

SUMMARY: Dedicatory epistle of 6 May 1581 to Oxford in *Divers Sermons of Master John Calvin Concerning the Divinity, Humanity and Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ*, a translation by Thomas Stocker of Calvin's *Plusieurs sermons touchant la divinite, humanite et nativite de nostre Seigneur Jesus Christ*. At the time of publication, Oxford was in the Tower, where he had been confined by the Queen after the birth of his illegitimate son by Anne Vavasour on 21 March 1581. Oxford's imprisonment may have caused a personal religious crisis. Stocker's epistle implies that Oxford has recently returned to the active practice of Protestantism ('to strengthen you in that good course which he of his mere love and singular goodness hath so lately begun in you'), and that he is being counselled by a clergyman ('chiefly because (sir) you seek by all means possible . . . to use conference with a certain godly learned man for the better reforming of yourself and your whole family to the obedience of the word'). It seem presumptuous of Stocker to have put such personal matters into print. However, he may have considered that he had licence to do so based on an earlier relationship with the 16th Earl. Stocker reminds Oxford that he was 'sometimes, as then very young, brought up in your Lordship's father's house'.

To the right honourable Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxenford, Viscount Bulbeck, Lord of Escalles and Badlesmere, and Lord Great Chamberlain of England, the Lord God grant increase [+of] a lively and true faith, and continuance in the zeal of the blessed religion of our alone Saviour Jesus Christ forever.

It is impossible, right Honourable, for a man to turn himself any kind of way here in this word, either in calling to mind generally the heavens and earth, either yet particularly the glorious garnishing, light, brightness & movings of the one and the great plenty of all sorts of beasts, fowls and fruits of the other, together with the infinite diversity of flowers wherewith God by his heavenly wisdom and goodness every year afresh marvellously clotheth and repaireth them, as it were, with rich and beautiful attires and colours, but that he, as often (I say) as he beholdeth these so wonderful works of his majesty, must even so often needs confess that there is set before his eyes a most large matter & argument for him to glorify the altogether good & only omnipotent God who hath not created all things for the use of man only, but also even for his delight and pleasure. For he is so good and glorious a father to all his children as that his very meaning is (so we take them modestly and thankfully) to have us freely use his benefits for our necessity, yea, and receive them with pleasure and delight without scruple of conscience.

For else, to what purpose should we [sic] have created such a number of sorts of fruits differing in substance, strength and nouriture, & of so sundry shapes in greatness, thickness & colour, in smell, taste & savour, except it had been both to strengthen & delight us? For doth wine only strengthen our bodies? Doth it not likewise, as David reckoneth it amongst the benefits of the Almighty, glad the heart of man? And therefore what is he that can be so blockish as not to think as much generally of all the rest of the benefits of God which he daily bestoweth upon us for the sustaining of our bodies? Yet

notwithstanding, this were not enough for us hereupon to acknowledge, as our duty is, the fatherly care which he hath over our present life in administering to us whatsoever is needful for the same, except we eftsoons learned also hereby that he alone who principally is the father of our souls (for it is he that hath created and regenerated them) giveth the food of everlasting life unto them by the bread of his holy word, to the end we might be drawn, as it were by degrees, by our bodily food to attain unto spiritual life, and thereby eternally live in bliss which never shall have end.

And indeed the eternal God brought the children of Israel hereunto by that manna wherewith he fed them in the wilderness. Whereupon it will come to pass that if we do as many of them did who made none other reckoning but of stuffing their paunches, and thereby looked into none other matter, that we also shall die even as they did. For as it is impossible for us to live here in this world without the use of bread and other food which God the Creator hath ordained as means whereby he, adjoining thereto his heavenly power, would sustain us in this corporal life, even so likewise is it as impossible to us to be partakers of everlasting life except we be fed with this food of the soul wherewith, being appointed by God to the same end, the Holy Ghost serveth, as it were, for an instrument to cause us possess, through a lively and true faith, Christ Jesus, who is alone given to us for life, and without whom we continually abide in death. Wherefore, seeing the soul is more excellent than the body, the heavenly bread more precious than corruptible bread, and everlasting life far more worth than the transitory life for a day, it is most certain that heavenly benefits are without all comparison a great deal more excellent than corporal, and to be preferred before them.

Now if we would at the least consider, as indeed we ought, what a benefit were it to have the true fear and knowledge of God instead of being altogether ignorant thereof and contemning the same, to trust surely in him alone instead of trusting too too much unto ourselves, unfeignedly to love our neighbours instead of envying and hating of them before we are regenerate, and to have a pure and sound heart belonging to everlasting life instead of all iniquity wherein we bathe and feed ourselves as fish in the water? To be short, if we think it no small matter that all supernatural gifts altogether abolished in man through sin be restored to us through Christ Jesus alone, and that reason, understanding, judgment, will and other such natural gifts which man had of his Creator, howbeit corrupted by the same fall, be likewise through the same Saviour renewed in us, and to speak in one word, if the image of God which was defaced by man his disobedience be repaired in us by our Redeemer, who alone hath reconciled us to God his father, cleansing us from our sins, making us his brethren and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, freed from the tyranny of sin and of the devil, impoverishing himself to make us princes and companions with angels, and by his death recovering us life, if these inestimable benefits (I say) be not lightly considered of us, we should esteem of them, as it is good reason, above all other things, yea, we should leave & forsake all other things to seek and enjoy them, and never be wearied with any pain, neither yet faint-hearted, seeing it is the bread of the word of God that we must all seek after.

And this bread, amongst other virtues, hath this, that is, it maketh him who is daily fed therewith more and more increase in the unity of faith until such time as he cometh to the

fullness of a perfect man. And without faith there is no salvation, and faith (as the apostle witnesseth) cometh by hearing, and hearing cometh by preaching of the word, so that without hearing of the word preached there can be no faith, and consequently, no salvation. This bread also of the word hath so pleasant a taste as that if the sweetness of honey itself be compared with it, it shall be as bitter as gall. Surely the godliest and best fruits of the earth in respect of this which restoreth the soul, rejoiceth the heart, strengtheneth the weak, and comforteth the afflicted are all but rotten, and no whit pleasant or delightful. To be short, over and besides that we are with so great pleasure thereby in such sort strengthened as no tongue is able to express, we are moreover so enriched therewith as that all the treasures in this world, in regard of it, can be but filthy and stinking. And therefore everyone is to consider and understand that the whole felicity of man resteth in this spiritual food. Here is likewise to be joined withal that our labour in travailing for the same shall not be lost, for God the Creator sendeth us not at this day (thanks be given to him for it forever) scarcity of this manna and heavenly doctrine, but most abundantly giveth and poureth it abroad without money all the world over to all such as hunger after it, but unto such as are full gorged and loathed therewith, so that they reject it and call it up again by reason of their unthankfulness, it turneth to them instead of good nutriment into deadly poison.

And contrariwise, the more a man desireth it, the more it nourisheth & doth him good. Wherefore our good God and loving father, knowing what need we have to be strengthened with this spiritual food, not for a day only but even so long as we shall creep here upon the earth, and must have it put into our mouths like young children, hath appointed pastors & teachers in his church soundly and truly to break unto all his faithful ones this bread of his word, even as a father who, giving bread to his children, cutteth every one such a morsel as he seeth to be most necessary for him. And therefore in this behalf (my good Lord) the Church of England hath greatly to thank the Lord our God in that he hath furnished it with such a number of godly, faithful and sound ministers as distribute unto his people the word of truth. For they, instead of confusedly heaping & huddling one thing in another's neck, do very familiarly and plainly handle and dispose the matter by piecemeal, and after an excellent good order, and instead of cutting, tearing in sunder, wresting it into a wrong sense and resting in the bark without making a through entrance, do soundly, perfectly, truly, very reverently and without falsifying deliver it unto us, and feed our souls with the marrow thereof.

Wherefore, right Honourable, seeing this food of the soul which is the word of God is so precious a thing as that all the kingdoms of the world are not valuable unto it, I have taken boldness to beseech your Honour to be the patron and defender of this my poor travail in the translation of these sermons following, which I have done for the benefit & good of the meanly lettered sort of my countrymen, very notably & learnedly handled by M. John Calvin, whose authority & sound dealing in such causes if I should take in hand to commend, I should seem (as we say) with a lantern to give light unto the bright-shining sun, & therefore will hold my peace.

Again, the doctrine set down by him in them affordeth unto all the readers thereof so great commodity of itself as that it needeth not the commendation of any other. And I

have the rather dedicated this my rude translation unto your Lordship, partly for that I would show some piece of my humble duty unto your Honour as a public testimony thereof, in respect of being sometimes, as then very young, brought up in your Lordship's father's house, but especially & chiefly because (sir) you seek by all means possible (the Lord be thanked for it, & continue you in the same mind all your life long, to his glory) to use conference with a certain godly learned man for the better reforming of yourself and your whole family to the obedience of the word. Which word, as Solomon saith, *Shall guide you when you walk, watch for you when you sleep, and talk with you when you are awake* [MN: Proverbs 6:22]. And in the verse following he saith, *That the word is a lantern and instruction, a light & correction, for instructions are the way of life etc.* Thus have I, my good Lord, boldly presumed of your noble and gracious cour[t]esy to present these sermons unto your Honour, beseeching you in the behalf of the church of God to accept of them. In the meanwhile I shall beseech the Lord our God, the father of all mercy and consolation, to strengthen you in that good course which he of his mere love and singular goodness hath so lately begun in you, that you may be like unto a comfortable bright-shining light in his church, to show yourself a constant maintainer of the truth of the glorious gospel of his dear son Christ Jesus, our Lord, for the stirring up of many thereto. And because I fear that I have troubled your Lordship with an overlong epistle, I most humbly take my leave, committing both you and all your affairs to the protection of the almighty and most sacred majesty. London, the 6 of May 1581.

Your Lordship's most dutifully to be commanded in the Lord Jesus,
Thomas Stocker