

# Necessity of Reforming the Church 4 of 4 (1544)

by John Calvin

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*The church is in a state of desperation and needs the protection of the princes to reform it and prevent its final destruction.*

**Duration:** 25:08

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 11:27

**Topics:** "Church Reform", "Spiritual Revival"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by describing the current state of the church as a fearful calamity, with a squalid and unsightly form and widespread devastation. The speaker urges the audience, including the emperor and princes, to take action and protect the church, as even worse calamities are looming. The speaker emphasizes the importance of this work, stating that it should take precedence over other concerns. The sermon concludes with a warning that without immediate intervention, the church in Germany will face final destruction.

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## Transcript

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If you do not have a web connection, please request a free printed catalogue. The Necessity of Reforming the Church Presented to the Imperial Diet at Spires, A.D. 1544 In the Name of All Who Wish Christ to Reign By John Calvin As read by Samantha Ellosite TAPE 4 Ambrose, in his day, had a controversy with Auxentius on the primary article of our faith, that is, the divinity of Christ. The Emperor favoured the view of Auxentius.

He does not, however, appeal to a general council, under the pretext of it being unlawful that so important a case should be decided in any other manner. He only demands that, being a question of faith, it should be discussed in the church in presence of the people. And to what end the provincial synods, which were

once regularly held twice a year, unless that bishops might consult together on emerging circumstances, as the Nineteenth Canon of the Council of Chalcedon explained.

An ancient enactment orders that the bishops of every province shall convene twice a year. The Council of Chalcedon gives us the reason that any errors which may have emerged may be corrected. Our opponents, contrary to what all know, deny the lawfulness of touching a corruption of doctrine or manners until it has been laid before a general council.

Nay, the very subterfuge by which the Arians Palladius and Secundinatus declined the Council of Aquileia was because it was not full and general, all the eastern bishops being absent, and few even of the west making their appearance. And it is certain that of the Italians scarcely a half had convened. The Roman bishop had neither come in person nor sent any one of his presbyters to represent him.

To all these objections Ambrose replies that it was not a thing without example for the western bishops to hold a synod since the practice was familiar to those of the east, that the pious emperors who summoned the council had acted wisely in leaving all at liberty to come without compelling any. And accordingly all who thought proper had come, none being prohibited. Though the heretics continued to press their quibbling objections, the holy fathers did not therefore abandon their purpose.

Assuredly, after such examples, your imperial majesty is not to be prohibited from using the means within your reach of bringing back the body of the empire to sacred concord. Though, as has been observed, our enemies who advise procrastination do it not with the view of shortly after consulting for the welfare of the church, but only of gaining time by delay, knowing that if they can throw us back to a general council the truce will be long enough. Let us, however, assume that there is no obstacle to a general council being immediately called.

Let us even assume that it has been summoned in good earnest, that the day of the meeting is at hand and all things prepared. The Roman pontiff will, of course, preside, or if he declines to come, he will send one of his cardinals as legate to preside in his stead, and he will doubtless select the one who he believes will be most faithful to his interests. The rest of the cardinals will take their seats and next them the bishops and abbots.

The seats beneath will be occupied by ordinary members who are for the most part selected for subservience to the views of those above. It will indeed happen that some few honest men will have seats among them, but they will be despised for the smallness of their number, and, made weak by fear or dispirited by the hopelessness of doing any good, will be silent. Should any one of them perchance attempt to speak, he will instantly be put down by noise and clamor, but the great body will be ready to suffer anything sooner than allow the church to be restored to a better condition.

I say nothing of doctrine, would that they could only come to the cause with an honest and docile temper. But it is certain and certainty itself that the single resolution of all will be not to listen to anything that is said, or to the arguments by which it is supported, be they what they may. Nay, they will not only stuff their ears with stubbornness and obstinacy, that they may not obey the truth, but will also arm themselves with ferocity to resist it.

And why? Is it credible that those who do not admit into their ears any mention of sound doctrine will spontaneously withdraw their opposition, as soon as it comes to be a matter of present practice? Can we hope that those who are constantly plotting to prevent the fallen kingdom of Christ from again rising in the

world will give a helping hand to raise it up and advance it? Will those who are now with fire and sword raging against the truth and doing all they can to wet and inflame the cruelty of others show themselves moderate and humane? But were there nothing else, I leave it to your prudence, most invincible emperor, and yours, most illustrious princes, to consider whether or not it is for the private interest of the Roman pontiff and his whole faction that the church should be restored to true order and its most corrupt condition reformed, according to the strict standard of the gospel? How much it is their want to forget their own advantage and in disregard of it to engage with heart and soul in promoting the common welfare you have learned by a sure experience. Sire, will you leave the church to them that they may decide concerning its reformation at their own will or rather their own caprice? Will you remain waiting for their nod, resolved never to consult for the church till they consent? If they know this to be your intention, they will disentangle themselves by an easy process. They will decide that things must remain as they are.

But let us suppose that they will be so overcome either by a sense of shame or by the authority of your majesty and the other princes as to put on some appearance of moderation and part with some small portion of their power. Will they, even of their own accord, condescend so far as to allow themselves to be reduced into order that the kingdom of Christ may be upraised? But if they will not, to what end is the care of reforming the church committed to them unless it be to expose the sheep to the wolves? Is there no other alternative? If there is no other alternative, it were better that the church should be given up as desperate than that she should fall into the hands of such physicians. It had indeed become those who have the name and hold the office of pastors to be the first of all to fly to her assistance.

It had, I admit, become them to come forward as leaders and unite the princes with them as associates and co-adjutors in this holy work. But what if they decline to do it themselves? What if they are unwilling it should be done by others? What if they leave not a stone unturned in order to prevent it? Are we then still to have regard to them? Must no man move till they give the signal? Must we still listen to that solemn song of theirs? Nothing must be attempted till the pope has approved? Let your majesty then be assured and do you, also most illustrious princes and distinguished personages, lay it to heart as a certain fact that the church not only betrayed, deserted and left destitute by her pastors but vexed, overwhelmed with calamity and doomed to destruction, throws herself on your protection. Nay, rather view it in this way.

God has now furnished you with the means of giving a sure and striking proof of your fidelity towards him. There is nothing in which all men ought to feel a deeper interest nothing in which God wishes us to exhibit a more intense zeal than in endeavoring that the glory of his name may remain unimpaired his kingdom be advanced and the pure doctrine which alone can guide us to true worship flourish in full vigor. How much more, therefore, does it become princes to make these things their care to design, commence and prosecute them to a close seeing God has honored them with a communication of his name that they may be on earth the guardians and vindicators of his glory.

Be unwilling, I beseech you, to lend an ear to ungodly men who either cajole you with false show of counsel in order that the church may receive no alleviation at your hand or disparage the cause, though it is the greatest of all causes that you may be more remiss in undertaking it or urge you to violent methods of proceeding in it. Hitherto most invincible emperor in endeavoring to inflame you with rage and in a manner close you in armor they have lost their labor and you will certainly transmit to posterity the distinguished praise both of mildness and prudence in not having suffered yourself to be once moved from moderation by the turbulent counsel which have been so often and so strongly pressed upon you. Be it at all times your care that this praise be not wrested from you by the importunity of our enemy.

Augustine acknowledges the discipline to be had which terrifies heretics but does not teach them. If heretics who by their intemperance and without any just cause disturb the church are to be treated with a mildness ensuring that instruction shall always precede chastisement how much more becoming is it to use humanity in this cause in which we call God and men to witness that we seek nothing but a sincere consent on both sides to the pure doctrine of God. That the Roman pontiff and his followers breathe nothing but blood and slaughter you yourself sire are the best witness.

Had you yielded to their fury Germany had long ago been deluged with her own blood. You too most illustrious princes well know the fact. Can it be that it is the spirit of God which drives them on headlong to such cruelty? But thus it is.

Licentiousness which has long stalked abroad without hindrance no sooner feels the curb than it breaks out into madness. If there are any besides those who desire to see us crushed by violence in arms either enkindled by the breath of others or instigated from within by an inconsiderate zeal they hate a cause which they know not. For the very same thing of which Tertullian complains in his apology as having happened to the church when she first arose is also experienced by us in the present day.

We are condemned merely from prejudice against our name without any investigation of our cause. And what do we contend for now save that our cause after due cognizance has once been taken of it may at length be decided according to truth and equity and not according to any falsely preconceived opinion? Sire, it is indeed a noble proof both of humanity and of singular wisdom that you have hitherto resisted the urgency which our enemies have endeavored to hurry you into an unjust severity. The next best thing is not to yield to the pernicious counsel of those who under specious pretexts for delay have for a long time hindered this holy work I mean the reformation of the church.

And what is worse, our endeavoring to prevent it altogether. There is perhaps one remaining difficulty which prevents you from commencing the work. Very many, not otherwise indisposed are deterring from engaging in this holy undertaking merely because antecedently to the attempt they despair of its success.

But here two things ought to be considered. The one, that the difficulty is not so great as it appears to be and the other, that however great it be there is nothing in it which ought to dispirit you when you reflect that it is the cause of God and that He overruling it both our hopes may be surpassed and our impressions prove erroneous. The former of these it is no part of my present design to explain.

A fitter opportunity will be found when once the matter comes to be taken into serious consideration. This only I will say, that the execution will be more expeditious and of less difficulty than is commonly supposed provided there is courage enough in attempting it. However, considering according to the well-known sentiment of an old proverb that there is nothing illustrious which is not also difficult and arduous can we wonder that in the greatest and most excellent of all causes we must fight our way through many difficulties? I have already observed that if we would not give deep offense to God our minds must take a loftier view for it is just to measure the power of God by the extent of our own powers if we hope no more of the restoration of the church than the present state of affairs seems to promise.

How slender soever the hope of success God visits to be of good courage and put far away everything like fear that we may with alacrity begur to ourselves for the work. Thus far at least let us do him honor confiding in his almighty power let us not decline to try what the success is which he may be pleased to give. In the present condition of the empire your imperial majesty and you most illustrious princes necessarily involved in various cares and distracted by a multiplicity of business are agitated and in a

manner tempest-tossed but be always assured that of all works this one is undoubtedly entitled to take precedence.

I feel what nerve, what earnestness, what urgency, what ardor the treatment of this subject requires and I am well aware that persons will not be wanting to express their surprise that on a subject so noble and splendid I should be so cold. But what could I do? I bend under its weight and magnitude and therefore see not how I can do better than set the matter before you simply without any embellishment of words that you may afterwards ponder and scrutinize it. First, call to mind the fearful calamities of the church which might move to pity even mines of iron nay, set before your eyes her squalid and unsightly form and the sad devastation which is everywhere beheld.

How long, pray, will you allow the spouse of Christ, the mother of you all to lie thus prostrated and afflicted thus too when she is imploring your protection and when the means of relief are in your hand? Next, consider how much worse calamities impend Final destruction cannot be far off unless you interpose with the utmost speed. Christ will indeed, in the way which to him seems good preserve his church miraculously and beyond human expectation. But this I say, that the consequence of a little longer delay on your part will be that in Germany we shall not have even the form of a church.

Look round and see how many indications threaten that ruin which it is your duty to prevent and announce that it is actually at hand. These things speak loud enough, though I were silent. Such indications, however, ought not only to move us by their actual aspect they ought also to remind us of coming vengeance.

Divine worship being vitiated by so many false opinions and perverted by so many impious and foul superstitions the sacred majesty of God is insulted with atrocious contumely his holy name profaned, his glory only not trampled underfoot. Nay, while the whole Christian world is openly polluted with idolatry men adore, instead of him, their own fictions. A thousand superstitions reign superstitions which are just so many open insults to him.

The power of Christ is almost obliterated from the minds of men the hope of salvation is transferred from him to empty frivolous and nugatory ceremonies while there is a pollution of the sacraments not less to be execrated. Baptism is deformed by numerous additions the holy supper is prostituted to all kinds of ignominy religion throughout has degenerated into an entirely different form. If we are negligent in remedying these evils God assuredly will not forget himself.

How could he who declares that he will not allow his honor to be in any way impaired fail to interpose when it is cast down and destroyed? How could he who threatens with destruction all the nations among whom prophecy shall have failed permit our open and contumacious contempt of the prophecies to go unpunished? How could he who punished a slight stain on his supper so severely in the Corinthians spare us in presuming to pollute it with so many unutterable blasphemies? How could he who by the mouths of all his prophets testifies and proclaims that he is armed with vengeance against idolatry leave untouched in us so many monstrous idolatries? Assuredly he does not so leave them for we see how, sword in hand, he urges and pursues us. The Turkish war now occupies the minds of all and fills them with alarm, it well may. Consultations are held to prepare the means of resistance.

This too is prudently and necessarily done. All exclaim that there is a need of no ordinary dispatch. I admit that there cannot be too much dispatch provided in the meantime the consultation which ought to be first the consultation how to restore the church to its proper state is neither neglected nor retarded.

Already delays more than enough have been interposed. The fuel of the Turkish war is within shut up in our bowels and must first be removed if we would successfully drive back the war itself. In future therefore as often as you shall hear the croaking note the business of reforming the church must be delayed for the present there will be time enough to accomplish it after other matters are transacted.

Remember, most invincible emperor and most illustrious princes that the matter on which you are to deliberate is whether you are to leave to your posterity some empire or none. Yet why do I speak of posterity? Even now while your own eyes behold it is half bent and totters to its final ruin. In regard to ourselves whatever be the event we will always be supported in the sight of God by the consciousness that we have desired both to promote His glory and do good to His church.

That we have labored faithfully for that end. That in short we have done all what we could. Our conscience tells us that in all our wishes and all our endeavors we have had no other aim.

And we have stayed by clear proof to testify the fact. And certainly while we feel assured that we both care for and do the work of the Lord we are also confident that He will by no means be wanting either to Himself or to it. But be the issue what it may we will never repent of having begun and having proceeded thus far.

The Holy Spirit is faithful and unerring witness to our doctrine. We know I say that it is the eternal truth of God that we preach. We are indeed desirous as we ought to be that our ministry may prove salutary to the world.

But to give it this effect belongs to God not to us. If to punish partly the ingratitude and partly the stubbornness of those to whom we desire to do good success must prove desperate and all things go to worse I will say what it befits a Christian man to say and what all who are true to this holy profession will subscribe. We will die but in death even be conquerors not only because through it we shall have a sure passage to a better life but because we know that our blood will be a seed to propagate the divine truth which men now despise.

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