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*When Orthodoxy Is Not Enough:
Calvin on Job's Interlocutors*



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At the turn of the nineteenth century, Nathanael Emmons was a no-bones-about-it, hard-line Calvinistic preacher in the Congregational Church in Franklin, Massachusetts. For nearly thirty years he had held forth from the pulpit of this small, New England village, serving a steady diet of purest Reformed theology for his parishioners' consumption. Under his ministry God had brought revival to Franklin in 1784, proof to his congregation that, in spite of his harshness, he was God's man for their needs.

Emmons was a disciplined homiletician, and would brook no wandering attention during his sermons. The ministry of the Word was serious business. He was known to dismount the pulpit and walk out of church, right in the middle of a sermon, if he felt the people were not listening carefully to what he said. Only when they pled with him to return and promised their undivided attention would he resume his pulpit ministry.

His sermons were highly logical and focused on clear and concise exposition of the Word of God, concluded, in typical Puritan style, by an elaboration of "uses" to which the message should be put. Emmons was particularly adamant about the Sabbath, and harangued his congregation so often and so effectively that most of them adopted such practices as bank-

ing their fires on Saturday evenings so as to avoid having to start a new one on the morning of the Lord's Day. So when Stephen Mann, a teen-aged member of the church, skipped worship one Sunday to go swimming, and drowned, nearly everyone in Franklin knew what to expect at the funeral. Jonathan Messerli gives us the details:

He had said it in many ways, but it was always the same theme. Profaning the Lord's Day held terrible consequences for the evildoer.

... No doubt in reviewing the life of Stephen [Emmons] found little or no evidence of the possibility of conversion. The inevitable conclusion was an agonizing judgment. Stephen had died unconverted and while willfully sinning. His future life would be one of eternal punishment. The only ray of comfort to be gained from the tragedy was that the incident was a sign, a special warning to the survivors of the imminence of death and the folly of placing themselves outside God's grace.¹

Probably few in the congregation were surprised. They knew Emmons all too well. But for Stephen Mann's younger brother, it was the last straw. He had tried for years to believe in Christ and accept the doctrines of the Genevan Reformer, but had found Emmons increasingly too much to bear. This tirade at Stephen's funeral was the final blow, and with it, Horace Mann, who would become the father of American public education, rejected Calvinism and the Church and headed off to the secular academy and Unitarianism.

We need not wonder what Calvin might have thought about such an approach to pastoral ministry on the part of this one of his spiritual descendants. In his sermons on the book of Job, Calvin makes clear that, when ministering the Word of God to people in times of deep, personal need—as, indeed, at all other times—mere orthodoxy is not enough. The ministry of the Word must be accompanied by compassion, deep affections, and careful consideration of the needs of those to whom one ministers, or the glorious doctrines of divine sovereignty and grace will not have their intended effect. Indeed, they may well be used in such a way as to drive

another into sin, leaving the preacher culpable before God for irresponsible and destructive use of his gifts and office.

We want to examine several of the sermons in this series² in order to see how Calvin judged the work of those friends who came to Job in his hour of deepest distress in order to minister the Word of God to him. We will see that, while Calvin had much commendable to say about their theology, he, echoing the words of God himself (Job 42:7), condemned Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and warned his hearers to a more careful, considerate, and loving use of the sword of the Spirit. We will examine first Calvin's assessment of the theological content of the advice of Job's interlocutors, and then consider reasons why he condemned them as failed counselors.

A COMMENDABLE THEOLOGY

There can be no doubt that, in the main, Calvin heartily concurred in the theology which serves as the basis of the advice of Job's friends. He was unqualified in his endorsement of their theological insights into the ways of God with the unrepentant. He labeled their teaching "good doctrine;"³ received their advice as "authentic summons" from God;⁴ embraced their counsel as good, and a very useful warning to sinners;⁵ and declared that the Holy Spirit himself was speaking through the mouths of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.⁶ Specifically, Calvin found the doctrine of Job's friends to be accurately representative of biblical teaching on the majesty and power of God, the sinfulness of men, the sovereignty and glory of God, and the mysterious ways of his love toward his chosen people.

The majesty and power of God

Calvin commended Eliphaz for his insight into the majesty and power of God. As the Temanite had been bold to declare, God is so great, so majestic and awesome, that men ought always to fear him:

For we see why we are not as teachable as we should be: namely, because we do not sufficiently know the majesty of God to be

touched by fear of him. Therefore we need to know how God governs the world, and to consider his infinite righteousness, power, and wisdom.⁷

Calvin considered that Eliphaz and Bildad rightly argued that we should not have to be forced to acknowledge God's greatness; rather, we should recognize every opportunity that God supplies for calling us to worship, and render him the praise that is his due. From his throne on high God rules all creation; we should be careful to discern his good and perfect will in all we see:

Since it is so, let us conclude that it is only right that there should be power, principality, and astonishment toward him; that is to say, that we should do him homage as to him who rules, and that there should be fear and dread in us, that with all reverence we should recognize him as master and Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.⁸

There is a danger, when people are overcome by fears and trials, of looking too much to those fears, so that we lose sight of the good and majestic, all-powerful God who allows such tribulations to come to us. Indeed, this seems to have been Job's failing, as is evident in God's response to him in chapters 38-41. Rather than dwell on our hardship and suffering, we should turn our hearts in praise, admiration, and fear of him who reigns as Lord of all.

The sinfulness of men

Before such a God men are as nothing, and have no reason, apart from his grace, to expect any good from him whatsoever.⁹ We should rather be quick to admit our faults before him, and to seek mercy and help in our time of need.¹⁰ Calvin agrees with Eliphaz, that we should "be mindful of our faults to be displeased with them," for by this means God "extends his hand to lead us to salvation."¹¹ We must guard against arrogance in God's presence, admit our hypocrisies and lies, tremble before his majesty, and guard against presumption. And we should, as Bildad suggests, do this as an ongoing dis-

cipline, without having to "wait for him to drag us" before him for an account of our behavior.¹² It is futile for puny men to strive with God, or be angry against him.¹³ Since the majestic God is in no way profited by sinful men, we should be very careful to approach him with all due reverence. As Calvin observed concerning Eliphaz's doctrine:

So then, let us note well what is said in this passage, that when man will have taken pains to live in holiness, and in uprightness, according as God commands him, it is not to say that he has been the least bit profitable to God in his whole life; he has been profitable only to himself; but yet our Lord to give us courage to do well surely wishes to accept that which in itself is of no profit; he requires it as if he were improved by it, and he declares to us that our efforts will be neither lost nor useless.¹⁴

All the more ought we to note well what is herein contained: namely, that it is vain for us to make believe that we can bring some profit to God; it is only pure foolishness, it is only vain imagination. And so when we shall have conceived what his highness is, let us learn to recognize our faults in all humility, not having any reply; for we cannot bring any reproach against him, as also we cannot allege to him that he has received anything from us, nor that he is in anywise obligated.¹⁵

The sovereignty and glory of God

Calvin affirmed Bildad's doctrine concerning the sovereignty and glory of God:

He so regulates all the order of the world that notwithstanding that things are here confused, and they stir about, and there are many changes, and troubles; nevertheless God does not cease to bring everything to such an end as he has ordained and deliberated in himself. It is true that if we cast our glance below, we cannot see this dominion as peaceable as it is here declared to us; but if we contemplate the providence of God, it is certain that in the midst of the troubles and all the revolutions of the world we shall know that God governs everything as it seems good to him.¹⁶

As Bildad indicated in his counsel to Job, we ought not question the motives and means of such a God, but, rather, worship him in full faith and humility.¹⁷

This God whom we must trust, even in the midst of difficulties and confusion, is of such light and glory that even the stars of heaven pale into insignificance when compared with him.¹⁸ We may in no way detract from God's glory, as Job seemed to be implying when he intimated that there was some unfairness in God for his not revealing the reason for the sufferer's torment. We flail in vain if we suppose to inflict some bruise on the glory of the sovereign, all-wise God, for at the end of the day, all "must be abased, and God must remain in his perfection, and we must recognize that there is neither justice, nor power, nor wisdom except in him alone; that all the rest is only vanity."¹⁹

The mysterious ways of God's love

Calvin affirmed Eliphaz's claim that God's love was present even in his discipline, be it ever so harsh.²⁰ Such corrections as he sends "are as testimonies that God is ready to receive us in mercy, if we acknowledge our faults and sincerely ask him for forgiveness."²¹ Therefore, we ought not strive against his afflictions, which God sends to bless and correct us, but accept his chastenings as expression of his fatherly love.²² We may not always be able to understand *why* God does what he does, but *that* he does it, and that he does it as our *loving Father*, must be accepted by faith, with humility, so that we might discover the blessings he has for us in his chastening rod.²³ His thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are higher than ours. Calvin advised the hearer to heed these observations, cast down all presumption, and cultivate a heart of faith and submission whenever it is the good pleasure of God to bring the rod against us.

All these doctrines, precious especially to those in the Reformed tradition, Calvin detected in the speeches of Job's interlocutors, and commended as true and wholesome. He found little to disagree with in their doctrine. It was in the "use" they made of those doctrines that Eliphaz, Bildad, and

Zophar anticipated the harshness and lack of sympathy in the ministry of such as Nathanael Emmons.

A Deplorable Practice

As affirming as were his words for the doctrine of Job's interlocutors, his conclusions regarding their application of that doctrine were condemning. Their tactics with Job were deplorable, and showed that they were more interested in their own views and advancement than in Job's well being. Calvin accused the counselors of trucking in half-truths;²⁴ offering ill-timed correctives;²⁵ misapplying their doctrine;²⁶ and of doing "great wrong and injury" to the sufferer.²⁷ Their words to Job, notwithstanding the sound doctrine with which they were composed, were "windy," lacking substance, and unedifying.²⁸ In short, Job's friends had failed him. They had become his enemies, and had betrayed and persecuted him.²⁹ Their lack of sympathy and pity constituted an acute failure of friendship, rendering their otherwise careful doctrine "foolish."³⁰ Job's friends "had apparently good arguments and reasons, from which one could gather useful doctrine." However, they built poorly on that foundation, and Calvin faulted them and condemned their attempts to minister God's grace to Job.³¹

Orthodoxy, it seems, is not enough. Job's friends should have found a way to offer him gentle comfort, to mix some sugar (Calvin's image) with their correctives, in order to show the love of Christ to their friend, so that Job might be able to "taste what is going to be said," and find profit in it.³² Their failure, as Calvin saw it, lay in two principal areas: they did not think to consider their own sinfulness before pronouncing so harshly on Job's; and they failed to carry out the requirements of loving their neighbor as themselves.

Failure to examine themselves

Calvin observed that we can only show proper pity for those who suffer when we first consider our own faults, "since we have deserved as much or more" as they are receiving.³³ This Job's counselors failed to do. Calvin insisted that if we are not moved to pity a suffering person, even one who may

be suffering for his sins, "there is no humaneness in us."³⁴ If, as we approach those who suffer, ostensibly to succor them, we do not take time to consider our own faults, and to acknowledge how much pity we ourselves require from our loving God, we cannot but act with cruelty toward those we seek to help.³⁵ Instead of loving them we usurp the place of God, and act in judgment toward them, not remembering, as Calvin observed, "We all must appear before the judgment-seat of God."³⁶ Only by first condemning ourselves in the face of the suffering of others can we expect to pity and act humanely toward them.³⁷ This Job's friends failed to do as they bore down upon him, fully assured of the rightness of their doctrine. Instead of loving Job they acted inhumanely toward him, completely without compassion or pity, and so made themselves enemies not only of Job, but of God: "Now if God calls us to humaneness, and we go entirely the opposite way, is it not fighting against him openly?"³⁸

There is no one-size-fits-all standard for the use of God's Word in ministering to those who suffer. Each person, each circumstance must be considered separately, and according to the needs of the situation.³⁹ We cannot have pity on those whose suffering we will not enter into as that of which we ourselves are deserving, and more. And we cannot expect that pat doctrinal answers will soothe the pain of those who suffer. More in the way of brotherly kindness and love is required than this.

A failure of love

Thus, Job's counselors failed to fulfill the requirement of God's Word to love their neighbor as themselves. Job himself thus accused his friends, as Calvin observed, "saying that if they were in such an extremity as he was they would surely wish to be handled more gently."⁴⁰ Job's friends, Calvin suggested, were moved more by "ambition, hatred, pride, avarice" than by love for the sufferer; they were more interested in their own advancement and views than Job's needs. They were blind to what Job required in the situation, and resolved only to make their points in judgment against him.⁴¹ Calvin summarized:

This is what we have to remember from this passage, when Job remonstrates against those who were accusing him unjustly, that since they would not be willing that someone should do likewise to them, they must not thus abuse his patience. This, in summary, is what we have to gather.⁴²

Sound doctrine, according to Calvin, is no substitute for compassionate love. Granted, we cannot rightly love others if all we have to offer them are vain hopes, wishful thinking, or empty clichés. We must speak the truth if we hope to help others find the grace of God to help in their time of need. But, as Paul reminds us, we must ever speak that truth in love, letting our speech be seasoned with grace and our words gentle and edifying (Ephesians 4.15; Colossians 4.6; Ephesians 4.29). From the beginning of their advice to Job clear through to the bitter end, Job's friends failed in this most important obligation, rendering their counsel useless and harmful, and themselves subject to the gathering wrath of God.

Uses

Would it have made a difference in the outcome of Job's story if Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had understood that mere orthodoxy is not enough when one is ministering the Word of God? We'll never know. Nor can we know what might have been the outcome in Horace Mann's life if Nathanael Emmons had wept with those who were weeping and shown more compassion for a suffering family. But we can know, and Calvin has shown us, what we must do with the precious truths of Reformed theology entrusted to us by our sovereign God. We must ever bear in mind—whether in preaching and teaching, counseling, or working through cases of church discipline—that the Word of God is to be ministered according to the love of God, with compassion and pity for those who suffer, whatever the nature of their suffering may be. Glib summaries of orthodox theology do not sound practice make. The end of God's commandments is love, as Paul reminds us (1 Timothy 1.5); therefore, in all the uses to which we would put the Scriptures and Reformed doctrine, let

our efforts be permeated by love. For when love is lacking, orthodoxy alone is not enough to accomplish the good and loving purposes of God.

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Notes

1. Jonathan Messerli, *Horace Mann: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 8ff, 25.
2. All references to Calvin's sermons on Job are from Leroy Nixon, translator, *John Calvin: Sermons from Job* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).
3. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 158.
4. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 160.
5. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 151.
6. Sermon on Job 22:1-8, 146.
7. Sermon on Job 5:17-18, 31.
8. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 153.
9. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 163.
10. Sermon on Job 22:1-8, 137.
11. Sermon on Job 22:1-8, 145.
12. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 161.
13. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 154-155.
14. Sermon on Job 22:1-8, 140.
15. Sermon on Job 22:1-8, 145.
16. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 152-153.
17. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 153.
18. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 162.
19. Sermon on Job 25:1-6, 163.
20. Sermon on Job 5:17-18, 32-33.
21. Sermon on Job 5:17-18, 33.

22. Sermon on Job 5:17-18, 36-37.
23. Sermon on Job 5:17-18, 43.
24. Sermon on Job 9:1-6, 46.
25. Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 94.
26. Sermon on Job 9:1-6, 46; Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 94; Sermon on Job 22:1-8, 137-47.
27. Sermon on Job 22:1-8, 148.
28. Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 95.
29. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 108.
30. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 109, 110-12; Sermon on Job 32:1-3, 215.
31. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 214.
32. Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 92-93; Sermon on Job 5:17-18, 31-32.
33. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 110.
34. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 111.
35. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 113.
36. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 113.
37. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 113.
38. Sermon on Job 19:17-25, 114.
39. Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 94.
40. Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 98.
41. Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 98.
42. Sermon on Job 16:1-9, 99.