

The Mercy of God

extract from Proposition XIII § x, xi

§ x. . . . Nevertheless, I do not doubt that many people whose understanding had been clouded by these ceremonies, still by the mercy of God have experienced some secret¹ sense of the mystery although they could not clearly understand because it was hidden* from them by their attachment to outward things. And because that secret sense penetrated their comprehension, they threw themselves into carnal explanations, such as imagining that the substance of the bread was changed, or that if the substance was not changed, still the body was also there, etc.²

In this case I am inclined to judge Calvin very favorably, because he is candid enough to confess that he neither understands it nor can express it in words, but still by an experience of feeling he can say, “The Lord is spiritually

¹ Secret as in intimate or unspoken, not clandestine.

² The Latin text of this paragraph is somewhat clearer than the English: *Non tamen dubito, quin plerique, quorum intellectus obscurati fuerunt istis ceremoniis, per misericordiam Dei secretum aliquem mysterii sensum habuerint, quod distincte intelligere non potuerunt quia ab illis velatum erat, dum externis istis adeo adhærebant, & secreto illo sensu compuncti, dum in imaginationibus & comprehensionibus conjecturam facerent, in eas carnales sententias prolapsi sunt, existimandi substantiam panis transsubstantiari, vel substantiam corporis cum pane esse, etc.* “I do not doubt that many, of whom the intellect was obscured by these ceremonies, by the mercy of God had some secret sense of the mystery, which they could not distinctly understand, since it was veiled from them while they stuck so much to those externals. Impelled by that secret sense, while they made conjectures in the imagination and comprehension, they slipped down into those carnal opinions, thinking that the substance of the bread was transubstantiated, or that the substance of the body was with the bread, etc.”

present.” I do not doubt that Calvin sometimes had a sense of the Lord’s presence without this ceremony, so that the understanding which God gave him made him correctly reject the false notions of transubstantiation and consubstantiation, though he did not know what to establish instead of them. He might have reached further into the knowledge of this mystery than many that went before him, if he had waited in the Light that makes all things plain.³ But instead he labored in his own understanding to stick* to that external ceremony by saying that the spiritual presence is *chiefly* in that ceremony, or specially related to it (though the presence is *not only* in the ceremony, as he well knew by experience).

§ xi. Finally, if at this day anyone practiced this ceremony in the same manner as the primitive Christians did, as recorded in Scripture, with a true tenderness of spirit and with a conscience really drawn* towards God (still, as far as I know, no one does this) I would not hesitate to say that they might be indulged in it, and the Lord might value them, and appear to them in the use of these ceremonies for a time — many of us have experienced him doing this in the time of our ignorance — provided that they did not try to impose these rites on others, nor judge those who feel themselves liberated from these things, nor stick to these things stubbornly.⁴ We certainly know that the day has dawned in which God has arisen and has dismissed all those ceremonies and rites, and that now he should only be worshipped in Spirit. He appears to those who wait upon him. To seek God in these things is to seek the living among the dead, like Mary at the sepulchre,⁵ for we know that he is risen and revealed in Spirit, and leads his children out of

³ Ephesians 5:13 RB

⁴ The Latin text adds: *cum a Domino ejusque Spiritu inde evocentur*, “when they are called away by the Lord and his Spirit.”

⁵ Luke 24:5.

these rudiments, so that they may walk with him in his Light: to him be glory forever. Amen.

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition XIII § x, xi (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 406-407 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 313-314.