

# Calvin on Offense When Christians Offend Christians

Several years ago I was speaking at a large weekend annual conference on the East Coast, leading several breakout sessions and giving one plenary. I had been asked to address popular culture so one breakout was on music and the other on film. Usually the conference consisted of lectures, I had been told, so the organizers were pleased I was going to use film clips in my main talk. The audience was skewed towards an older demographic—there were a handful of people in their 20s and 30s, a few more in their 40s, and the majority were older. In situations like this I've learned that some folk are easily offended, so I used scenes that contained no bad words or nudity or violence or sex—everything I showed could have appeared on television. In fact, far edgier scenes appear on television every day, but that's beside the point. Actually, the Bible contains far edgier scenes, but that's beside the point too. I wanted to help my listeners think about living faithfully as Christians in a world saturated by popular culture, not get into a debate about R-rated movies. That's an issue I'm very happy to address, but this day it was a tangent that would take us off topic—the Q&A period was too brief to do it justice.

After my talk a group of young adults asked if they could eat lunch with me. We had a wonderful conversation and I found them to be delightfully thoughtful, in love with the gospel but uncomfortable with the church. One was the



vocalist for a death metal band.

Later that afternoon my host took me aside and thanked me for my lecture. He mentioned a group needed to talk to me—he had told them they needed to do so but was unsure whether they would. (Sadly, they didn't.) During my plenary they had walked out, gone back to their hotel rooms and spent the hour praying that God would protect the conference from the demonic influence I was allowing in with my use of film.

They told my host that they had been deeply offended and would never attend the conference again.

Growing up in the church I found that certain phrases from Scripture seemed to carry particular weight. It was important not to “stumble” people or to cause them “offense,” because the apostle Paul had warned against such things in 1 Corinthians 8. If we failed at this point our testimony could “be destroyed” and that was something no

Christian wanted to have on their conscience. Even if we were convinced our actions were right and proper, we must “please” the other person for their “good” and be careful “not to please ourselves” (Romans 15). The apostle even gave practical examples of what he was talking about so no misunderstanding could arise. “It is good,” the apostle argued, “not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother [or sister] to stumble” (Romans 14:21).

The Christians at the conference were offended at my ▶

use of film clips. Over the years I've known Christians who have been stumbled by all sorts of things: bad words in a movie, *Rolling Stone* on a coffee table, drinking wine, nudes in an art museum, contemporary praise music, traditional worship music, rock music, never attending Sunday school, sipping single malt, smoking a cigar with old friends, having a tattoo.

Offense can arise even when the offended party agrees that no wrongdoing was involved. “There is nothing sinful about it,” one woman said, “but it offends me.” The woman had a Baptist background, and objected when her Presbyterian daughter ordered a glass of wine with dinner at a restaurant. She enjoyed wine herself occasionally, she said, but only at home, never in public where anyone could see you who might be stumbled. “It's offensive the way you Presbyterians flaunt your freedom,” she said.

All of this raises intriguing questions for the thoughtful Christian. When does giving and taking offense become spiritually problematic? Since the film clips offended some of the Christians in the audience, should I have used them?

Did I need to apologize for offending them? What are the proper biblical limits to embracing the freedom we have in Christ? Should the Presbyterian daughter never order wine in public because it offends her Baptist mother? And what role, if any, should our witness to Christ and his gospel before the world become part of the issue?

## What did Calvin say?

There are a number of ways I could approach answering these questions. I could simply go back to the texts of Scripture involved, analyze their meaning and provide some ideas about how we could respond in how we think and live. And we'll do that, but I want to also take into account the fact that we are not the first generation who has had to wrestle with this issue. We are not the first to have to reflect on these texts of Scripture and figure out what it means to live faithfully under their direction. As always when I study the Scriptures, I want to find a way to help make certain I am not inadvertently captive to the prejudices of my own culture and

period of history. One way to help with that is to consider what orthodox teachers from previous centuries have said about the texts we are studying. In this case we'll use John Calvin (1509-1564).

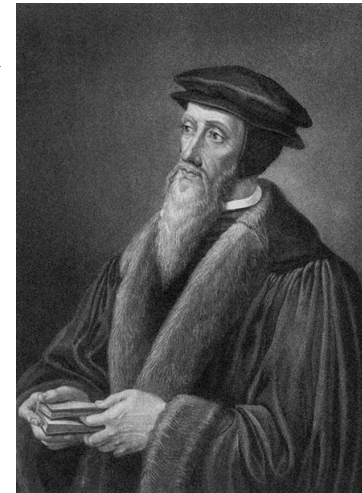
I reread Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* last year and was intrigued with what he wrote on this topic. As I think you'll see, his comments are remarkably applicable for the 21st century. Calvin was a lawyer known for careful scholarship, and unfortunately more than a few theologians have taken his thinking and reworked it into a rather cold, academic, abstract theological system. Calvin, on the other hand, I find to be warm, biblical, and practical. His concern was that the people of God would know God through Christ, love, understand and obey God's word in Scripture, and in gratitude for grace live faithfully to God's glory. So, let's get started.

I know this is a lot to ask in our busy world, but I would urge you to take the time as you read to look up the biblical texts I reference. I've written out quotes from Calvin because all readers will not have easy access to his works, but you do have access to a Bible so I don't always quote the text involved.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin addressed the issue of giving and taking offense in his chapter on Christian Freedom (chapter 19, sections 10-13). [By the way, for those who want to know, I am using the two-volume version of the *Institutes* translated by Ford Lewis Battles.] That's where it belongs because the question we are really asking is whether we are free to do something if that act causes someone offense.

For Calvin, the biblical doctrine of Christian freedom—or liberty in Christ—was of real significance. He referred to it as “an appendage of justification” (an essential aspect of being right with God), and therefore “a thing of prime necessity.” If it is neglected,

he said, believers will be plagued with doubt and made fearful and hesitant—all needlessly. He was keenly aware that the topic of freedom often roils up heated debate in the church, where differences of opinion can be difficult to resolve. ▶



## READING THE WORD

Text **Denis Haack**

*For, as soon as Christian freedom is mentioned, either passions boil or wild tumults rise unless these wanton spirits are opposed in time, who otherwise most wickedly corrupt the best things. Some, on the pretext of this freedom, shake off all obedience toward God and break out into unbridled license. Others disdain it, thinking that it takes away all moderation, order, and choice of things. What should we do here, hedged about with such perplexities? Shall we say good-by to Christian freedom, thus cutting off occasion for such dangers? But, as we have said, unless this freedom be comprehended, neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known. Rather, we must take care that so necessary a part of doctrine be not suppressed, yet at the same time that those absurd objections which are wont to arise be met.*

[III.19.1, p. 834]

Apparently some things in the 16th century are very similar to those in the 21st.

This is classic Calvin. His interest here is not simply doctrinal. Instead his interest flows out of a practical concern as a pastor for the people of God. In his view, the doctrine of Christian freedom must be taught, with care taken to correct misunderstandings, so that extreme views on either side—either license on the one hand or legalism on the other—may be adequately addressed. Far too much is at stake—“neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known”—for us to sidestep this potentially difficult, even divisive area, of biblical instruction. I think it would be wise for church elders and parents to reflect on Calvin’s insistence on this point so that neither a tendency to avoid conflict nor an assumption that the doctrine of Christian liberty is of secondary importance leads inadvertently to a lack of clear teaching on the topic.

### Calvin on Christian Freedom

For Calvin there are three essential parts to the doctrine of Christian freedom. The first is that because of the cross we are free from what is called “works righteousness”—the notion that our good works can in any way earn or merit the grace or favor of God. Calvin’s concern, in his words, is “that the conscience of believers, in seeking assurance of their justification before God, should rise above and advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness.” [III.19.2, p. 834]. In other words ▶



## READING THE WORD

the Christian should understand and believe that we are free from the burden of proving ourselves by works. Our being a child of God is not determined by what we do or don’t do, and nothing we do or don’t do earns God’s favor. This, Calvin believed, is something essential to the gospel of grace. It is also, I think, something that many evangelicals do not grasp, and so feel the weight of having to perform in order to feel accepted by God and by his people.

The second element in the doctrine of Christian freedom, Calvin taught, is related to what is called the “third use of the law.” This refers to the notion that God’s law given in Scripture has three uses. The first use of God’s law is to convict people of sin in their life, of what is present in their acts or thoughts or imagination that is contrary to the standard of God’s holiness and glory. The second use of God’s law is to help restrain evil in a fallen world. Even secularists recognize that civil society is impossible without a proper legal and ethical structure to keep things from descending into anarchy. Finally, the third use of God’s law involves the fact that in revealing his law to us God reveals what is pleasing to him. Since his people are redeemed by grace, accepted in Christ, we are then free to serve and obey God through gratitude and not necessity. We keep his law because he loves us, not to earn his love. Calvin’s concern is that believers, “freed from the law’s yoke they willingly obey God’s will” [III.19.4, p. 836]. Calvin believed that unless our true freedom is understood and embraced, a Christian’s good works will be a matter of meriting approval—from God and man—instead of flowing out of a heart simply overwhelmed with gratitude for the amazing grace and love bestowed on us in Christ. Sadly, many evangelicals never experience this profound freedom to serve in love rather than duty. They do or don’t do things primarily through guilt, or because they fear missing God’s approval, or because they know friends or church leaders will disapprove. They need to hear the good news of the gospel.

So, Calvin believed that the doctrine of Christian freedom was important because first, we need to be free from any sense of works righteousness (the need to earn approval by what we do or don’t do) and second, so that we could be free to serve God and our fellow creatures out of love and gratitude. Calvin identified a third essential element in the biblical teaching of Christian freedom. This is that the believer is free to embrace God’s good creation and receive his good gifts in life without endless rules—Calvin called them “superstitions”—that appear spiritual but do nothing to promote true maturity ▶



## READING THE WORD

in Christ. Thus, he said, “regarding outward things that are of themselves ‘indifferent,’ we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently” [III.19.7, p. 838]. He has in mind St Paul’s teaching that “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4-5). Calvin says we can identify a simple principle to guide our understanding and application of this aspect of Christian freedom. “To sum up, we see whither this freedom tends: namely, that we should use God’s gifts for the purpose for which he gave them to us, with no scruple of conscience, no trouble of mind. With such confidence our minds will be at peace with him, and will recognize his liberality toward us.” [III.19.8, p. 840]. In other words, we are free to embrace and enjoy the grace of God in his good creation, without fearing that his gifts come bundled with all sorts of regulations and rules. Culture and the arts, good food and drink, rest and work, hospitality and silence, education and skill—we are free in Christ to enjoy all that God has provided in his creation.

### Calvin on Weak and Strong

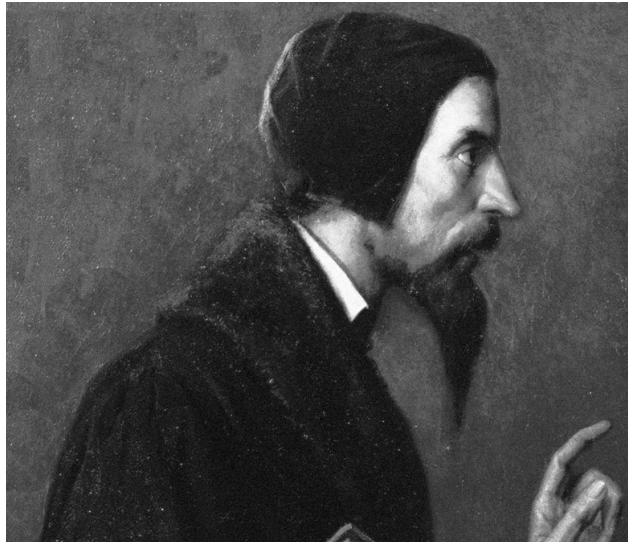
Calvin was a pastor, however, and knew that there is a practical problem involved in the proper understanding and embrace of this grand freedom we have in Christ. The problem is that some people are very weak in faith. Perhaps they are new believers, or have gone through a period of enormous disappointment, or have become overwhelmed with doubts and questions and uncertainty. So, while Calvin recognizes and celebrates the freedom we have in Christ, he also cautions against using that freedom in ways that will cause injury to those who are weak in faith. Some, he says, have turned liberty into something that wounds others unnecessarily and makes their faith more tenuous. “They use their freedom indiscriminately and unwisely,” he says, “as though it were not sound and safe if men did not witness it. By this heedless use, they very often offend weak brothers” and sisters [III.19.10, p. 842]. So eager are they to express the freedom that is theirs in Christ they ignore the fact their freedom is inexplicable and perhaps deeply problematic to a believer whose faith is so weak as to be near the edge of unbelief.

Loving weaker sisters and brothers must be such a priority that we willingly forgo our freedom for their sake. This does not mean, however, that we are therefore at the mercy of all who might claim “offense.” Calvin acknowl-

es that exercising the freedom we have in Christ might not always be fully appreciated by others who witness it. “It is sometimes important for our freedom to be declared before men,” he says. “Yet we must with the greatest caution hold to this limitation, that we do not abandon the care of the weak, whom the Lord has so strongly commended to us” [III.19.10, p. 842].

Calvin is correct here because the apostolic tradition about this in the New Testament is indisputable. “As for the one who is weak in faith,” St. Paul writes in Romans 14:1, “welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.” The apostle mentions two specific issues that were being quarreled over in the 1st century, an omnivore versus a vegetarian diet, and the identification of certain dates as having religious significance. Sadly, they are still being argued about in some circles today. It is the weak Christian for whom such things are an issue of conscience, Paul says, and those who are strong in faith are forbidden to pass judgment on them [Romans 14:4, 10].

In his commentary on Romans 14:1, Calvin defines the strong as “they who have made the most progress in Christian doctrine,” and the weak as “more ignorant,” meaning those less mature or advanced in understanding and applying biblical teaching. These weak believers, he says, are those “who, except they are treated with great tenderness and kindness, will be discouraged, and become at length alienated from religion.” At stake, in other words, is not people who might feel offended but people for whom the stability and continuance of their faith is in question. Commenting on Romans 15:1, Calvin defines the strong as those who have “made more advances than others in the knowledge of God.” ▶



Calvin points out, in commenting on 1 Corinthians 8:9, that the apostle “expressly desires that regard be had to the weak, that is, to those who are not yet thoroughly confirmed in the doctrine of piety.”

It is clear that Calvin sees the intentional limitation to freedom as not an issue of trying to please everyone’s whims that might feel offended, but an honest concern to show grace to those whose faith might totter or collapse. The weak Christian’s lack of knowledge and growth requires

sacrificial love on the part of those who are stronger. What they do not need is a defiant insistence on freedom that could breed doubt, confusion, or even unbelief in them. It is a matter of love, in other words, of a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of another person’s growth in Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 8:7-13, St Paul warns Christians not to offend those who are weak in faith. In this text he is discussing if it is acceptable for Christians to eat meat purchased in a pagan marketplace where the seller might have offered it to an idol. He points out that idols are not truly divine, and in fact have no ontological (or real) existence as a rival to the true God. Therefore, eating the meat offered to them need not trouble us as a spiritual problem. But then the apostle issues a warning that all Christians must take seriously.

*However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God.*

## READING THE WORD

*We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

The issue is not that certain believers feel offended by something we do. They may feel offended or not—it simply doesn’t matter. The issue is whether we know of someone whose faith is precarious enough that our freedom might put them over the edge into doubt and unbelief. If so, then we are to give up our freedom for their sake.

“This is the kind of offense that Paul reproves in the Corinthians,” Calvin writes, “when we induce weak brethren, by our example, to venture upon anything against their conscience.” We must never encourage people to violate their conscience. Their conscience may be deeply skewed, of course, and so may need to be shaped and molded by the standard of God’s word. They will have no opportunity to mature in this way, however, if we, by what we say or do encourage them to violate their conscience and collapse their faith.

Calvin defines Paul’s phrase, “become a stumbling block” as “they emboldened the ignorant to hurry on, contrary to conscience, to attempt what they did not think it lawful for them to do.” Paul says that when a strong Christian inappropriately insists on exercising their freedom, “the weak person is destroyed.” Calvin translates the phrase a bit differently, “And thy brother perish.” And then he comments, “Mark how serious an evil it is, that mankind commonly think so little of—that of venturing upon anything with a doubtful or opposing conscience.” Since Christ died for the weaker person, being disdainful of them is to be disdainful of Christ. Or, as Calvin puts it, “contempt of this kind is an open insult to Christ!”

In reality, both those who are strong and those who are weak are in danger of mistreating their brother or sister in Christ. As he discusses the controversy over eating meat or sticking to vegetables, for example, Paul warns, “Let not the



## READING THE WORD

Text **Denis Haack**

one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats" (Romans 14:3). In his commentary on this text Calvin expands and explains the apostle's meaning this way:

*They who were strong had this fault, that they despised those as superstitious who were scrupulous about insignificant things, and also derided them: these, on the other hand, were hardly able to refrain from rash judgments, so as not to condemn what they did not follow; for whatever they perceived to be contrary to their own sentiments, they thought was evil. Hence he exhorts the former to refrain from contempt, and the latter from excessive moroseness.*

So far Calvin has stressed three important biblical teachings: first, he has rightly insisted on the importance of Christian freedom, second, he has noted that not all believers will necessarily appreciate the biblically appropriate liberties taken by their brothers and sisters, and third, he has argued that Christians must be eager to forgo their freedom in loving sacrifice for those who are weaker in faith, those who are in danger of slipping into doubt and unbelief.

So, it should be clear that we are not required to guess what might stumble some weak person somewhere and take this to be the limit for our freedom. Even if our intentions were honorable this would be nothing but the imposition of a legalism, a standard set for Christian behavior that is beyond that imposed by Scripture. What all this does mean is that in a loving community the weak will be helped to grow to take their place among the strong. Such growth will shape their conscience more in line with the truth of God's word, and allow them greater enjoyment of the true freedom that is rightfully theirs in Christ. And because the strong love the weak, the strong will willingly sacrifice their freedom when necessary to give the weak space and time to grow towards greater maturity. If we need to limit our freedom it will be because we know a person weak in faith.

### Weak offense v Pharisaical Offense

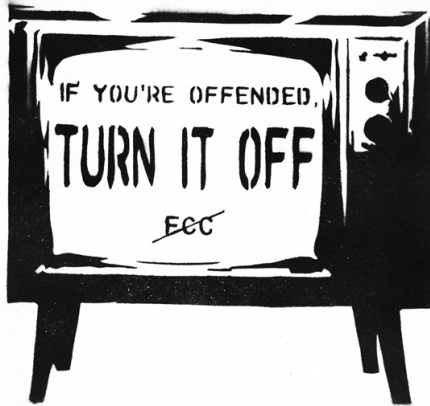
An important question remains. How should those who are strong in the faith respond not to weak believers, but to those whose offense is a matter of taste, or social etiquette, or cultural preference, or misguided doctrine, or some legalistic standard? At stake here is not the possibility of someone weak in faith being turned away from the faith, but rather the possibility of someone being offended by another believer's behavior and then using their "offense" to disapprove, and control another's expression of freedom. This is the situation I faced in my talk at the conference where people walked out, offended that I showed film clips. Their faith in Christ was in no danger of toppling. They would probably have been offended if such a possibility was suggested. Instead, they were offended by my freedom

and wanted their sense of offense to set the limits of freedom for everyone at the conference.

Calvin solves this issue by distinguishing two types of offense.

*If you do anything with unseemly levity, or wantonness, or rashness, out of its proper order or place, so as to cause the ignorant and the simple to stumble, such will be called an offense given by you, since by your fault it came about that this sort of offense arose.*

*And, to be sure, one speaks of an offense as given in some matter when its fault arises from the doer of the thing itself. An offense is spoken of as received when something, otherwise not wickedly or unseasonably committed, is by ill will or malicious intent of mind wrenched into occasion for offense. Here is no 'given' offense, but those wicked interpreters baselessly so understand it. None but the weak is made to stumble by the first kind of offense, but the second gives offense to persons of bitter disposition and pharisaical pride. Accordingly, we shall call the one the offense of the weak, the other that of the Pharisees. Thus we shall so temper*



*the use of our freedom as to allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers, but for the rigor of the Pharisees, not at all!*

[III.19.11, p. 843]

In Calvin's understanding, then, it is possible for a Christian to offend another person without needing to be troubled by that fact. The real problem, according to the Scriptures is not the action that caused the offense, but the state of the heart of the believer that registered the offense. The question to be asked is not whether someone was offended, but whether someone was stumbled in their faith. If the person involved is weak in faith, then we should be concerned, if they are strong and merely put off by our actions, we need not be too concerned. Love does not require forgoing one's liberty to please others (who are strong in faith but offended), but instead requires that we serve the other person (who is weak) so that their faith is not undermined.

To illustrate this biblical teaching, Calvin reflects on the controversy between Jesus and some Pharisees in Matthew 15.

*We learn from the Lord's words how much we ought to regard the offense of the Pharisees: He bids us let them alone because they are blind leaders of the blind (Matt. 15:14). His disciples had warned him that the Pharisees had been offended by his talk (Matt. 15:12). He answered that they were to be ignored and their offense disregarded*

[III.19.11, p. 844]

Can you see how freeing this is? Instead of being held captive to the emotional reactions of Christians who want everyone to conform to their personal standards, we are free in Christ to ignore and disregard what is little more than a power play on their part.

Another biblical example arises in Calvin's commentary on Luke 11:37-41. Jesus is at table with a group of Pharisees, but did not wash according to tradition before the meal. This did not escape the Pharisees' notice, yet Christ neither apologizes nor washes to make up for the offense, but instead rebukes them. "Christ is fully aware that his neglect of this ceremony

## READING THE WORD

will give offense," Calvin says, "but he declines to observe it." Christ has made us free, and this freedom, according to Scripture allows us—actually if we want to be like Christ it requires us—to disregard what Calvin terms "Pharisaical offense," when strong Christians claim they are offended and want us to conform to their preferences. What they are doing via their offense is merely propagating legalism.

In the New Testament there is an interesting series of events involving whether a Christian should be circumcised. The apostles taught that since Christ fulfilled the law on our behalf and since baptism takes the place of circumcision this requirement in the law is no longer in force. We are free in Christ from the need to be circumcised as a sign of being part of God's covenant people. That part was clear. Out of concern for weaker Jewish believers, however, Paul had Timothy circumcised, but in opposition to strong (and legalistic) Christians who insisted on the observance of the law for salvation Paul refused to have Titus undergo the same ceremony. Calvin argues that this is a clear biblical example of how to distinguish between weak and Pharisaical offense [III.19.12, p. 844-845]. In the one case Timothy freely sacrificed his freedom (and much more!)

for the sake of weaker Christians, while on the other Titus refused to be controlled by believers who claimed they were offended by his life. "We must at all times seek after love," Calvin concludes, "and look toward the edification of our neighbor" [III.19.12, p. 845]. Loving weak believers means not offending them, while loving Pharisaical believers means not giving in to them.

Refraining from the freedom that is ours in order to serve a weaker

brother or sister is a grace that edifies everyone involved, but refraining from freedom in order to fulfill the demands of legalists serves to edify no one. It merely affirms the dangerous legalism of the offended Pharisee. There are times when faithfulness to God will result in offending some who



are not in danger of losing their faith but whose desire is to make others conform to their own extra-biblical standards. In such cases we must be careful to be faithful regardless of the resulting “offense” being claimed. “For,” Calvin says, “as our freedom must be subordinated to love, so in turn ought love itself to abide under purity of faith.” [III.19.13, p. 845].

**A Few Final Reflections**

I may be mistaken but it seems that questions about Christian freedom and causing offence arise fairly frequently in evangelical circles today. Some feel under pressure to never do anything that might offend others in their fellowship. For some the pressure has been sufficient to drive them from the church. Others simply operate below the church’s radar screen, unwilling to be bullied into conformity in nonessential areas. When strong believers use their own offense to set standards it doesn’t take long before these standards take on a sort of biblical significance. Soon they are so accepted that questioning them is interpreted as a sign of spiritual insensitivity or coldness. Disappointing Christian leaders can produce a rolling series of negative reactions.

It needs to be noted that in a world like ours that is increasingly post-Christian, this doctrine of freedom and causing offence is important as we live out our faith before a watching world. Many non-Christians, Tim Keller says in *The Reason for God*, are deeply disillusioned by a church culture that appears to outsiders to be both conformist and legalistic.

*Pharisaic religion doesn’t just damage the inner soul; it also creates social strife. Pharisees need to shore up their sense of righteousness, so they despise and attack all who don’t share their doctrinal beliefs and religious practices. Racism and cultural imperialism result. Churches that are filled with self-righteous, exclusive, insecure, angry, moralistic people are extremely unattractive. Their public pronouncements are often highly judgmental, while internally such churches experience many bitter conflicts, splits, and divisions. When one of their leaders has a moral lapse, the churches either rationalize it and denounce the leader’s critics, or else they scapegoat him. Millions of people raised in or near these kinds of churches reject Christianity at an early age or in college largely because of their experience. For the rest of their lives, then, they are inoculated against Christianity [p. 179].*

If Keller is correct, and I believe he is, he has provided one more reason both to teach the doctrine of Christian freedom with biblical care and to refuse to give in to the pressure of Pharisaical offense. We live not in isolation but before a watching world and are responsible to our Lord that what is seen in us is a clear demonstration of the gospel. And our care for those who are weak in faith is also of importance before a watching world as a sacrificial demonstration of the love that proves our relationship with the risen Christ [John 13:35].

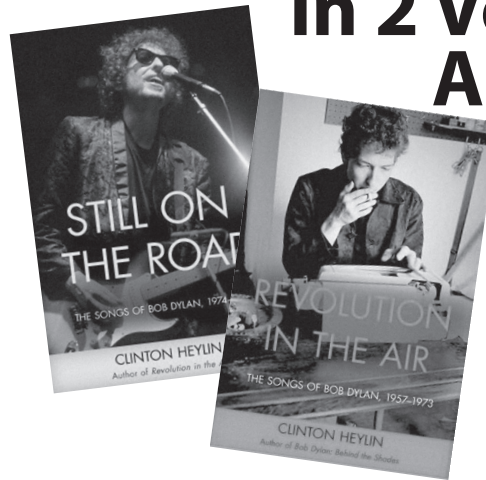
I am not here suggesting that we delight in offending strong members of our community and simply set out to do it vigorously—a silly, childish option. “If possible,” St Paul writes, “as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18). We must pick our battles carefully and draw lines in the sand prayerfully. Many things are simply not worth dying for. The only option not open to us is always giving in to Pharisaical offense.

Calvin’s understanding of Christian freedom—as a necessary aspect of biblical doctrine; of the need to distinguish between the offense of the weak and the Pharisee; of the mandate that the strong in faith care tenderly for the weak while ignoring the prideful pretensions of the legalist—is practical, pastoral and most important of all, biblically orthodox. It is not a matter of flaunting our liberty—though our deceitful hearts are capable of even this perversion—but of embracing the grace of true freedom that Christ died to give us. ✿

**HEARTS & MINDS**  
Distinctive Books and Music  
Mention you saw this ad in CRITIQUE and Hearts and Minds will make a donation to Ransom Fellowship.  
www.heartsandmindsbooks.com  
read@heartsandmindsbooks.com  
234 East Main Street  
Dallastown, PA 17313  
(717) 246-3333

Text Denis Haack

# 600 Songs in 2 Volumes, And Counting



Bob Dylan is not merely an entertainer, though he has entertained millions over the years, and it is a mistake to think of him in such terms. He is a poet who has captured the essence of our time in his music, so that those of us who have yearned for insight into the meaning of things might be able to see below the surface of events. Dylan’s poetry is deeply rooted in reality but always in a way that transcends the details of the here and now to touch on the deeper questions of life and meaning and spirituality and death. “Dylan’s is an art,” Christopher Ricks says, “in which sins are laid bare (and resisted), virtues are valued (and manifested), and the graces brought home. The seven deadly sins, the four cardinal virtues, and the three heavenly graces: these make up everybody’s world—but Dylan’s in particular.”

What is significant is not merely that phrases from his lyrics have made their way into the patterns of our speech, but that his lyrics help unpack the loud and demanding cacophony that is daily life in a media-saturated world so that we can begin to make some sense of who we are, where we are, and why it matters. Over the decades his songs have appeared like signposts for me, pointing in some direction when so much of life and society and the church seems to be going in circles.

Please understand what I am claiming here. It is not just that I like his music, though I do. It is not just that I think his unceasing musical output has been creatively stunning, though I believe it is. It is not that I disdain people who don’t like his voice or albums, because liking his art really has nothing to do with it. I am claiming he is a poet—perhaps *the* poet—for my generation, and that in his lyrics is a record of our time, for blessing and for curse. We may listen to the news to know some of what’s happening and read history books for some of the context, but for unpacking a deeper level of understanding we need to listen to poets. It is the poets who have always provided a way to sort the significant from the meaningless, a way to see the glimmers of light hidden in the shadows of our dark world. And from that perspective, Bob Dylan is the voice that time and again has swept aside the distracting details covered with such mind-numbing repetition in media and gossip to expose the heart and soul of what truly matters.

In two volumes Clinton Heylin, a prolific writer on popular culture, has produced a chronological (according to when the songs were written) commentary on all the songs written by Bob Dylan. *Revolution in the Air: The songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973* and *Still On the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006* include notes, historical background, and reflection on the 600 titles Dylan penned over those 49 years. Not everyone will necessarily be interested in reading Heylin’s two volumes, but those interested in Dylan, popular culture, and the significant signs of our times will want access to them. ✿

**RECOMMENDED**

*Revolution in the Air: The songs of Bob Dylan, 1957-1973* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press; 2009) 450 pages + bibliography, and indices.

*Still On the Road: The Songs of Bob Dylan, 1974-2006* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press; 2010) 497 pages + notes, bibliography, and indices.

**SOURCE**

*Dylan’s Visions of Sin* by Christopher Ricks (New York, NY: HarperCollins Books; 2003)