affection and his concern that they would be restored to the Catholic Church in his introduction, he remarks:

> And that we may begin with what we deem most seasonable, I presume, dearest brethren, that both you and I, and all else besides who have put their faith and hope in Christ, do, and have done so, for this one reason, viz., that we may obtain salvation for themselves and their souls—not salvation which is mortal, and will quickly perish, but one which is ever-during and immortal, which is truly attainable only in heaven, and by no means on earth (Sadolet, 1539:28.)

Sadolet seemed convinced that Geneva's move towards the Reformation was putting in jeopardy what should have been their main area of concern, and the church's, for the people, the salvation of themselves and their souls. For he later concluded,

> ...we have shown you, dearest brethren, or, rather, attempted to show (for our discourse is not equal to the magnitude of the subject), how important it is, how deeply it concerns us to secure our soul and its salvation, because our soul is our whole selves, is properly our good and only good, while all other goods are foreign to us, and disjoined from us, and cannot in any degree be enjoyed, if we fail of obtaining this, which is first and truly ours (Sadolet, 1539:30).

Also, the Day of Judgment analogy towards the end of Sadolet's letter makes this concern obvious. In this analogy, Sadolet compares the defence and the fate of two people, one who remained a devout Catholic and one a former Catholic who embraced Protestantism, before God on the Day of Judgment. Of course, according to Sadolet, before the judgment seat of God, the devout Catholic is saved whereas the Catholic turned Protestant is condemned.

If Sadolet's letter was filled with concern for the salvation of the Genevans, the more so was Calvin's reply permeated with zealous concern for the salvation of his former flock.

First, Calvin assured his readers that his concern for the Genevans together with the Reformers had been for their salvation, which Sadolet was undermining with his accusations:

> But as it was of the greatest importance to your cause to throw complete discredit on our words, you labour to the utmost to fill them with sinister suspicions of the zeal which they saw us manifesting for their salvation. (1539:225.)

Secondly, in his defence of the Reformers' conduct against Sadolet's accusation that their real motives were to satisfy their greed and misplaced ambition in the course of the Reformation, Calvin does so by pointing out that if they had desired what Sadolet alleged, they would have continued in their scholarly endeavours and remained in the Catholic church where they would have had a better chance of achieving their goals (Calvin, 1539:225-226). And yet they did not because their ultimate aim was "to promote the kingdom of Christ by their poverty and insignificance" (Calvin, 1539:227).

Thirdly, Calvin agreed with Sadolet that distorted worship of God was more dangerous to salvation than any other peril, but he insisted that human beings know what the right form of worship is through the Spirit working through the Word of God and not apart from it

(Calvin, 1539:229-231)m and as we have seen, the Word of God was the key feature through which the pastor exercised his duty.

Fourthly, in Calvin's defence of Protestant doctrines, justification, the chief doctrine concerning salvation in the Reformers' view, was accorded more attention than the rest of the doctrines because Calvin saw it as fundamental to salvation:

> In the first place, you touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. Is this as a knotty and useless question? Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown. (Calvin, 1539:234.)

Fifthly, Calvin's parallel analogy to Sadolet's of Judgment Day, which is the former's conversion story it seems (Parker, 2006:199), serves as a final defence of Protestantism and undoubtedly an assurance to the Genevans of their salvation, which is not dependent on their remaining in the Catholic Church, but is rooted in genuine conversion to the Christian faith (1539:246-253).

5. Conclusion

Although undoubtedly a masterly piece of academic writing, as we read Calvin's reply we are confronted by its pastoral nature. Calvin wrote this letter while in Strasbourg, released from his pastoral duties, out of touch with the Genevans; yet he saw it as his pastoral obligation to reply to Sadolet to defend and reassure his flock of their right standing with God, even though outside the Catholic Church. Thus, it would not be far-fetched to conclude that Calvin's reply to Sadolet, more than being an academic treatise, was his way of fulfilling his pastoral obligation to the Genevans. As Fatio (1986:1) put it, "...Calvin was above all a pastor, and his work as a reformer was simply the extension of his pastoral ministry." It would be worthwhile then in the study of the rest of Calvin's works to consider this pastoral framework.

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