

2010

Calvin and Conciliation

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Recommended Citation

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CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

CALVIN AND CONCILIATION

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

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BY

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FOR

SENIOR THESIS

FALL 2009 – SPRING 2010

APRIL 26th, 2010

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Ad gloriam Domini.

For the glory of God.

Introduction

The popular conception of John Calvin today is as a divisive figure within Christianity, who vehemently opposed some beliefs while demanding rigid acceptance of others. In this thesis, I intend to investigate the accuracy of that conception by exploring how Calvin approached ecumenicalism theologically and practically. This will cover Calvin's understanding of the Church, his cooperation and disagreements with other Christians, and evaluate what Calvin might contribute to an ecclesiology useful for the Church today.

Calvin has gained a poor reputation in modern times both for participation in historical events, including the execution of Servetus, and also for the association of Calvin with the Calvinism that arose after his death in the Netherlands and then in the United States. Calvin is associated with a strong anti-secularism, rigid doctrine (particularly arising out of five point Calvinism), exclusive claims with strictly delineated in and out groups, and ultimately with conservative Christians who are frequently perceived as theocratic far right-wingers. These perceptions stand somewhat, although not fully, in contrast to the very human John Calvin, whose work was frequently designed to build up the Christian Church.

The Reformation period was characterized by religious upheaval and division, and, as the period progressed, confessionalization that defined the Lutheran and Reformed traditions as theologically distinct movements. Divisions within Protestantism grew and exploded as Radical Reformers, including Anabaptists and Anti-Trinitarians,

were suppressed by the official Reformed and Lutheran churches. Even Reformed groups that recognized each other as legitimate disagreed on the nature of the sacraments. At the same time, Protestant hope for a strong reform of the Roman Catholic church dwindled.

Born Jean Cauvin on July 10th, 1509, in a small town about sixty miles from Paris, the man now widely known as John Calvin would become one of the most important leaders of the Protestant Reformation.¹ Though initially intended for the priesthood, his father redirected his studies to law in his mid-teenage years.² It was during, or soon after, his law studies that Calvin converted to the Reformation. The details of this conversion are unknown, but it is clear that Calvin had a Reformed understanding of his Christian faith for nearly all of his adult life. He soon came to be involved in the Reformed underground throughout France.³

In 1535, following a wave of arrests and executions of Protestants in France, Calvin left the country, arriving in Basel, an Imperial Free City at the time, loyal to the Reformation thanks to the efforts of the Reformer Oecolampidus. It was here that Calvin began in earnest to write what would become his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁴ Despite the work he did while there and his involvement in the French refugee community there, Calvin embarked on an extended trip soon after his arrival, intending on ending up in Italy. Instead, having to redirect his trip because of a war nearby, Calvin entered Geneva in 1536. Initially intended on staying only a night, Calvin was instead persuaded to stay by a very insistent Guillaume Farel, at the time an

¹ T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 192.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

influential Reformed minister in the city.⁵

Though Calvin would, even soon after his arrival, have enormous influence over the local clergy, it was only the next year that he and Farel were exiled over a dispute with the city's governing authorities over its jurisdiction over Church practice. In exile, Calvin settled in Strasbourg, again ministering to a French refugee community.⁶ By 1541, however, political shifts in Geneva led the Council to attempt to recall Calvin, which, somewhat reluctantly, he accepted, returning to the city for good in September of that year. Due to political changes, his influence over the French refugee population, and popularity with the younger generation, Calvin came to be the most important figure in the city in both religious and political matters. At the same time, through his writings and personal conflicts, Calvin's influence touched the Reformation movement throughout Europe.⁷

Structure

In seeking to adequately explore the aspects of Calvin's conciliatory (or anti-conciliatory) actions and thought, I will begin with an exposition of his ecclesiology, supplemented by a description of his understanding of the word of God and the practice of the sacraments. The latter two stand as Calvin's two marks of the Church, and comprehension of them is necessary in order to understand Calvin's theological perspective in his interactions with other Christians. These marks are then related to Calvin's understanding of the bounds of the Church. Calvin's ecclesiology also engages

⁵ Ibid., 73-75.

⁶ Ibid., 91-92.

⁷ Ibid., 108-164.

with the nature of the Church, and with how it ought to be properly organized.

Coming from an old church which based its claims to authority on its being the true Universal Church, Protestants, in order to justify their existence in place of the Roman Catholic church, had to reject the old ecclesiology and develop a new one. In part of John Calvin's magnum opus, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he seeks to do just that, developing an understanding of the nature of the Church. This understanding was controversial to a European society where many demanded an absolutely pure Church, where no sin or association with sinners was tolerated, and others demanded a Church based on linear succession and well proven in historical practice.

The second chapter examines Calvin's interactions with other Reformed Protestants, whom he generally acknowledged as following orthodox belief. Calvin's attempts at bridging the gap between Wittenberg and Zürich, his numerous instances of cooperation with both Lutherans and Zwinglians, and his clear concern for the fate of Protestant communities throughout Europe all speak to the conciliatory side of John Calvin. We will examine how Calvin sought to support and equip orthodox Protestants to better understand their faith and to endure persecution by their state.

Contrary to some perspectives today, Calvin was not so obsessed with the purity of the Genevan church as to be unable to perceive that there were true Christians outside of the city. Calvin's interactions with other key reformers, particularly Martin Luther and Phillip Melancthon, reveal a man with deep respect for other orthodox Protestant theologians. In a time when it seemed that Christianity itself was fragmenting, Calvin went to great lengths to support unity among those whom he considered to be orthodox Christians.

With Roman Catholicism, Calvin's understanding becomes more detailed and subtle. Repeatedly, Calvin would be challenged by Roman Catholic leaders to justify the schism of the Reformation. How could Calvin, the vehement opponent of schism, be part of the movement that was in revolt against the church that had existed for generations? Moreover, Protestants often debated whether the church of Rome was still a legitimate church? If Roman Catholicism does not fit in the true universal Church, then is it at least possible that some part of the Church might still survive within it?

Calvin's interactions with Roman Catholicism display his deep respect for tradition. Calvin relied heavily on ancient theologians in arguing various points, and, while not claiming that tradition was in any way authoritative, viewed it as informative and helpful when viewed properly. In a manner that seems counterintuitive to many today, Calvin used the writings of many past theologians to argue that the Papacy and the whole Roman Catholic church had been misled.

In the fourth chapter, I examine Calvin's approaches towards those Protestants whom he considered to be heterodox and hence outside of the normal bounds of the Church. Having previously discussed Calvin's theology of the Church, this chapter will briefly engage again with the idea of the bounds of the Church: how far may views be from orthodox Christianity without departing from the Church? With this as a broader question, the chapter offers vignettes of Calvin's interactions with various Protestants, following a brief description of the level of tolerance typical in the Reformation period.

Most important in this section are the discussions of Calvin's conflicts with first Michael Servetus, who would be put to death in Geneva, and with Sebastian Castellio, a former friend of Calvin's who criticized his handling of the Servetus case. The bounds of

the Church, the limits of tolerance, and the actions permissible against those espousing heterodox beliefs are discussed and explored in the disagreements between Calvin and Castellio.

Finally, appended to the thesis is another chapter, in which I will attempt, by interacting with Calvin's theology and example, to formulate an ecclesiology adequate for the Christian Church today, particularly in the context of the United States. How can we understand the Church – its origin, its nature, its marks, and its bounds – and how is this understanding useful for Christians today? This belongs to the thesis as an expression of an ecclesiology which I propose is true to tradition, to scripture, and which may be useful to the Christian Church in the United States today. Though this chapter is quite distinct from the four making up the body of the thesis, which are, largely, historical and explanatory overviews, but it carries a certain sense of purpose, of meaning to my historical study.

Methodology

Most of the material for this thesis came from original sources, that is, letters, treatises, and books written by Calvin himself. In addition to pieces written by Calvin, other materials from contemporaries of Calvin are also quite relevant and used throughout the paper. In terms of modern secondary sources, a number of biographies were consulted, as well as scholarly books and articles discussing Calvin's interactions with particular groups, either theologically or geographically defined.

Terminology

In studying a field where Biblical interpretation plays a major role, it is abundantly clear to me that the meaning of words is important. In order to avoid unnecessary confusion, I want to describe several terms which I will use throughout the paper.

The first of these, where distinction is most important, is Church/church. Given what I consider to be the dual meaning of the word, I hope to be able to show what I intend it to mean in particular cases. Throughout the paper, I intend “Church”, with a capital C, to refer to the universal Church, which extends to include all people everywhere, alive, dead, and yet to be born, whom God has chosen for justification and sanctification and who will live together with God in the world to come. With “church”, with a lowercase c, I want to refer to church buildings, to the individual, local communities centered around such locations, to the Christian communities of a particular denomination in a city, or the ecclesiastical organization of a particular denomination. For example, I might use phrases such as “the Church is infallible only in its strict adherence to scriptural doctrine” to refer to the universal Church, while phrases like “Castellio was actually quite well respected by the Genevan church” would be meant to refer to the Christian community in Geneva and its institutions.

The term “Reformed” will be used in reference not only to those Protestant groups which were the predecessors to the modern “Reformed” tradition, but also more expansively to the Christian communities which, during the Reformation, distinguished themselves from the Roman Catholic church by reforming their theology and institutions. Hence, it refers to Lutheran reformation supporters as well as the Swiss Reformed

churches of Zürich and Geneva.

This is distinct from the “Radical Reformation”, which I will use to mean Protestants who, unlike the orthodox Reformed, engaged in more radical changes of theology and practice. This includes, primarily, Anabaptists and Anti-Trinitarians, though those terms are often insufficient to accurately describe the theology of these individuals and groups. The “Radical Reformation” sometimes intersects with the Libertines, but the Libertines are distinct as a group more concerned (by the meaning with which I will be using the word) with the political application of religious rules than with religion itself; unconcerned with theology, they are more of a political group.

In referring to the Roman Catholic church, out of respect for that tradition and the many Christians who count themselves members of that church, I will use the term by which they identify themselves, though, by leaving “church” uncapitalized, I am affirming that I consider it to be a particular Christian community, rather than the Church universal. Because of this, my use of the word “Catholic” in the title of that church is somewhat of a misnomer. In order to be able to use the title by which Roman Catholics identify themselves, and avoid using the polemical alternatives adopted by some other Protestant writers during the Reformation and today, I consider the use of the word “Catholic” in that title separately from how I use the term otherwise. When I refer to the catholic Church in the manner in which it is referred to in the Apostles' Creed, I will either write it with a lowercase rather than an uppercase C in order to distinguish that term from “Catholic”, which, in modern parlance, refers to Roman Catholicism, or forgo the issue entirely by writing “universal” instead.

Finally, in referring to God, I will use male gendered language. I am a Christian,

and I rely on the Bible as holy scripture, looking to Jesus Christ as the chief example for how good servants of God ought to live. The Lord's Prayer and other frequent uses of male language for God by Jesus himself shows that it is certainly not inappropriate to use gendered language when referring to God. Besides the use of such descriptive terms as Father or Lord, which reflect certain aspects of God's nature, the use of the pronoun "he" has certain benefits. It is consistent with widespread practice in Christian and Jewish communities over the last three thousand years, and "he", as opposed to the ungendered pronoun "it", reflects the personhood and relatable nature of God. This also avoids the incongruities that could result from switching between male gendered references to God in quotes from the Reformation period and sentences which frequently repeat the term "God" so as to avoid any use of pronouns in referring to him.

Chapter One:
Theology of the Church

“Oftentimes no difference can be observed between the children of God and the profane, between his proper flock and the untamed herd.”⁸ Questions of the nature and bounds of the Church are some of the most important theological questions that Calvin attempted to address. The fourth of the four books of Calvin's *Institutes* is entitled “Of the Holy Catholic Church”, and addresses precisely these issues, which have considerable prominence throughout his writings.

What is the Church? What is its nature, and how did it come to exist? Calvin understands the Church to be, like all the things he values most in the Christian faith, “his [God's] own institution”.⁹ The Church is a form of order appointed by God, an earthly institution consecrated unto himself, as were the tabernacle and the temple in the years before Christ's coming.¹⁰ It has received the keys to heaven, and holds in itself the means to salvation.¹¹ The Church is the spouse of Christ and the “home of God”, the “pillar and ground of the truth”.¹² As it is on earth, the Church, while holy, still awaits its complete perfection. It will remain imperfect until the end of time. Even the elect, who are the membership of the Church, are affected by original sin and hence imperfect, though

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), trans. Henry Beveridge, 281 (Book 4. Chapter 1. Section 2). From this point on, when citing the *Institutes*, in addition to page number in the 1962 translation, I will cite the Book, Chapter, Section location in parentheses. For example: (4.1.2).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 284 (4.1.5).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 286 (4.1.5).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 298 (4.1.22).

¹² *Ibid.*, 290 (4.1.10) - Quoting 1 Tim. 3:15.

Calvin vividly says that “the Lord is daily smoothing its [the Church's] wrinkles”.¹³

In this, Calvin is opposed to the ecclesiology of the Radical Reformation and the Anabaptists of his day. After they cut themselves off from the flawed church of Rome, radical reformers sought, and believed it was possible, to create a perfect church on earth. They expected Christians to be willing and able to fulfill all God's commandments, and doubted that anyone who transgressed against them could truly be part of the Church. Humanists who stayed loyal to the Roman Catholic church, like Erasmus, or who returned to it after conversion to Protestantism, like Calvin's friend du Tillet, argued that that church, though acknowledgedly flawed, was still the one universal Church.¹⁴ Calvin's disagreement with both of these positions produced an ecclesiology that walks the fine line between them. This is a Church that while not perfect, is being perfected, that is neither corrupting nor incorruptible, and holy but not divine. The Church is built on the otherworldly gifts of God to the faithful and extends to include others in practice in a Church that is very much real and is in the world.

This ecclesiology seeks to find a balance between problematic extremes. How much authority can the Church assume to honor properly the command God has given it without usurping power that is rightfully his alone? How holy must the Church be to reflect properly the grace God has given it without claiming for itself the perfection that belongs to him alone.

Because of its consecration by God, the Church has authority in the world,¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 295-296 (4.1.17).

¹⁴ Ross W. Collins, *Calvin and the Libertines of Geneva* (Toronto: Clark, Irwin and Company Limited, 1968), 125.

¹⁵ John Calvin. “Confession of Faith in Name of the Reformed Churches of France,” in *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM.

though it may use that authority only to “maintain order, cherish concord, and invigorate discipline.” The power of the Church is not merely to be checked against scripture, but is limited far before that, since “he who abrogated divine laws, in order to release us from bondage, assuredly never meant that we should be oppressed by new human laws.”¹⁶ The Church may enforce discipline, right practice and right belief amongst its members. Its orders must not only not contradict scripture, but must find precedent within it. Calvin justified his requirement of the affirmation of a Confession of Faith for all Genevans on the precedents of God's people's corporate renewal of the covenant under Josiah, Asa, and Ezra and Nehemiah.¹⁷

In a catechism for the education of youth in Geneva, Calvin describes the Church as, fundamentally, “the body and society of believers whom God has predestined to eternal life.”¹⁸ In his response to Cardinal Sadoletto defending the Protestant faith, Calvin defines the Church as “the society of all the saints, a society which, spread over the whole world, and existing in all ages, yet bound together by one doctrine and the one Spirit of Christ, cultivates and observes unity of faith and brotherly concord.”¹⁹ Combining the two definitions, and assuming that Calvin would affirm both, those “whom God has predestined” are “bound together by one doctrine and the one Spirit of Christ.” This Church was created by the sanctification of these individuals in Christ's death, Calvin

B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 150.

¹⁶ John Calvin. “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 269.

¹⁷ William Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William J. Heynen (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 95.

¹⁸ John Calvin. “The Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. Rev. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 102.

¹⁹ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *Reformation Debate*, ed. John C. Olin, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1894), 62.

affirms, that the Church is both holy, meaning that God's chosen are both justified and sanctified by God, and catholic, meaning that there is only one Church, which is both universal and united. There is a communion of saints, which means that the members of the Church are united as well, even across vast distances, and including both the dead and the living. Calvin understands the Church through two lenses, similar to Luther's. The Apostles' Creed professes belief in the invisible Church, which is known through faith, and which is based on God's own secret election, though it is not always discernible through signs. But, "there is indeed also a visible Church of God, which he has described to us by sure marks and signs".²⁰

The Visible and Invisible Churches

Calvin's understanding of the Church seems to have started out limited to the invisible, or hidden Church, but came to emphasize more strongly the visible, or external Church, likely because of Martin Bucer's influence.²¹ In 1536, Calvin's first version of the *Institutes* had almost nothing on the Church as such, but by 1543, the entry on the Church had become the largest chapter.²² This chapter stressed the visible Church, in contrast to Lutheran theological deemphasis on the visible Church.²³ Though he claimed the invisible Church does take priority over the external one, Calvin emphasized practical membership in the Church which, as the Christian community, is the body of Christ. This

²⁰ Calvin, "The Catechism of the Church of Geneva," 103.

²¹ François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Marret (Darheim, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1987), 294.

²² Eva-Maria Faber, "Mutual Connectedness as a Gift and a Task: On John Calvin's Understanding of the Church," in *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society*, ed. Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 123.

²³ Wendel, 295.

community then, existing in this world, should be wholly based on the action of God,²⁴ giving visible meaning to the invisible work of God in believers' hearts. God's action in the external Church becomes visible in the administration of the sacraments, and in the Church's acknowledgment of the Word of the Lord and the ministry of that Word.²⁵

The hidden Church includes only those individuals distinctly chosen by God, all the “elect who have existed from the beginning of the world”.²⁶ To Calvin, the invisible Church is the basis for the visible Church,²⁷ though, since the two are actually one and the same (there is, after all, only one Church), the external Church is, to some extent, the visible realization of the invisible Church. It is in the invisible Church that one can be certain of a unity of believers, since the invisible Church is the complete body of Christ, held together by the Holy Spirit. One has faith in the Church of which Christ is the head, and can be assured in that faith that one is counted among that Church. This allows certainty of personal election and salvation, but it is not, Calvin says, the place of humans to know who is elect and who is reprobate – that right is God's alone.^{28,29}

The Church as a people is, fundamentally, God's people.³⁰ This concept illustrates the invisible and external Churches as two sides of a single coin. It is the Church as it is seen in this world, and as it is seen from the next.³¹ The Church, as we experience it, is sinful and includes hypocrites in it, just as Christians are imperfect and often hypocritical,

²⁴ Wendel, 295.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 288 (4.1.7).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 288 (4.1.7).

²⁷ Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 184.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 283 (4.1.3).

²⁹ Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 181 - referring to Calvin's reference to 2 Tim. 2:19.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 284 (4.1.3).

³¹ Wendel, 297.

but is holy as an institution of God, and as the reality of the Church in this world.³²

As “the home of God” on earth, the Church is the institution and the community in which the Lord works.³³ The Church really is a mother, according to Calvin, saying that “there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth”.³⁴ Salvation is found exclusively in the Church. The Church is a school in which perfect doctrine and general perfection are taught, and Christians must rely on it their entire lives. “For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for, as Isaiah and Joel testify.”³⁵

This two-sided nature of the Church is based on another tension within Calvin's ecclesiology. The Church is neither solely spiritual nor solely material. The Church is the community of the elect, but, since it is impossible to be certain who is and who is not elect, Calvin defers to expediency in presuming that any member of the Christian community in this world, that is, any church congregation, is a member of the invisible Church. Being unwilling, however, to place faith in that community of this world, Calvin interprets the Apostles' Creed phrase, “I believe in the holy catholic Church”, to refer to the invisible Church. In this instance, Calvin seems to allow a differentiation between the invisible and visible Churches. Perhaps his claim that the two are one and the same might be downplayed in favor of an assertion that the visible Church is fully dependant on and is the visible manifestation of the invisible Church.

The distinction between the invisible and the visible Churches makes problematic

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 288 (4.1.7).

³³ *Ibid.*, 290 (4.1.10). - Quoting 1 Tim. 3:15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 283 (4.1.3).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 283 (4.1.4).

the assertion that salvation is found only in the Church. Calvin's description of the Church as a school seems to imply tangibility, from which we might infer that where a visible Church community exists, there are no elect outside it. God's election necessarily effects individual membership in the invisible communion of saints, which Calvin appears to presume, and leads to communion with the faithful in this world. The problem of the phrase "beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation can be hoped for" is that it is easily taken to imply that God has elected no one except some of those who recognizably belong to a Christian community. This would mean that prior to the early Christian church, not a single gentile received salvation and that practitioners of other religions had no chance of being elect until Christianity was introduced to their communities. More relevantly, no salvation outside of the Church, when applied to the visible Church, denies that salvation was granted to the prophet Elijah, who preached at a time when there was no visible community loyal to God, to the prophet Daniel and his companions in Babylon, where there was likewise no visible community rejecting idolatry, and even to the thief on the cross next to Christ, whom Jesus promises a place in heaven.

No salvation outside the Church must refer to the invisible Church, but does that still require community with the visible Church when possible? Part of the call of election is a call to fellowship with others called by God, but it should be acknowledged that not even the elect ever fully fulfill God's call to them. The keys to heaven have been given to the Church, but the ultimate basis of that Church is God's secret election, and no limits may be placed by people on God's saving grace.

The Ministry of the Church

Calvin describes the ministry as an “angelic” and prophetic office. God's power is present in the preaching of the Gospel, in instruction in the Church. God “consecrates the mouths and tongues of men to his service”, sanctifying the structures of the external Church, public worship, structures of divine agency, for Christians to participate in. As divine orders, abandoning them would be an incredible hubris, tantamount to placing one's self above God.³⁶ Since the Church is the bride of Christ, trying to participate in Christ while rejecting the Church violates the marriage of Christ. Opposition to the Church, both the theoretical invisible Church and the external Church of this world, is tantamount to opposition to God and Christ.³⁷ This should be considered in tandem with the restriction that the Church may act only in obedience to God's Word in scripture.³⁸

Calvin considered the fourth commandment³⁹ (“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Exodus 20:8) to still be partially applicable after the advent of Christ, as it contains the command “not to neglect the sacred ordinances which contribute to the spiritual polity of the Church; especially to attend the sacred assemblies for the hearing of the Word of God, the celebration of the mysteries, and the regular prayers as they will be ordained.”⁴⁰ The Church is embodied in the Sunday worship service, which is one of its primary functions. God communicates through the Word and through the Sacraments,⁴¹ both of which are received not by individuals (to the effect of which Calvin references

³⁶ Ibid., 285 (4.1.5).

³⁷ Ibid., 290 (4.1.10).

³⁸ Wendel, 305-308.

³⁹ Fourth according to Calvin's reckoning and numbering commonly accepted by Reformed Protestants today.

⁴⁰ Calvin, “The Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” 113.

⁴¹ Ibid., 131.

Eph. 4:11), but corporately by the Christian community in the Church. The gifts of God given to members of the Church are intended to be shared with others in the community. With this intention, preachers are set over churches to preach the Word of God. The faithful must meet together to hear the spoken, living Word of God, as well as to celebrate the sacraments, both of which can only be done in the context of the Church to which both Word and sacrament have been given.⁴² The Church holds three powers: doctrine, jurisdiction, and the faculty of ordaining spiritual laws. Doctrine, however, is set by the Word of God alone, and the Church is infallible only in its strict adherence to scriptural doctrine, and no additions it makes have any divine authority. Church law is not, and cannot be binding on the conscience – obedience to it is not necessary for salvation.⁴³ Since the leaders of the Church rule Christians according to the Word of God, it is ultimately God alone who is listened to.⁴⁴ So long as pastors are preaching the Word of God, they should be respected and listened to, but they, and any Christian for that matter, can be mistaken, so Peter's answer in Acts 5:29 must be remembered: “We ought to obey God rather than men.”⁴⁵

Corrupted Church and Corrupting Rites

Calvin describes a section of chapters of the fourth book of his *Institutes* as arguing “the necessity of cleaving to the Holy Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints.” The visible Church that is an institution in this world, one which is imperfect

⁴² Ibid., 130.

⁴³ Wendel, 305-308.

⁴⁴ John Calvin. “Brief Form of a Confession of Faith,” in *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church* trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 134.

⁴⁵ Calvin, “Confession of Faith in Name of The Reformed Churches of France,” 150.

and yet must be respected. Calvin disagrees with Anabaptist theology in accepting a Church that is less than perfect as still a true Church, though that Church ceases to be the Church and ought to be resisted when it opposes God by acting in contradiction to scripture. The Church “contains a mixture of good and bad”, and we would be loath to, as Calvin accuses the Anabaptists, withdraw from the genuine Church because we thought there was no Church there.⁴⁶ The prophets did not separate from the Jerusalem Church (as Calvin understands the Temple institution), despite its corruption and sinfulness. Though this church may be polluted, participation in its rituals will not pollute a person, so the prophets did not abandon it and its services to set up a rival church or altar.⁴⁷ Neither did Paul reject or seek to destroy the community in Corinth, but rather recognized it as still being a Church of Christ, despite its flaws.⁴⁸ It should be said that the primary issue that Calvin was addressing with regards to the perfection of the Church was the perfection of its members. He's talking about problems with individuals or more minor issues of doctrine or practice.

A church can cease to be the Church by abandoning those things that God has given it that distinguish it as a Church. When a community and its rituals of worship cease to be the Church, they become dangerous to anyone who participates in them. Though the Church in this world will naturally err from God, it will never, and could never, outright reject him without ceasing to be the Church. Though the Temple rites could still be legitimately practiced even when corruption was rampant, Calvin claims that participating in Roman Catholic Mass necessarily pollutes a person. The Mass is

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 292 (4.1.13).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 296 (4.1.18).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 293 (4.1.14).

“contaminated by idolatry, superstition, and impious doctrine”, and has become “the greatest sacrilege”,⁴⁹ a false form of worship that reduces God from the God who is the Creator to a god who comes from within creation.⁵⁰ For an honest Christian to worship in a Roman Catholic service would be like a prophet worshiping or giving sacrifice in Bethel. As no prophet did that, since they could not without polluting themselves, no Christian should participate in the Roman Catholic Mass,⁵¹ lest they, by such participation, separate themselves from the body of Christ.⁵² A person should reject a church when it rejects Christ.⁵³ If the ministry has become completely corrupted and no longer belongs to God,⁵⁴ and if the doctrine of salvation in Christ alone has become lost, then so has the Church.⁵⁵ Most importantly, if communal worship of God has turned into idolatry, then there is no Church in that community, and it must be abandoned.⁵⁶

Membership in the Church

Ultimately, the Church is a small number of individuals, God's elect. Who is and who is not among that small group remains hidden in this world,^{57 58} but Calvin exhorts

⁴⁹ Ibid., 312 (4.2.9-10).

⁵⁰ Christopher L. Elwood, “Calvin's Ecclesial Theology and Human Salvation,” in *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society*, ed Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 95.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 312 (4.2.9-10).

⁵² Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. and Judith J. Guber (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 104.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 306 (4.2.2).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 310 (4.2.7).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 305 (4.2.1).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 310 (4.2.7).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 282 (4.1.2).

⁵⁸ It is also notable that the line, “Although, while we are as yet uncertain of God's judgment, we are not allowed to distinguish individually those who belong to the Church or not,” appeared in the 1536 version of the *Institutes*, but was dropped from later editions. (In the second book – quotation is from Calvin's collected works, as translated by F.L. Battles and printed 1995 in Grand Rapids). (As cited by Christoph Strohm in “Calvin and Religious Tolerance” in *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society*).

Christians to “acknowledge all as members of the Church who by confession of faith, regularity of conduct, and participation in the sacraments, unite with us in acknowledging the same God and Christ.”⁵⁹ Calvin's meaning in “confession of faith” is probably related both to the broad confession of the Apostles' Creed or similar creeds, and specifically to those doctrines which he considers to be required for a Christian to believe: “God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like”.⁶⁰ A judgment of love rules that all professing Christians are in the Church.⁶¹ Other issues are “things indifferent”, and can be subjects of disagreement and discussion between people who can acknowledge each other as being apart of the Church.⁶²

Discussion of which individuals are and which are not apart of the Church can distort an understanding of Calvin's ecclesiology, since Calvin understands God's relationship with humans, in all its myriad forms, to be not individual, but rather communal. Salvation is not granted to humans on their own; it is granted to the Church, the community of all believers. An individual's election is necessarily tied to their membership in that body.⁶³ Since authority has been given to the Church, one of the most clear signs of a person's membership in the Church is that person's acknowledgment of that authority in their listening to and respect for the preaching of the Word of God in the Church.⁶⁴ Calvin explicitly describes the visible Church as acknowledging the ministry

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 289 (4.1.8).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 291 (4.1.12).

⁶¹ Benjamin Charles Milner Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1970), 99.

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, 291 (4.1.12).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 290 (4.1.10).

⁶⁴ “Confession of Faith in Name of The Reformed Churches of France,” 150.

(as well as the Word of the Lord in scripture).⁶⁵ Election and rejection, while secret, are most clear in the nature of the community to which an individual enjoins him or herself, though some of the reprobate continue to participate in the rituals of the external Church. That there might be some elect within reprobate bodies is less clear, but some scholars read Calvin so as to allow for the possibility of the true Church existing even within the Roman Catholic church,⁶⁶ a body which Calvin broadly thought to be tyrannical and idolatrous.⁶⁷

The Bounds of the Church

If the Church, and membership in it, are to be understood a communal issue, it is on a corporate basis that the bounds of the Church should be judged. Calvin's conception of the visible Church is strongly based on the Church's election, and its God-given faith, accepting human weakness and infidelity to God, while relying on God's fidelity to it.⁶⁸ This ecclesiology is highly historically functional, but, relevant to the bounds of the Church, remains based on God's action, and God's action alone.⁶⁹ If the Church is to be, as Calvin would have it be, a witness in the world and for the world,⁷⁰ then it must both be driven by and testify to the living God who is beyond the world. If the Church was not instituted by humans but by God, then the distinguishing factors are things of divine origin. Since these gifts are received by the Church as a body, they won't necessarily be

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 288 (4.1.7).

⁶⁶ William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 93.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 310 (4.2.7).

⁶⁸ Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 105.

⁶⁹ Wendel, 295.

⁷⁰ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 237.

visible in the lives and conduct of every individual member, but are instead held corporately by the Church.⁷¹

“Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence.”⁷² Calvin gives these two signs, the preaching and hearing of the Word of God and the right administration of the sacraments, as the signs by which one may tentatively identify the Church. This is a refinement of the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession, which Calvin agreed with, but was not fully satisfied with, that the Church is “the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered”.⁷³ These marks are, Calvin argues, the means by which God communicates with humanity,⁷⁴ the means of grace accompanying the presence of Christ in the Church,⁷⁵ which consecrate the Church to God's purposes.⁷⁶ It is by these marks that Calvin argues that Roman Catholicism is not apart of the Church, and by which Calvin evaluates the various Protestant churches.⁷⁷

Calvin's conception of the marks of the Church is a good refinement of thinking of his time, but it misses something. Calvin's standards for determining if a person is a member of the Church and for determining if a community is part of the Church differ far too much from each other. If individuals who confess faith in Christ, conduct themselves well, and participate in the sacraments are to be considered Christians, it seems to follow that communities doing the same things ought also to be presumed to be legitimately

⁷¹ Wendel, 297.

⁷² Calvin, *Institutes*, 289 (4.1.9).

⁷³ Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin* 182.

⁷⁴ “The Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” 131.

⁷⁵ Wendel, 297.

⁷⁶ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* 208.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 304 (4.2.1).

Christian. If a community is faithful in belief and in practice, worships God and celebrates the sacraments, then God certainly has been and is active in that community and it is part of the Church. But even this omits the most important standard, which Calvin fails to mention in any part of his discussion of the marks of the Church. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”⁷⁸ If nothing else, this sort of sacrificial love should at least be a factor in determining if a community is loyally following Christ. The greatest commandments, after all, are to love God and love neighbor. If God is working in a community, then God's love will be in that community. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is based on love. After all, God himself is love.

Practically, love can be used as a standard only if one is able to fully engage a community. It doesn't work well to be able to evaluate a community in a far away town, or to be able to categorically accept or reject an entire denomination or regional organization with a certain theological bent. Love can be neither quantified nor easily compared, but it is the most important part of the Christian Church. If there is no love in a church, then neither is there the God of love. The sacraments are only empty shells without love, and preaching cannot be loyal to God and to scripture without being based on the Gospel of love.

⁷⁸ John 13:34-35, 15:12-14, RSV.

Preaching and Hearing of the Word

The Word, as Gospel preached by ministers of the Church, is a gift of God, originating not in the minister's personal thoughts, but in the scripture of which it ought to be an exposition.^{79,80} The preaching of the Gospel brings forth faith, as God works through ministers to bring his Word to the Church.⁸¹ Calvin conflates God's Word and proper doctrine,⁸² and says that “the church is founded on Christ by the preaching of doctrine”.⁸³ The Word of God is found in scripture,⁸⁴ but also in the “living voice” of the preacher, provided that the preacher may neither contradict nor detract from scripture,⁸⁵ and the congregation may legitimately attempt to determine if what is preached is actually God's Word, without being in danger of scrutinizing God's Word itself.⁸⁶ When the Word of God is properly preached (and Calvin affirms that there is potential for it to be perfectly preached),⁸⁷ it is as if the congregation has heard the voice of Christ himself.^{88,89} As the prophets were once “depositories” of God's Word, preachers are depositories of that Word today. The homiletic office has become an “angelic” and prophetic office, and preachers serve as messengers and ambassadors of God.^{90,91}

Compare the words of the Augsburg Confession “in which the gospel is rightly

⁷⁹ Ibid., 280 (4.1.1).

⁸⁰ Milner, 103.

⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 284 (4.1.5).

⁸² Milner, 101 – citing Calvin's Commentary on 1 Tim. 5:17.

⁸³ Ibid – citing Calvin's Commentary on Eph. 2:20.

⁸⁴ “The Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” 130.

⁸⁵ Milner, 101.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 308 (4.2.4) - Citing John 10:4-5.

⁸⁹ “Brief Form of a Confession of Faith,” 134.

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 285 (4.1.5).

⁹¹ John Calvin. “The Genevan Confession,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. Rev. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 32.

taught” to Calvin's “the word of God sincerely preached and heard” (elsewhere Calvin says that it must be both “heard and kept”). Besides the difference in wording – gospel versus word⁹² – Calvin takes a more expansive view in including the hearing of the Word. If the Word is preached, but not received by the preacher's hearers, what good is it? If it is not good and does not bear fruit, then it cannot have come from God. Since the Word is given to a community, rather than to individual preachers alone, if a community is not receptive to the Word of God, then it is unlikely that community is actually apart of the Church. The value of the Word is not solely in its preaching, but also in its hearing, which naturally bears fruit in believers' hearts.

The preaching and hearing of the Word could be taken to be an extremely high standard, one which requires flawless preaching and full openness to that Word from the entirety of the community. Need a community be so perfect to be the Church? Though Calvin thinks that flawless preaching is possible,⁹³ he does not consider that to be a requirement for the Church, instead anticipating the necessity for laity to differentiate between what is actually the voice of Christ and what is not.⁹⁴ Since the Church “contains a mixture of good and bad”,⁹⁵ it cannot be assumed that everyone will hear and receive the Word. The standard of the ministry of the Word is a general statement, and not a specific hurdle that must be cleared. In “The Geneva Confession” these signs are described as marking the Church “even if there be some imperfections and faults, as there

⁹² Calvin conflates the two: while he uses “word” in the *Institutes*, in “The Geneva Confession” he uses “gospel”.

⁹³ Milner, 104.

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 308 (4.2.4).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 292 (4.1.13) - Citing Matt. 13.

always will be among men.”⁹⁶ Assuredly there must be some recognizable preaching of the Word, and if the ministry of the Word is lost in a community, that community is not part of the Church.⁹⁷

Calvin equates the Word of God with right doctrine,⁹⁸ mentioning right doctrine in sections primarily dealing with preaching, and even including it instead of the preaching of the Word as a mark of the Church in one of his treatises.⁹⁹ It is by the Word of God contained in scripture that doctrine is set and tested,^{100,101} but there are some essential doctrines that Calvin considers to be necessary components of the preaching of the Word. Most important is the doctrine of salvation in Christ alone; without this doctrine, the Church cannot stand.¹⁰² Calvin lists other requisite doctrines as “God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like.”¹⁰³ Beyond these, there is a certain amount of doctrinal freedom for the Christian. Though other things can be errors, they are not so grave as to separate sincere believers from the Church.¹⁰⁴ If Calvin's mark of the ministry of the Word is hard to identify and narrowly define, so are his requisite doctrines. The three are clear enough, but the vague ending to the sentence, “and the like”, leaves much room for interpretation. Calvin was perfectly willing to require pastors to accept some sort of approved set of doctrine,¹⁰⁵ and

⁹⁶ “The Genevan Confession,” 31.

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 310 (4.2.7).

⁹⁸ Milner, 101 – citing Calvin's Commentary on Eph 2:20.

⁹⁹ John Calvin. “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 263.

¹⁰⁰ Wendel, 306.

¹⁰¹ Elwood, 91, 94.

¹⁰² Calvin, *Institutes*, 305 (4.2.1).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 291 (4.1.12).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ John Calvin, “Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. Rev. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 59.

in Geneva required, along with Farel, not only preachers, but ordinary citizens as well, to subscribe to the Genevan Confession.¹⁰⁶ This sort of requirement of a subscription to specific doctrine shouldn't be understood to be a universal necessity, but merely one appropriate for the Church in a particular place at a particular time. Calvin doesn't use this as a standard in evaluating the legitimacy of Christian groups, and lists different articles in his “Brief Form of a Confession of Faith” and “Confession of Faith in Name of The Reformed Churches of France”.¹⁰⁷

The preaching of the Word is the more important, or at least the more determining mark of the Church in Calvin's theology. He consistently lists it first, and is more apt to apply it to differentiate between Church and not-Church than he is right administration of the sacraments. Calvin's “Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances” for Geneva describe the office of doctor of the Church as the office of theologians.¹⁰⁸ This is Calvin's office (in addition to pastor – his own experience combined the two), and since his primary concern is determining right doctrine, it is naturally by that standard that Calvin is most willing to differentiate between “the children of God and the profane”.¹⁰⁹ Calvin's own preaching, his exegetical work, his many theological treatises, and most importantly his *Institutes* all speak to his concern with the establishment of true doctrine and proper interpretation of scripture. If the Church is God's flock, those who hear the voice of Jesus and know him, then certainly Jesus must speak to them. If this happens through the preaching of God's

¹⁰⁶ T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 88.

¹⁰⁷ “Brief Form of a Confession of Faith” and “Confession of Faith in Name of The Reformed Churches of France.”

¹⁰⁸ “Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances,” 62.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 281 (4.1.2).

Word, as Calvin understands, then without that preaching, the Church cannot exist.¹¹⁰

Generally, the Protestant Reformation encouraged greater education in doctrine for the laity, in services in local languages, distribution of translations of the Bible, and deeper and more frequent sermons and public discourses on scripture. Expounding scriptural interpretations in sermons was the primary means of getting the Protestant/Evangelical message across. This became a major advantage for the reformers, one which the use of preaching as a mark of the Church sought to capitalize on, and which the Roman Catholic Council of Trent sought to address by requiring more lectures on scripture in its churches.

Sacraments

Calvin understands a sacrament as “an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men.”¹¹¹ In Calvin's description of the Lord's Supper, he frequently uses the word “seal”, describing the sacrament as a signifier and a seal of other promises, rather than those promises in itself. “They do not of themselves bestow any grace, but they announce and manifest it, and, like earnest and badges, give a ratification of the gifts which the divine liberality has bestowed upon us.”¹¹² Sacraments, Calvin says, have both terrestrial and heavenly parts,¹¹³ in the pledging of faith by the individual,

¹¹⁰ “Brief Form of a Confession of Faith,” 134.

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 491 (4.14.1).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 503 (4.14.17).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 566 (4.17.14).

and a reassurance of the fidelity of God to his promises.¹¹⁴ Christ is the substance of the sacrament,¹¹⁵ but he is not locally present¹¹⁶ or “annexed to the element of bread” in the Lord's Supper.¹¹⁷ In order to function, the sacrament must be preceded by the Word of God of which it is a seal,¹¹⁸ and accompanied by the Holy Spirit acting through the faith of the believer.¹¹⁹ While necessary in the community of believers, for the individual salvation may be assured without the visible signs of the sacraments, just as the sacraments can be celebrated without the sanctification of all communicants.¹²⁰ The basic purpose of the sacraments is the same as that of the preaching of the Word of God, “to hold faith, and offer Christ to us, and, in him, the treasures of heavenly grace.”¹²¹ The sacraments are completely dependent on the Word of God. Faith is born of the Word, and the sacraments depend on faith to be effective, while they seal and confirm that same faith. That same Word of God in scripture defines and delineates between true and false sacramental practices.¹²²

Since the existence of the sacraments is a mark of a true Church, the boundaries of true practice of the sacraments should also be the boundaries of the Church. Most obviously, a Church community must necessarily practice the rituals of the sacraments in some manner, and a community not partaking in the sacraments cannot be the Church. When a Christian group has knowledge of the sacraments of God, failure to celebrate them would be a rejection of Christ's ordinances to practice them. Thus, rejection of the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 500 (4.14.13).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 502 (4.14.16).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 569 (4.17.16).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 564 (4.17.12).

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 494 (4.14.5).

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 497 (4.14.9).

¹²⁰ Ibid., 501 (4.14.14) - Citing Augustine.

¹²¹ Ibid., 503 (4.14.17).

¹²² Milner, 117.

practice of the sacraments represents a rebellion against God's commands, a sign that a community is not motivated by God, even if they claim to be. More specifically, Calvin argues that the sacraments can only be understood and practiced within certain bounds, outside of which they cannot be called sacraments, and the community practicing them is likely not part of the Church. Following in the footsteps of Luther and Zwingli, Calvin recognizes only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

For the practice of baptism, Calvin sees certain essentials: the presentation of the person to God and the Church, prayer over the person, a recitation of a confession of faith, an explanation of baptism, and baptism itself in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, followed by prayer and thanksgiving.¹²³ Other elements and details are nonessential and may be decided by the local Church, including the question practice by immersion or by sprinkling of water, which Calvin explicitly describes as “a matter of no importance”, though he is quick to mention that the ancient Church practiced baptism by immersion.¹²⁴ Despite limiting essential factors to the preceding list, Calvin is clearly skeptical of the practice of baptism by lay persons, and is absolutely convinced that women cannot baptize.¹²⁵

The Lord's Supper

Calvin spends much more time and paper discussing the Lord's Supper because of the greater controversy surrounding it in his day (he similarly devotes an entire chapter of the *Institutes* to justifying infant baptism, another controversial topic of his day). The

¹²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 524 (4.15.19).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 525 (4.15.20).

discussion of the Lord's Supper is much more detailed, and deals quite a bit with issues of false and dangerous practice of the sacrament. The Lord's Supper, Calvin says, has been obscured with mists and darkness for some time.¹²⁶ The sacrament is valuable, and “pious souls can derive great confidence and delight” from it,¹²⁷ but must be careful to neither over nor undervalue it.¹²⁸

Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper can be best understood as an opposition to the two extremes of Roman Catholic and Radical Protestant theologies. The “breaking of the bread is a symbol, not the reality, [...] but this being admitted, we duly infer from the exhibition of the symbol that the thing itself is exhibited”, since God wouldn't conceivably give us an unfulfilled symbol.¹²⁹ Without being in the bread, Christ's body is still present in the Supper by “the secret operation of the spirit.”¹³⁰ Christ is still in heaven, but Christians can be fully connected with him without him being brought to earth.¹³¹ To Calvin, the discussion of Christ's presence in the bread and wine appears to be a question of Christ's human nature, which makes the discussion of Lord's Supper a discussion of the nature of Christ.¹³² A denial of the humanity of Christ, as Calvin appears to think any “local presence” in the Lord's Supper is, is fairly easily within his standards of rejection of essential doctrine, and therefore rejection of the Word of God.

Any sort of reduction of God from the God who is the creator of the universe to a god who originates within that creation is false worship, and necessarily cannot be

¹²⁶ Ibid., 557 (4.17.1).

¹²⁷ Ibid., 558 (4.17.2).

¹²⁸ Ibid., 560 (4.17.5).

¹²⁹ Ibid., 564 (4.17.10).

¹³⁰ Ibid., 586 (4.17.31).

¹³¹ Ibid., 587 (4.17.31).

¹³² Ibid., 587 (4.17.32).

legitimate practice of the sacraments.¹³³ Calvin is very clear that Christ's body is in heaven, and that even to say that it is now in this world is unlawful.¹³⁴ The distinctions of presence in the Eucharistic elements are the core distinctions of the legitimacy of the practice of the sacrament. There is absolutely no “local presence”, no descent by Christ from heaven into the bread and wine; though there is still a link between the sacrament and what it signifies. Drifting in either the direction of complete congruence between the elements and the body of Christ (Roman Catholicism) or in the direction of no link between the promises of justification and sanctification and the sacrament (Radical Reformation) loses sight of the sacrament, and Calvin would be unwilling to call it the Lord's Supper.¹³⁵ Calvin rejects the claims that the essence of the bread is transformed, while the outward appearance remains the same (transubstantiation), or that Christ descends and exists in the bread alongside the essence of the bread, which still remains (consubstantiation). Both of these come perilously close to attaching the incorruptible body of Christ in heaven to corruptible elements in this world, though, as we will later see in the discussion of Calvin's relations with Lutherans, Calvin is willing to tolerate some dissenting views as still legitimately Christian. His two basic restrictions for legitimately Christian sacramental theology are that it may neither “affix” Christ to corruptible elements, nor may it make claims about his body that are inconsistent with human nature.¹³⁶ If either of Calvin's two standards for Eucharistic theology are violated, then so are essential doctrine, and the Word of God. A community doing either of these things would then cease to be the Church, and rather be in opposition to true Christianity.

¹³³ Elwood, 95.

¹³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 565 (4.17.12).

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 569 (4.17.16).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 571 (4.17.19).

A claim of literal transformation of the Lord's Supper elements is a rejection of the Word of God by making a “sacrilege” out of the sacrament.¹³⁷ The denial of a link between “the sign and the thing signified” destroys “the truth of the sacrament”, and so loses the sacrament, without which there is no Church community.¹³⁸ Worship and adoration of the sacrament itself is idolatrous in that it honors “the gifts instead of the giver”, and corrupts the practice, destroying the sacrament.¹³⁹ There is certainly grave danger in any false practice of the sacraments, it having the potential not only for idolatry, but even to break its participants off from the Church, rendering their community no longer Christian.

All the dangers of the destruction of the practice of the Lord's Supper iterated by Calvin underline how important he thinks it is for the Church community. “That the pious soul may duly apprehend Christ in the sacrament, it must rise to heaven.”¹⁴⁰ This communion with Christ is fully possible and to be practiced in the Lord's Supper. The sacraments unite people with Christ and with one another in common worship,¹⁴¹ and strengthen faith and testify of it to the community.¹⁴² The Lord's Supper should be celebrated frequently,¹⁴³ ideally at every meeting of the Church,¹⁴⁴ but at least once a week (something that he would be forced to compromise on in Geneva).¹⁴⁵ Everyone at

¹³⁷ Ibid., 305 (4.2.2).

¹³⁸ Ibid., 569 (4.17.16).

¹³⁹ Ibid., 594 (4.17.37).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 593 (4.17.35).

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 505 (4.14.19).

¹⁴² Ibid., 506 (4.14.19).

¹⁴³ Ibid., 600 (4.17.44).

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 601 (4.17.44).

¹⁴⁵ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), 253. – In 1537 the Articles on Church Organization and Worship of Geneva advised practice of the Lord's Supper once monthly, and upon his return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin accepted a practice of the sacrament only four times a year – Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the first Sunday of September.

the Church meeting should partake,¹⁴⁶ both eating the bread and drinking the wine.¹⁴⁷ But with all of these requirements, Calvin is careful to emphasize several practices as non-essential, on which local Churches can practice the sacrament differently without damaging the sacrament or separating themselves from the Church. “Whether or not believers are to take into their hands and divide among themselves, or each is to eat what is given to him: whether they are to return the cup to the deacon or hand it to their neighbor; whether the bread is to be leavened or unleavened, and the wine to be red or white, is of no consequence.”¹⁴⁸ Though intensely rigid on issues of utmost importance, Calvin is willing to accept diversity of practice in some issues he considers to be “of no consequence”, and able to compromise on other issues, particularly the frequency of the celebration of the sacrament.

Conclusion

By Calvin's estimation, the Church is the community of God's elect, both alive and dead. The Church exists both as the visible institution and community in the world and as the invisible society of the faithful from all times and places. It is a society set apart by God, and delineated by the presence of two marks, given by God. The Word of God, as preached and as received in true doctrine and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper come from God, and are held by the Church. They each act to sanctify the Church and its members, and if a community is lacking either of them, it is not part of the Church. It is by the standard of the presence of these two marks that Calvin endeavors, at

¹⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 602 (4.17.46).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 603 (4.17.47).

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 599 (4.17.43).

least theoretically, to evaluate the legitimacy of communities claiming to be Christian.

Chapter Two:

John Calvin and Reformed Protestants

“We acknowledge all as members of the Church who by confession of faith, regularity of conduct, and participation in the sacraments, unite with us in acknowledging the same God and Christ.”¹⁴⁹ While he establishes fundamental limits on those to be acknowledged as Christians with this declaration from the *Institutes*, John Calvin practically limited the Church to those who stood in fundamental agreement with him, with Luther, and with the currents of the Reformation. Though Calvin's ministry was undoubtedly local, and he had the greatest influence on Geneva, he was globally concerned, interested in establishing contact with and aiding Reformed Christians throughout Europe.

This chapter will deal Calvin's interactions with those whom he accepted as genuinely Christian, sometimes despite disagreements. How did Calvin act in the theological dialogues within the Reformation movement? He drew on the thought of other Reformed Christians, and dealt with disagreements in the movement, sometimes relieving tensions, sometimes aggravating them. Calvin's interactions with Luther will be examined, particularly his loyal dissent in criticizing Luther's attacks on Zwingli while maintaining principled support of Luther's theology. Likewise, Calvin's strong conciliatory push for unity with the leading Swiss reformers will receive attention. Also of importance are the close relationship between Calvin and Philip Melancthon, despite their different theological approaches, and problems between Calvin and some other German Protestants. Joachim Westphal's disputations with Calvin aggravated the

¹⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), trans. Henry Beveridge, 289 (4.1.8).

German-Swiss disagreement over the nature of the Eucharist.

John Calvin's interest in international Christianity was not limited to advice to and disputation with the top theological leaders of the Reformation movement. He was concerned with and attempted to support Protestants in southern Germany, in Poland, in England, and in his country of birth, France. Calvin's theological, scholarly, and pastoral work was aimed at equipping Protestants with the tools to be better educated in their religion, to resist the arguments of both Radical Reformers and Roman Catholics, both of whom Calvin considered to be outside the bounds of the orthodox Church. Many of his letters were directed to political leaders urging them to be tolerant of Reformed movements in their respective countries, and frequently arguing that Reformed Christianity was both the legitimate expression of the Christian faith, and also totally unlike the Anabaptism and Radicalism that the Reformation had become associated with. These were also the true objects of most of Calvin's public treatises against Roman Catholic letters and doctrines.

As a theologian emerging after the initial push of the Reformation, Calvin entertained very little expectation of true reform taking place in the Roman church. Instead, letters and treatises responding to Roman Catholic declarations and actions were meant to equip Reformed Christians to resist Roman Catholic arguments, and to continually justify the legitimacy of Reformed Christianity before governing authorities.

Calvin sought unity with other orthodox Reformed Christians by encouraging progress towards stronger, purer faith. Correcting false impressions and reaching reconciliation in matters of disagreement were the objects of most meetings of Protestant leaders, and were the key objects of the international council that Archbishop Cranmer

proposed in his letter to Calvin. Calvin's thought seems to have generally been that as Christians come closer to true, pure belief and doctrine, union will proceed organically. Likewise, as political leaders are corrected, convinced of the legitimacy of the Reformed faith, and converted to it, tolerance of the Reformed will follow. To Calvin, unity was not achieved through an institution, but rather based on loyalty to God, based in scripture and held together by the Spirit, leading the Church towards common interpretation and understanding.¹⁵⁰

Calvin and Luther

Because the Reformation movement arose somewhat independently in a number of different cities, there weren't necessarily strong bonds between Protestants. Leaders such as Martin Luther were not universally acknowledged in the movement. In the midst of the disputes between Luther and Zürich, Calvin counseled Bullinger to be patient with Luther, stressing his importance in beginning the Reformation and in his theological writings.¹⁵¹ As a Reformer and as a Christian theologian, Calvin followed very much in the footsteps of Martin Luther. In relying heavily on Biblical texts and in being willing to repudiate the traditions of the historical church when they appeared to conflict scripture, Calvin accepted the method of Luther, even when following in this manner led to different stresses in his theology. It is clear that Calvin deeply admired Luther, even if Luther was varyingly indifferent, impressed, and annoyed with him. In a letter to

¹⁵⁰ Christopher L. Elwood, "Calvin's Ecclesial Theology and Human Salvation," in *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society*, ed Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 91-92.

¹⁵¹ David C. Steinmetz, "Luther and Calvin on Church and Tradition," in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 3.

Bullinger in late 1544, Calvin wrote about Luther, “I often say that even if he should call me a devil, I should still pay him the honor of acknowledging him as an illustrious servant of God, who yet, as he is rich in virtues, so also labors under serious faults. [...] It is our task so to reprehend whatever is bad in him that we make some allowance for those splendid gifts.”¹⁵²

Calvin thought some of Luther's criticisms of other Protestants to be excessive, even, a “fierce invective.”¹⁵³ Despite his disagreement with them, Calvin was willing to tolerate Luther's polemics.¹⁵⁴ With many, though certainly not all, Reformed Christians, Calvin tended to be more conciliatory in tone, contrasting Luther's tendency towards harsh criticisms.¹⁵⁵ After Luther's criticisms of Zürich, Calvin didn't support Zürich's response, but instead sent a moderate letter to Melanchthon, criticizing the harshness of the attack and asking Melanchthon to counsel Luther to be more patient with Zürich.¹⁵⁶ The letters to Melanchthon and to Bullinger were intended to keep both from responding, in order to deescalate the dispute.¹⁵⁷ Though Calvin very much appreciated Zwingli's theology, he was always loyal to Luther.¹⁵⁸ This loyalty in no way precluded him from cautioning Luther when he thought he had misstepped, but meant that he was willing to defend him to others who would criticize him more expansively.

¹⁵² Steinmetz, 3 – quoting a letter to Bullinger on Nov. 25th 1544.

¹⁵³ John H. Kromminga, “Calvin and Ecumenicity,” in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 43 – quoting a letter to Bullinger on Nov. 25th 1544.

¹⁵⁴ Steinmetz, 2-3.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵⁶ John T. McNeill, “Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism,” in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 67.

¹⁵⁷ W. Stanford Reid, “The Ecumenicalism of John Calvin,” in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 104.

¹⁵⁸ McNeill, “Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism,” 61.

Luther's experience and the history of the early Reformation helped to inform Calvin's own support of Church unity. Many early Protestants had called for a universal Christian council to be held somewhere in Germany where their safety could be assured. Luther saw such councils as serving as a sort of court interpreting the established law of scripture. The decisions of such a council were valid only if they reflected scripture. A new council wouldn't necessarily arrive at the correct conclusions, and most questions ought to be able to resolved through exegetical study of scripture.¹⁵⁹

Both Luther and Calvin rejected the idea that they were innovators, instead asserting their continuity with the early Church and the principles of scripture. In emphasizing this, particularly in response to Roman Catholic criticisms and accusations, Calvin stressed points of agreement with Church fathers. Luther, on the other hand, in repudiating the excessive authority that had been ascribed to those fathers, stressed their faults.¹⁶⁰

Calvin and Melanchthon

While Calvin never had a close personal relationship with Luther, he maintained a strong friendship with his successor, Philip Melanchthon. In 1540, Calvin and Melanchthon represented the Protestant movement at the Colloquies at Ratisbon, arranged by Emperor Charles V. Melanchthon lead the Protestant delegation, and Cardinal Contarini the Roman Catholic. The colloquies were ultimately unsuccessful, but the experience brought Melanchthon and Calvin closer together.¹⁶¹ That same year,

¹⁵⁹ Steinmetz, 5-7, 13.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁶¹ Reid, 103.

Melanchthon produced the *Confessio Augustana Variata*, an alteration to portion of the Augsburg Confession on the Lord's Supper more amenable to the Swiss Protestants.¹⁶² Calvin signed and supported this variation (though he had also signed the original version, supporting Luther's conception of the reception of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament),¹⁶³ but the *Variata* would be rejected by other Lutherans. Calvin produced, in the same year, the "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper", trying to unify Lutherans and Zwinglians. The "Short Treatise" argued that the dispute could be resolved simply through greater communication.^{164,165} In it, Calvin emphasized the essential agreement between Swiss and German Protestants, and the essential differences between the Reformed views and the Roman Catholic doctrines of sacrifice and transubstantiation.¹⁶⁶ In defending Bucer and Melanchthon to Farel and other Swiss Reformers, Calvin argued that the Papal legate was trying to encourage and exploit the Lutheran-Swiss rift.¹⁶⁷

Despite their efforts, the 1540s were filled with disputes between Wittenberg and Zürich on the nature of the Lord's Supper,¹⁶⁸ and Calvin would end the decade by writing, in his "Concerning Scandals" that "it is an old trick of Satan's to rush otherwise prudent servants of God into controversies with each other so that he may hinder the course of sound doctrine."¹⁶⁹ The status of Melanchthon and Calvin as moderates in their

¹⁶² McNeill, "Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism," 63.

¹⁶³ Steinmetz, 3.

¹⁶⁴ McNeill, "Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism," 62.

¹⁶⁵ John Calvin, "A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and only Saviour Jesus Christ," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. Rev. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 140-166.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 155-157.

¹⁶⁷ James MacKinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962), 189.

¹⁶⁸ McNeill, "Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism," 64.

¹⁶⁹ John Calvin, *Concerning Scandals*, trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 80.

respective (Lutheran and Swiss Protestant) communities lead them to stand out as clear proponents of Reformed unity when Luther and Bullinger were engaged in polemics against each other. Each of them, unwilling to publicly repudiate members of his community, worked quietly to diminish the severity of the argument. By 1545 Calvin felt secure enough in his relationship with Melanchthon to write to him to ask him to try to convince Luther to hold back in his polemics against the Swiss. Melanchthon's favorable opinion of Calvin probably moderated Luther's opinion of Calvin.¹⁷⁰

The Calvin-Melanchthon relationship wasn't the result of identical theological beliefs. Melanchthon and Calvin had different understandings of predestination, with Calvin stressing God's election, and Melanchthon maintaining a sense of human free will.. Though they seemed to be well aware of their differences, they didn't confront those differences.¹⁷¹ In 1542, Calvin dedicated a response to Albert Pighius's criticism of the doctrine of slavery of the will to Melanchthon, who was actually bothered by it. Melanchthon's chief concern with the response, however, was not that he disagreed with its fundamental position, but rather that it was excessively divisive and controversial. Melanchthon suggested that Calvin focus his attention on topics more likely to encourage unity.¹⁷² In contrast, following their initial meeting at the Ratisbon Colloquies, Calvin was concerned that Melanchthon was too willing to use broad, vague language to achieve agreement with the Roman Catholic delegation.^{173,174} Calvin even had a French translation of Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* published, despite its slant towards free

¹⁷⁰ Reid, 104.

¹⁷¹ Kromminga, 45.

¹⁷² MacKinnon, 179.

¹⁷³ Reid, 103.

¹⁷⁴ Kromminga, 43.

will.¹⁷⁵

These incidents illustrate what were and what weren't the issues dividing Calvin and Melanchthon. Though their minor theological differences were no problem, Calvin was concerned that Melanchthon tended to compromise more than he was comfortable with, and Melanchthon was concerned that Calvin could, like Luther, be excessively polemical at times.

Following Melanchthon's death, Calvin made a point of showing his friendship with him, writing:

O Philip Melanchthon! For I appeal to you who live in the presence of God with Christ, and wait for us there until we are united with you in blessed rest. You said a hundred times, when, weary with labor and oppression with sadness, you laid your head familiarly on my bosom; Would, would that I could die on this bosom! Since then I have wished a thousand times that it had been our lot to be together.¹⁷⁶

There was clearly a close personal tie between Calvin and Melanchthon, but this was certainly a valuable relationship for the cause of Protestant unity. Calvin would continue to appeal to Melanchthon during disputes with Lutherans such as Westphal and Tilemannus Heshusius.

Calvin and Swiss Reformed

Though Calvin allied himself with leading German Protestants such as Luther and Melanchthon, and defended them against attacks by Swiss and Genevan Reformers, there

¹⁷⁵ MacKinnon, 190.

¹⁷⁶ Kromminga, 43.

was still a strong bond between the two. Like other major Reformers, Calvin mildly opposed iconoclasm, and was moderate on ceremonies, denying that he supported the outright abolition of fast days.¹⁷⁷ This, and his relationships with leading Lutherans helped feed some opposition to him in Swiss Protestant public opinion that was much less favorably disposed towards traditional ceremonies. Calvin was willing to tolerate these sorts of things in other Reformed communities for the sake of Christian unity, but did not encourage their practice in his own ministry, which explained his agreement with Zürich. Just as the key disagreements between Lutherans and the Swiss were differences in the understanding of the nature of the Lord's Supper, agreement on that topic was essential for unity between Geneva and the Swiss churches.

Discussions between Reformed Christians linked to Geneva and Zürich on the nature of the Lord's Supper went on for a considerable period of time, but eventually essential agreement was reached between the two camps.¹⁷⁸ John Calvin was well aware that on the nature of the Lord's Supper, he was theologically between Wittenberg and Zürich, opposing the Eucharist as merely a sign or an aid to memory (the excesses of Zürich), or as corporeal presence and completely literal "this is my body" (the excesses of Wittenberg).¹⁷⁹ Calvin had repeatedly attempted to bring Wittenberg and Zürich closer together, but, considering his minimal success, eventually sought a unilateral agreement on the Eucharist with Zürich that he hoped might be the basis for further discussion with Wittenberg.

Since 1537, Calvin had kept up occasional correspondence with Heinrich

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷⁹ McNeill, "Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism," 60-61.

Bullinger, the leader of the Zürich church following Zwingli's death. In late 1548, Calvin sent him a proposal of twenty statements on the sacraments, which Bullinger was willing to broadly support. However, early in 1549, Calvin presented 20 very similar articles to the Swiss synod at Bern, which rejected the proposal. In May of that year, Calvin went with William Farel to Zürich at Bullinger's invitation, and the three together produced and agreed to twenty-six articles of what would be the *Consensus Tigurinus*. It was agreed to by the ministers and city council of Zürich by August, and came to be widely accepted in the Swiss Confederacy and France, unifying Reformed Protestants there. The articles clearly affirmed the sacraments as more than empty signs, but described them as “marks and badges of Christian profession and fellowship or fraternity, to be incitements to gratitude and exercises of faith and a godly life.”¹⁸⁰

Calvin seems to have hoped that the *Consensus* would help to make Swiss theology palatable to Lutherans, but it was far from conciliatory enough, and Lutherans, by and large, strongly opposed it.¹⁸¹ Unity with Zürich brought Calvin further away from Lutherans. The Reformation movements that would eventually become the Reformed Confessions of today gained relative theological unity through this effort, but the apparent agreement with the Zwinglian theology of the Eucharist ruffled the feathers of those following in the theological footsteps of the man who had railed against such theology. As unity was achieved along the Reformation's southern front, the divisions deepened with Reformers in the north.

Calvin and Westphal and Heshusius

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 69-72.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 71-72.

In short, Calvin did not get along with Westphal and Heshusius. The arguments with them were centered around their criticisms of Calvin's conception of the Eucharist, and developed into a major disagreement.¹⁸² Joachim Westphal of Hamburg wrote five short treatises criticizing Calvin, Bullinger, à Lasco, Peter Martyr, and the *Consensus Tigurinus*. While Melanchthon openly expressed his willingness to accept the understanding of the *Consensus* as legitimate, Westphal canvassed southern Germany, where Zwinglian and Calvinist sympathies were strongest, for opposition to the *Consensus*. Westphal spoke out against Melanchthon, and gained influence amongst Lutherans, mobilizing opposition to the *Consensus*. Throughout the 1550s, Calvin issued a series of responses. In 1554, he wrote a treatise, “Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments”, which he published together with the text of the *Consensus*. Two years later, following continued attacks from Westphal, he wrote his “Second Defense of the Sound and Orthodox Faith Concerning the Sacraments, in Answer to the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal”, and, in 1557, issued a “Final Admonition”. In these, Calvin appealed to Melanchthon to support him, and insisted that he had always supported the Augsburg Confession – held as the standard confession of faith among anti-*Consensus* Lutherans.¹⁸³

About two years after the beginning of the conflict with Westphal, Tilemannus Heshusius wrote a treatise arguing real presence and criticizing the stance of the *Consensus*. Bullinger wrote notations on a copy and sent it to Calvin, asking him to write a response. Calvin was initially reluctant to do so, but eventually changed his mind, writing “The clear explanation of sound doctrine concerning the true partaking of the

¹⁸² Kromminga, 46.

¹⁸³ McNeill, “Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism,” 73-75.

flesh and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper”.¹⁸⁴ In this treatise, Calvin appealed to Melanchthon, by this time deceased, and cites his private rebuke of Staphylus and his criticism of Le Coq in correspondence to Calvin, two men who tended towards more extreme assertions of real presence, and whom Calvin called apostates. Calvin refuted the claims of these two, primarily claims about Calvin's own personal beliefs, and asserted his moderate theological position, affirming that the Lord's Supper is indeed a communion of the body.

Calvin makes a point of criticizing Heshusius' attacks on Melanchthon, which has the added benefit of reminding the reader of the relationship between Calvin and Melanchthon. Heshusius' primary focus is on the nature of the Supper, and Calvin spends most of the treatise dealing with this subject. Heshusius' claim that the bread of the supper is literally Christ, Calvin asserts, isn't necessary for the sacrament to be valid, just as it is unnecessary for the sacrament of baptism, and actually becomes dangerous and heretical in that it destroys the analogy between Christ's sacrifice and the bread itself. The effect of the claim that Christ is at once in heaven and in different places on Earth “is to dismember the body”. Calvin avoids the problematic presumption that the reprobate also ingest the body of Christ, but accuses Heshusius of it. Calvin's criticisms of Heshusius' strongly literal interpretation of the sacrament are more or less the same as his criticisms of transubstantiation.¹⁸⁵

Calvin's argument is primarily focused on the issue at hand: the nature of the Lord's Supper, but he also confronts the accusations against him personally, emphasizing

¹⁸⁴ John Calvin. “The clear explanation of sound doctrine concerning the true partaking of the flesh and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. Rev. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 257.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 271-284.

his consistency on the subject. In arguing on the topic, he cites ancient authorities, emphasizing his consistency with their theology, as well as contemporary sources, including the *Consensus* itself. But Calvin's emphasis on substantive argument doesn't prevent him from criticizing Heshusius personally, thus adding to the polemical nature of his defense.¹⁸⁶

The conflict with Westphal and Heshusius brings into question the limits of Calvin's tolerance for divergent theology. Calvin clearly seems to think that Heshusius is an apostate, but is unwilling to openly accuse him of it. On the other hand, in his "Final Admonition" against Joachim Westphal, Calvin is quite willing to call him a heretic, because he has failed to accept the admonitions by Calvin and others. The issue with these two is unlike issues with Anabaptists or Roman Catholics. Calvin considers Westphal to be outside the Church simply because he has refused to receive correction from that Church, following in some manner the instructions of Christ in Matthew 18:15-17 to consider a person an apostate if he or she fails to respond to repeated admonitions. Heshusius is another unique case: Calvin doesn't want to call him out as a heretic, probably because, at least in part, he is more moderate than Westphal, and had not been admonished as frequently as him, but mainly because he didn't want to have to call those of similar belief to Heshusius heretics on principle. Lutherans arguing some sort of real presence, though clearly misguided, might still be Christians, and certainly should be refuted so that they can return to orthodox Reformed belief.

These cases are also complicated by the fact that Heshusius and Westphal seem to consider Calvin himself to be a heretic, as sinful in his belief as an Anabaptist radical

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 287-319.

would be. It isn't implausible to think that Calvin might have been reacting emotionally in denying that these two had a place in the Christian Church, as he also may have with Sebastian Castellio, as we will see in the fourth chapter.

Calvin devoted considerable time, both prior to and after the Westphalian controversy, towards resolving the Swiss-Lutheran controversy over the Lord's Supper. From his "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and only Savior Jesus Christ"¹⁸⁷ to "The best method of obtaining concord – provided the Truth be sought without contention", Calvin maintained that Lutheran and Zwinglian conceptions of the Eucharist were reconcilable and in fact rested on the same essential points, namely that the Supper is not an empty symbol and that it cannot control God's grace. Though he consistently rails against those who "insist that the body of Christ is swallowed,"¹⁸⁸ he strongly emphasizes the agreement from both sides "that under the symbols of bread and wine a communion of the body and blood of Christ is set forth."¹⁸⁹ As unity is achieved through God's grace received in the Eucharist, Calvin aimed to achieve unity in opinion on that sacrament, so that Christians might be of one mind.

Calvin as Christian Internationalist

Scholars and biographers have frequently minimized or failed to note the fact that, though he came to be the chief minister of Geneva, Calvin was, himself, a refugee from France. His youth and education in France, the influence of the theology of the new

¹⁸⁷ Calvin, "Short Treatise."

¹⁸⁸ John Calvin. "The best method of obtaining concord – provided the Truth be sought without contention," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. Rev. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 326.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 325-326.

German Reformation movement, his travel before settling in Geneva, his exile to Strasbourg, and the location of Geneva itself all uniquely contributed to Calvin's international outlook and focus. As a persecuted Protestant in France, and as minister to the French Reformed refugee congregations in Geneva and Strasbourg, Calvin had a heart for his country of origin, and the plight of followers of the Reformation there. As a Genevan statesman and an influential theologian, he was deeply involved in Swiss-Genevan politics and theological discussions. His concern for the international, universal Church lead him to have concern for Protestant groups in England, Poland, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. Wherever those whom he acknowledged as Christians were being persecuted, Calvin had concern. Since Calvin's theology described the Church as independent of the state, the Church existed apart from artificial state boundaries, and was truly international.¹⁹⁰

Reformed Protestantism remained relatively weak and persecuted throughout Calvin's life. The status of the Roman Catholic church in France as controlled by the state made the government particularly sensitive to criticisms of it.¹⁹¹ This became a draw for Reformed Christianity, a religion without a Pope or Prince as a spiritual authority on Earth.¹⁹² Strong government religious policy also increased the importance of winning favor, or at least tolerance from governmental leaders for the Reformation.

At that time, Reformed Protestants in France remained associated with Anabaptism and the Radical Reformation, so much so that even Philip Melancthon and other German Reformers were totally unperturbed by the persecutions in France. They,

¹⁹⁰ Franklin Charles Palm, *Calvinism and the Religious Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 29.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 38, 64.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 72.

and, it would appear, much of the French government apparatus, assumed that the victims were revolutionaries and Anabaptists or other spiritualist radicals.¹⁹³ A significant number of Reformed Protestants were executed in France, including, soon before Calvin completed his first edition of the *Institutes*, Etienne de la Forge, a personal friend of Calvin's.¹⁹⁴ It is in this light that we should read Calvin's dedicating letter to King Francis I at the beginning of the *Institutes*, which asked him to tolerate legitimate Reformed Protestantism. The letter argues that the Reformed should not be persecuted not because of any universal mores against suppressing particular religious groups, but because this particular group, Calvin claims, is actually correct. In this, Calvin sought to disassociate Reformed Protestants from religious radicals and revolutionaries. In as much as it was an attempt to stop the persecutions, the censorships, the imprisonments and the executions, it was also an attempt to vindicate the executed, to protect their memory. It mattered that these people had died for the sake of the gospel and not for some unchristian blasphemy or for a rebellion against the state.¹⁹⁵

The publication of the *Institutes* turned out to be a great boon to the Reformed communities in France, not because the letter convinced King Francis (it didn't), but because the book as a whole helped to guide the theology of the newly developing underground church.¹⁹⁶ As he worked to improve the perception of Reformed Protestants and disassociate them from the Radical Reformation, Calvin was interested in making certain that the Reformed Protestant movement in France remained legitimately

¹⁹³ William Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William J. Heynen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 43.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-46.

¹⁹⁶ Palm, 38.

Reformed and avoided straying into what he would have considered Anabaptist heresies. Calvin's second work, "Psychopannychia", was intended to refute the arguments of the Anabaptists who were then becoming notable in France and associated with the Reformed there. Focusing on a particular issue, that of soul sleep, it provided a solid refutation of the Anabaptist doctrine, and helped to build up Reformed Protestants in holding to orthodox belief on the subject.¹⁹⁷

In order to help build up the movement and to protect the orthodox faith, Calvin maintained correspondence with typical French Protestants, as well as with non-Reformed French aristocrats to encourage their conversion with the goal of converting France as a whole.¹⁹⁸ Calvin's letters included significant treatises such as *Concerning Scandals* which, though intended for a wider Reformed audience, was first published in the form of a letter to a particular friend of Calvin's in France, providing advice for refuting arguments against Reformed Protestantism, for unity (particularly concerning the nature of the Lord's Supper), and for the avoidance of heresy.¹⁹⁹ The French Reformed church, strongly influenced by Calvin's Geneva, spread throughout the south, becoming particularly strong along major trade routes, and united in its first national synod in 1559.²⁰⁰ Calvin would write to advise French church leaders, as well as writing to repudiate secret loyalty to scripture and God, that is, personally and secretly keeping Reformed faith and attending Roman Catholic services despite it, in order to comply with the law and escape persecution. In this, Calvin was rather vehement, calling such

¹⁹⁷ John Calvin. "Psychopannychia," in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 413.

¹⁹⁸ Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement 1564-1572* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 14.

¹⁹⁹ Calvin, *Concerning Scandals*, 1.

²⁰⁰ Palm, 41-42.

Protestants “Nicodemites” after the Jewish council member who secretly came to Jesus at night and failed to speak up for him when the council acted against him. Calvin sought to support those who resisted “Roman idolatry”, but he had little regard for those who, while acknowledging Reformed theology, failed to reject the Mass, which he saw as the centerpiece of a Roman Catholic rebellion against God.²⁰¹

In 1552, Calvin wrote to Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Crammer describing divisions between Christians as “among the chief evils of our time”, saying that “the body [of Christ] lies bleeding”.²⁰² Though opposition to episcopal polity has been strong in the Congregationalist and Presbyterian Reformed traditions since soon after the Reformation, Calvin was fully open to the episcopal structure for Church governance. He did not, of course, practice it or suggest it in Geneva, but he saw it as a morally neutral structure, neither divinely ordained (as Roman Catholics claimed) nor inherently evil (as some Presbyterians and Congregationalists in later years would claim).²⁰³ Calvin acknowledged the legitimacy of the episcopate in England, Denmark and Sweden, and proposed a Reformed episcopate in Poland. Likewise, he was fully in agreement with the establishment of superintendents in the French Reformed church.²⁰⁴ Of course, Calvin considered it necessary to make it clear that the role of the Archbishop of a country was far from the absolute control of the Pope. An Archbishop could not claim to be the single supreme head of even a national church, nor could he claim anything near divine

²⁰¹ Elwood, 99-101.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁰³ John T. McNeill, “Calvin and Episcopacy,” in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 54.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

authority.²⁰⁵

Calvin was also concerned with local issues and questions of faith. He wrote an “Admonition to the Poles” when a number of Protestant radicals, including some former residents of Geneva, were promoting Anti-Trinitarian belief in Poland.²⁰⁶ Calvin wrote the bishop of London to encourage the consolidation and organizational unity of the English church, and tolerated the Anglican liturgy, though he thought it less than ideal.²⁰⁷ Continually seeking to resolve disputes in other Reformed congregations, Calvin urged à Lasco not to exclude the Waldenses (French Protestant refugees) even if they didn't fully conform to the norms of his congregation.²⁰⁸ He advised John Knox to moderate his opposition to some rituals, and, while acknowledging the importance and the danger of the uses of symbolic candles or “figured bread”, advised the acceptance of Protestant communities that maintained their use for the sake of unity.²⁰⁹ Some variation of belief was even acceptable to Calvin; he allowed a former Anabaptist join his church in Strasbourg even though he wasn't willing to consider accepting predestination, and still didn't hold orthodox beliefs on regeneration, paedobaptism, and some other topics (though he was willing to accept instruction in those areas).²¹⁰

Conclusion

In seeking to resolve disagreements between individual reformers, Calvin wrote Bullinger to ask him to get along with Bucer, despite his legitimate complaints against

²⁰⁵ MacKinnon, 202.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 203.

²⁰⁷ Kromminga, 44, 46.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 48.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 49.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

him.²¹¹ He wrote Farel to defend Bucer's toleration of Lutheran ceremonies, and encouraged agreement between Zürich and Strasbourg.²¹² Since true unity would be achieved through fidelity to God and to true faith, Calvin provided numerous resources for the interpretation and understanding of scripture. These included exegetical tools, of his preaching, his commentaries, and his theological works. The Academy of Geneva, founded in 1559 was another such tool, and served to educate numerous leaders of the Church in Geneva, in Switzerland, and in France.²¹³

Calvin tried to reach out to aid persecuted communities of Reformed Christians, writing numerous civil authorities, supporting the French Waldenses in Switzerland, and Dutch refugees in Denmark.²¹⁴ He avoided making unnecessary changes if they would ruffle feathers, declining to abolish feast days (though he would be accused of doing precisely that), and, like other major reformers, opposing iconoclasm.²¹⁵ Though cautious on doctrine, Calvin sought to be open on practice and ceremony. The complete designs of Calvin and other leading reformers, particularly Archbishop Cranmer, are revealed in Cranmer's proposition of a general Christian Council for the Reformation and Calvin's support for such a Council.²¹⁶ Calvin would write a letter to Melancthon in late 1557 proposing a conference in Germany. Later, in 1560, Calvin wrote a letter to some Reformed individuals in France, proposing “a free and universal council to put an end to the divisions of Christendom”, the participants in which would agree to accept the authority of the council, and then reach conclusions regarding doctrine, ritual practice,

²¹¹ Ibid., 43.

²¹² Ibid., 44, 48.

²¹³ Elwood, 92-94.

²¹⁴ Kromminga 44.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

²¹⁶ Elwood, 90.

and church governance.²¹⁷ Such a conference or council wouldn't necessarily arrive at the right conclusions, and most questions should probably be resolved through scriptural exegesis, but a council could certainly be helpful in unifying Reformed Protestantism and quelling certain false beliefs.²¹⁸ These proposals were, of course, never realized, but they display well an admirable characteristic of Calvin's: his dedication to the unity of orthodox Protestantism.

²¹⁷ McNeill, "Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism," 76-77.

²¹⁸ Steinmetz, 13.

Chapter Three:

Calvin and Roman Catholicism

In Calvin's ecclesiological system, the marks of the Church are the presence of the word of God, including right doctrine, and the celebration of the two sacraments which Calvin understands to have been instituted by Christ: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Under the Roman Papacy, Calvin says, these things have been wholly lost. In the *Institutes*, Calvin writes that the Roman church has replaced the ministry of the word with “a perverted government, compounded of lies, a government which partly extinguishes, partly suppresses the pure light.” In the place of the Lord's Supper, an idolatrous sacrilege has been established, and right doctrine has been “wholly buried.”²¹⁹

Throughout his works, Calvin emphasizes the flaws he perceives in the Roman Catholic church. He criticizes its practices, its doctrine, and the actions of its leaders. Calvin clearly considered Roman Catholicism to be outside orthodox Christianity, separate from the true universal Christian Church. While he may have had some hope that individual communities would turn to what he considered to be the truth in Reformed Christianity, Calvin was not optimistic about the chances for true, general institutional reform in the Roman Catholic church. Calvin's interactions with Roman Catholicism display how serious he was about maintaining Reformed Christian doctrine – for Calvin, there could be no conciliation or cooperation if it required compromise on any essential elements of doctrine, and the Church cannot tolerate any idolatrous practices.

²¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), trans. Henry Beveridge, 305 (4.2.2).

The Papal Institution

The Papacy, Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, bases its claim to legitimacy on its historical Apostolic succession. Even if there is a true succession, which Calvin elsewhere argues there is not, any legitimacy gained by it is lost by the corruption of the institutions, the practices and the doctrine of the Roman Catholic church.²²⁰ In the confession of faith that he writes for Reformed churches in France, Calvin argues that both pastors and bishops have legitimate power over Christians, but that this power is limited to those things which God has allowed to them. Therefore, all Christians are obligated to make an effort to distinguish between true and false clerics. If they err from God's word and commands as revealed in scripture, then, Calvin says, Christians should remember Peter's answer to the high priest in Acts 5:29 - "We must obey God rather than men."^{221,222} In the very next article of the confession, Calvin seems to apply the principle in arguing that acknowledgment of the primacy of the Pope, since it would lead Christians away from obedience to God, should be rejected. Christians must remain loyal to God, and if an institution or a person demanding their allegiance requires that they are also disloyal to God, then Christians must avoid it, to stay morally pure for God.²²³ The Pope is not above God's law.²²⁴

Calvin doesn't frequently make the typical criticisms of the high status granted to

²²⁰ Ibid., 306 (4.2.2).

²²¹ Acts 5:29 RSV.

²²² John Calvin, "Confession of Faith in Name of the Reformed Churches of France," in *Tracts and Treatises on the Doctrine and Worship of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 150.

²²³ Ibid., 150-151.

²²⁴ John Calvin, "Remarks on the Letter of Pope Paul III," in *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 285.

the Pope, certainly not as much as one might think from reading Protestant polemics against the Roman Catholic church today, but when confronted with high praises given to the Pope and the Papal seat, it is part of his systematic criticisms. In his “Antidote to the Acts of the Council of Trent”, Calvin argues vehemently against the suggestion that the Bishopric of Rome is somehow universal or that the Pope is, as he is called, the “sovereign pontiff.”²²⁵ These praises are unprecedented in the history of councils, and are, Calvin says, contradictory to the decrees of the Council of Carthage.²²⁶ “To Christ alone belongs the universal bishopric.”²²⁷ The Council of Trent showers the Pope with praises, including some, such as the one just mentioned, which ought be, by Calvin's estimation, applied to Christ alone. Here, the Roman church is already in dangerous territory.²²⁸ The arrogance to make excessive claims about the institutions and leaders of the church of Rome is a problem, but that alone doesn't refute the Roman Catholic claims to legitimacy.

In “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church”, Calvin makes a systematic attack on the Roman Catholic arguments of the legitimacy of the Papacy as the universal bishopric through succession directly from Peter, and Peter's own status as universal bishop of the Church. According to some Roman Catholics, the marks of the Church are pure doctrine and the right use of the sacraments. Calvin heartily agrees, and suggests that it is on these marks, rather than

²²⁵ John Calvin, “Acts of the Council of Trent with The Antidote,” in *Calvin's Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958) 89.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid., 49.

²²⁸ Ibid., 51.

loyalty to an earthly institution that unity depends on.²²⁹ Calvin rejects the idea of succession of bishops, arguing that though there is an uninterrupted succession of the Church from century to century, that this succession does not take place in terms of externalities. The Church has, in fact, been lacking true pastors and bishops for “several centuries” by Calvin's time. The pastors of the Roman Catholic church aren't true pastors. These supposed shepherds of God's people are actually wolves, false teachers among the Church, as Peter predicted in 2 Pet. 2:1. There is true succession, and Calvin cites Irenaeus, Origin and Augustine supporting the concept, but this succession is based on the perpetuity of doctrine. The Church is not tied to mortals, but to Christ, who is its head. Unity doesn't come from allegiance to the heir of apostolic succession, but rather from “a common consent only to the truth of Christ.”²³⁰ Just as Caiaphas' Temple organization was not the Church despite its link in succession from Aaron, the Roman Catholic church is not the true Church even if it can demonstrate a linear chain from the apostolic era to the present.²³¹ Calvin points towards the true basis of unity in succession of true faith and doctrine, but explicitly makes an argument against the Roman Catholic claims of linear apostolic succession.

Calvin's criticism breaks the Roman Catholic claims about the papacy into steps, each of which is a necessary chain in the sequence. Without even one of these claims, the assertions about the Papacy cannot stand. This includes the supposed special status of Peter, its being passed down from generation to generation, and its specific geographic

²²⁹ John Calvin. “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 263.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 264-266.

²³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 307 (4.2.3).

location in Rome.

Peter is told three times to feed Christ's sheep, an event which stands in parallel contrast against his three denials of Christ. Others are also told to feed the sheep, even by Peter himself (1 Peter 5:2) and in this call are concurrently called to the same office as Peter. Calvin claims that the sheep shouldn't be thought to represent the entire Church, or that, by implication, Peter is called to shepherd all of God's flock. He is a pastor, as are others, and he does not claim a special position for himself, allowing Paul to criticize him.²³²

Even if these claims about Peter are to be accepted, the claims about the papacy cannot be accepted unless it can be shown that there is succession from generation to generation. While the claims about Peter are evidently an interpretation of what Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians recognize as scripture, though, in Calvin's mind, a false interpretation, there is no explicit Biblical mention of succession. This seems particularly conspicuous in its absence in Paul's list from the Epistle to the Ephesians 4:4-6. Enumerating the things there are only one of in the Church (one body, one spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism and one God), Paul mentions nothing of the universal bishopric established at Rome, which, had it existed, he certainly would have been aware of.²³³

Finally, even if Peter was the first in a clear line of popes, Rome oughtn't necessarily be the Papal see. The second highest status granted to the see of Mark in Alexandria seems arbitrary, especially as compared to the see of James, the see of John, or Antioch. Considering all these things, if it is simply accepted that a see is established

²³² Calvin, "The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church," 270-271.

²³³ Ibid., 271.

where a certain holy person lived near the end of life, why shouldn't Jerusalem be considered the greatest of all bishoprics, as the see of Christ?²³⁴

Pope Paul III

Broadly speaking, Calvin suggests that bishops should be better examined before being selected, and that their powers to act independently should be more strongly limited.²³⁵ Without limits on power, bishops, particularly the Pope, have become corrupt. Though he doesn't frequently engage in the criticisms of papal corruption that other Protestants do, Calvin includes a section on the sins of the Pope and the Papal court in his "Remarks on the Letter of Pope Paul III". The Pope and his court are themselves corrupt, and have supported the corruption of the Pope's sons. Unity under this kind of leader isn't a positive unity, but rather a corrupt tyranny.²³⁶ The Reformation sought liberation from that tyranny, which placed the Pope above the law and could not reform itself through councils.²³⁷ The Pope was unwilling to turn towards the true faith, and nothing in the church institution that he controlled is able to correct him. No reforming impulse should be expected from within the Roman Catholic church.²³⁸

The Authority of Tradition

Calvin clearly believes the Roman Catholic church to have erred not only from scripture, but even from tradition in the form of the early Church fathers. The Roman

²³⁴ Ibid., 272.

²³⁵ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, ed. John C. Olin, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1894), 81.

²³⁶ Calvin, "Remarks on the Letter of Pope Paul III," 257-259.

²³⁷ Ibid., 282, 285.

²³⁸ Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with The Antidote," 38.

Catholic church is not the church of the days of Chrysostom, Basil, Cyrian, Ambrose, or Augustine, but rather a new and different institution.²³⁹ Conceptually, Calvin is unwilling to acknowledge that tradition is authoritative. God alone, Calvin says, is authoritative, as is his guidance of the Church through scripture, apart from which the Church has no authority. Calvin thought that the Council of Trent, by including the deuterocanon in scripture and declaring the Latin vulgate Bible to be the true version of scripture because of its traditional basis, was claiming that authority rested not in scripture, but in tradition. The rejection of Hebrew and Greek versions of the Biblical texts represents a devaluing of the revelation given to the prophets in Hebrew and the apostles in Greek, and a worship of a specific translation. In rigidly defining as the exclusively reliable version of holy scripture a text that seems to be imperfect, the Council of Trent has, in the eyes of John Calvin, made tradition the master of scripture itself.²⁴⁰ The Roman Catholic claims of the unique ability to determine what scripture is, to determine how to interpret it, and to itself establish Church traditions which “have the force of oracles”, is, according to Calvin, sheer arrogance. Even the most legitimate traditions cannot be treated as authoritative. Authority must come from God, typically through scripture.²⁴¹

The Authority of the Earthly Church

Merely following the traditions passed down by previous generations cannot save Jews or Muslims, and likewise will not save Roman Catholics. The argument is not that tradition must necessarily be rejected, but rather that it may not be elevated above the will

²³⁹ *A Reformation Debate*, 62.

²⁴⁰ Calvin, “Acts of the Council of Trent with The Antidote,” 64-72.

²⁴¹ Calvin, “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church,” 266-269.

of God revealed in holy scripture, and cannot be obeyed if it contradicts the word of God, especially as revealed in scripture. Therefore, tradition or the decrees of the Church must be judged with the word of God, the one thing which is beyond judgment, as criterion.²⁴² The Church may not establish laws on human conscience, but only those intended to “maintain order, cherish concord, and invigorate discipline”, which Calvin considers of much lesser importance. No institution in this world may spiritually oppress those it commands – God surely does not intend that Christians suffer under such a yoke when he has abrogated even divine laws for the sake of their liberation.²⁴³ “Whoever will not obey what [Pope Paul III] says, he excludes from the number of the children of God.”²⁴⁴ Fealty is not due first to people and human institutions, but rather to God, and no human commands may contradict that fealty.

Roman Catholic Ceremonies

Calvin broadly criticized Roman Catholic ceremonies as being superstitious. The Reformation decreased ceremonial aspects because of this, and because they had denigrated true religion into “a kind of Judaism”, with a sort of pharisaic focus on ritual at the expense of true faith.²⁴⁵ Specifically, Calvin criticized the Roman Catholic church on relics in his “Address showing the Advantage which Christendom might derive from an Inventory of Relics”, a sarcastic, biting critique of the high honor given to relics, which Calvin thought were mostly fakes anyway.²⁴⁶ Calvin would elsewhere criticize the

²⁴² *A Reformation Debate*, 90-92.

²⁴³ Calvin, “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church,” 269.

²⁴⁴ Calvin, “Remarks on the Letter of Pope Paul III,” 281.

²⁴⁵ *A Reformation Debate*, 63-64.

²⁴⁶ James MacKinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962), 184-185.

practices of prayer to and veneration of dead saints. The excessive reverence for the saints divided God's offices amongst them, creating a new idolatry similar to old paganism, complete with a new pantheon of deities. Belief in purgatory was also, Calvin argued, a corruption of the ancient prayers for the dead, which were, he says, nothing but a short observance to reflect care for those dead. The institutionalization of superstitions does not reflect the traditions of the Church in ancient times. Though there may have been some superstition among Christians in those days, these things were never and could never have been truly part of the Church.²⁴⁷

The Roman Catholic Mass

By Calvin's estimation, these problems pale in comparison with another practice. The worst of all superstitions is the Roman Catholic Mass. What once was the legitimate and wonderful sacrament of the Lord's Supper is now nothing but an unchristian and idolatrous sacrilege.²⁴⁸ Reformed Christianity understands worship to be idolatrous when it reduces the God who is creator to a god is from within creation.²⁴⁹ Mass and the doctrine of transubstantiation were the epitome of this in the understandings of Calvin and many other Reformed in his day. Attending a Mass is an engagement with idolatry, and, through its pollution, it separates one from the body of Christ.²⁵⁰

Calvin understands the Mass to be a perversion of the Lord's Supper which, because it has strayed so far from the actual ritual of the Supper, is not only ineffective,

²⁴⁷ *A Reformation Debate*, 72-73.

²⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 305 (4.2.2).

²⁴⁹ Christopher L. Elwood, "Calvin's Ecclesial Theology and Human Salvation," in *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society*, ed Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallman (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 95.

²⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. and Judith J. Guber (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 104.

but also displeasing to God. The Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation is a particular problem here. By claiming that the substance of the body of Christ is underneath the substance of the bread, Transubstantiation precludes the possibility of a link by the Holy Spirit between the believer and Jesus Christ in heaven.²⁵¹ This means that, in Calvin's eyes, the Mass cannot be claimed to be a form of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Worse than that, the claim of Transubstantiation that the bread should be regarded as God is idolatrous.²⁵² Furthermore, the role of the priest and the understanding of the priest distinguish it again from the true sacrament. The Mass is, Roman Catholicism claims, a sacrifice. According to Calvin, this new sacrifice on the altar of a Roman Catholic church by a priest who is not Christ endangers its participants by failing to point towards and acknowledge the one, universal and sufficient sacrifice by Jesus Christ, the new High Priest, on the cross.²⁵³

According to Calvin, the Mass is a superstitious, impious and idolatrous abomination,²⁵⁴ it is “the greatest sacrilege”,²⁵⁵ nearly unprecedented in Christian/Jewish history. The sin of the Mass is so great as to exceed the sinfulness of religion in Israel under King Jeroboam, who openly supported idolatry. Though, Calvin describes in his *Institutes*, in Jeroboam's day Godly prophets were still able to participate in the Temple rites without danger of polluting themselves, it is impossible to engage in the rites of the Roman Catholic church without becoming separated from God. The state of religion under the Papacy is similar to what religion would have been like under Jeroboam

²⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 564-565 (4.17.12).

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 566 (4.17.13).

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 606 (4.18).

²⁵⁴ John Calvin, “On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly and Preserving the Purity of the Christian Religion,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958) 360.

²⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 312-313 (4.2.9).

without the Temple, if only pagan idols remained. The prophets never worshiped or gave sacrifice at the idolatrous altars in Bethel – they couldn't without polluting themselves. This idolatry, Calvin opines, is comparable to the grave evil that is the Roman Catholic Mass.²⁵⁶

Calvin, in his “On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly and Preserving the Purity of the Christian Religion”, written particularly to the underground Reformed churches in France, strongly warns Christians against participation in the Mass, even if done while true Reformed faith is held to. Some Protestants in Roman Catholic countries, France included, still participated in the Roman Catholic rituals in order to keep their true faith secret and avoid punishment. Calvin criticized this practice, calling on them to be openly loyal to the Christian faith, accepting persecution like martyrs.²⁵⁷ Calvin makes it clear that it is not required for the Reformed to run out into the streets and preach,²⁵⁸ but that one absolutely should not participate in idolatrous rituals.²⁵⁹ Calvin's model in this is Daniel, who, though he was in a country that openly embraced idolatry, he did not participate, but rather worshiped God quietly in private.²⁶⁰ Besides this, practically, attendance at the Mass risks an image of support for the Mass, and can mislead others.²⁶¹

Calvin rejects the doctrine of transubstantiation, and clearly argues both that ministers are not priests, and that no sacrifice is conducted at the altar of a church in the Lord's Supper. On the face of it, Calvin's Eucharistic theology seems to be in complete

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Calvin, “On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly and Preserving the Purity of the Christian Religion,” 362, 364.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 367.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 370.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 371.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 375.

opposition to the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass, thinking of the bread and wine as the means via which the body and blood are received, rather than literally transforming into them. It should be said, though, that there may be some room for reconciliation between the two. Calvin certainly seems to have doubted that there was, but at least one significant Roman Catholic scholar, Fr. Joseph N. Tylenda S.J., seems to think that the two could be sensibly reconciled.²⁶²

Justification

If the Mass was the key practice separating Calvin from the Roman Catholic church, then, as Calvin wrote against Cardinal Sadoletto, “justification by faith is the first and keenest subject of controversy” on doctrine between Roman Catholics and Reformed.²⁶³ The Council of Trent dealt heavily with the issue of justification, definitively laying out the Roman Catholic position, establishing it for the future, and reflecting the standard belief within Roman Catholicism in the preceding decades. The Council of Trent held that, in contrast to Reformed doctrines, one cannot be justified by faith alone.²⁶⁴ This is not to say that justification can be achieved through works without the grace of Christ,²⁶⁵ but that works do aid righteousness and in some way affect justification,²⁶⁶ and that sins, including but not limited to sins of unbelief, can cause an individual to lose grace previously received.²⁶⁷ Fundamentally, good works are a credit

²⁶² Joseph N. Tylenda, “A Eucharistic Sacrifice in Calvin's Theology,” in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992).

²⁶³ *A Reformation Debate*, 66.

²⁶⁴ “Acts of the Council of Trent with The Antidote,” 105 Canon XIV.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 103 Canon I.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 106 Canon XXIV.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 107 Canon XXVII.

to the person doing them, not just a credit to God.²⁶⁸

According to the Council of Trent, justification necessarily requires baptism. That justification can be lost through sin, but regained through proper penitence. Mortal sins remove grace and justification from a person, but do not affect that person's faith, so he or she can still be considered a Christian. Salvation is received through the performance of good works. The Council of Trent also attacked claims of certainty concerning justification. Barring special revelation, a person cannot know for certain if he or she is justified or not – such knowledge is for God alone, and claiming justification with certainty is incredibly arrogant. One cannot know if he or she is apart of the elect or not.²⁶⁹

In his rebuttal to Cardinal Sadoletto, and later in his “Antidote” to the Council of Trent, Calvin lays out his response, criticizing the Roman Catholic position and explaining his own. God's saving power works so that the elect are reconciled to God through Christ's righteousness rather than their own, which they receive through faith.²⁷⁰ Since the work in effecting our justification is God's alone, the glory is also his alone. This contrasts to the Roman Catholic position, which, in granting some glory to humans and some to God, walks a line between Pelagianism and what Calvin thinks to be true doctrine.²⁷¹ Faith is, of course, typically accompanied by good works, since Christ's justification is accompanied by the Holy Spirit's regeneration and sanctification,²⁷² but

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 107 Canon XXXII.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 96-103.

²⁷⁰ *A Reformation Debate*, 67.

²⁷¹ Calvin, “Acts of the Council of Trent with The Antidote,” 108.

²⁷² *A Reformation Debate*, 68.

those works don't bring salvation, which is exclusively by God's election.²⁷³

This inevitably leads into a discussion of free will. Calvin points out that arguments for a strong freedom of will, like those made by the Council of Trent, might lead to a conclusion that without God's action, people are able to choose freely to do good. This isn't explicitly supported by the Council of Trent, but Calvin spends a brief amount of time refuting it in case it might be considered the logical consequence of the theology of the Council of Trent. The will of humankind is, in its natural fallen state, enslaved to sin, and thus there cannot be any redemptive work done by a person without God first intervening in that person's life.²⁷⁴

Beyond this, Calvin's main concern seems to be making certain that God receives his full due. Claims of free will mean that the elect individual is merely cooperating with God's spirit, but ultimately could choose not to.²⁷⁵ Here, Calvin quotes Augustine, "God promises not to act so that we may be able to will well, but to make us will well."²⁷⁶ God's work is so complete that our works are meaningless in comparison. The things binding us to God are not our virtues and good deeds, but His. Everyone sins and falls short, Calvin is clear on that, but God allows his elect to cleave to him through faith, which, since it is a gift from God, is not a work done by people. Cleaving to God through faith allows one to receive salvation through God's incredible grace. Thus, there is no reason to doubt one's salvation if one has faith. One needn't live in constant uncertainty over whether or not one has been a good enough person, since salvation doesn't rely on the inherent righteousness of a person, but on the righteousness of Christ imputed to that

²⁷³ Ibid., 69.

²⁷⁴ Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with The Antidote," 108-109.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 110.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 111.

person. One needs to have faith in the grace of God, since it is in that grace that salvation rests. Glory must always be given to God rather than people.²⁷⁷

The Remains of the Church

Given Calvin's severe distaste for Roman Catholic practice, doctrine, and their respective strong rejection of the beliefs and practices of the Reformation, it need be asked if Calvin practically understood the bounds of the Church to exclude all those who, while professing Christ as Lord and Savior, believed the doctrine of the Roman Catholic church and participated in its rituals. “But what arrogance, you will say, to boast that the Church is with you alone, and to deny it to all the world besides?” Calvin writes against Cardinal Sadoletto.²⁷⁸ It might be arrogant to claim with certainty that there is no Church surviving within the Roman Catholic system, but how could the Church exist amongst the Roman Catholic churches that Calvin describes as “synagogues of the devil”?²⁷⁹

Calvin lays out his understanding of Roman Catholicism in several sections of the *Institutes*, beginning by refuting Roman Catholic claims to legitimacy and authority, and then making attacks, describing Roman Catholicism as having separated from the true Church. The Roman Catholic institution, Calvin says, cannot be called a church, since the true ministry of God has been destroyed in it, and instead the “tyranny of the Romish idol” reigns.²⁸⁰ To acknowledge it as a true church would require subservience to its

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 112-130.

²⁷⁸ *A Reformation Debate*, 75.

²⁷⁹ John Calvin. “The Genevan Confession,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. Rev. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 31 – Article 18.

²⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 310 (4.2.7).

institutions, which cannot be done without engaging in idolatrous practice.²⁸¹ The Roman Catholic church is heretical in its corruption of the purity of faith, and, where the faith might still be maintained within that church, it is schismatic, because of the casting out of the Reformed. True Christians are cast out by the Roman Catholic church, and need to withdraw from it in order to draw nearer to Christ.²⁸²

All this being said, God has still maintained something of a church within Roman Catholicism. Through this work of God, the baptisms performed by Roman Catholic priests are still valid, and the Church “remains, though half in ruins”.²⁸³ “Therefore, while we are unwilling simply to concede the name of Church to the Papists, we do not deny that there are churches among them. The question we raise only relates to the true and legitimate constitution of the Church, implying communion in sacred rites, which are the signs of profession, and especially in doctrine.”²⁸⁴ There are still churches, though they are under the tyranny of the Antichrist. As such, the Church may continue to exist in parts of the Roman Catholic church, and most certainly exists where the gospel is preached and received, and the sacraments are celebrated properly, if such practices are able to exist under the yoke of Roman Catholic doctrine.²⁸⁵

Schism or Unity

To many in Calvin's day, the Reformation represented a shattering of the Christian Church, an enormous schism that had split the body of Christ in Western Europe in two.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 312 (4.2.10).

²⁸² Ibid., 309-310 (4.2.5-6).

²⁸³ Ibid., 313 (4.2.11).

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 313 (4.2.12).

²⁸⁵ William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 93.

Cardinal Sadoletto believed the Reformed to have left the faith of their fathers – that the separation from the Roman Catholic fellowship was a separation from the holy Church itself.²⁸⁶ Emperor Charles V wanted a new general council to heal what he thought of as a schism.²⁸⁷ To these men, the Reformation, even if its followers are still legitimately Christian, which Emperor Charles V would probably agree to, but which the Roman Catholic leaders doubt, is an incredible disaster for Christendom. But the Reformed themselves, and Calvin among them, thought of themselves neither as heretics nor schismatics. Calvin understands schismaticism as the breaking of bonds of unity between believers while maintaining the faith. This arises as a result of not keeping God's doctrine or seeking Christ.²⁸⁸ Unity is sought after, and schism is avoided through, and only in conjunction with seeking truth.²⁸⁹ To seek unity without regard for the maintenance of truth and proper doctrine is to be “liberal with what is not theirs”. The Reformed-Roman Catholic rift may not be bridged by giving away things that belong to God.²⁹⁰ Calvin acknowledges that this makes him seem picky and unnecessarily disagreeable, but if things come by way of decree from God, then they are most certainly important.²⁹¹

Colloquies at Ratisbon and the Adultero-German Interim

²⁸⁶ *A Reformation Debate*, 45, 54.

²⁸⁷ John Calvin, “The Adultero-German Interim to which is added The True Method of Giving Peace and of Reforming the Church,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 192.

²⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 309-310 (4.2.5-6).

²⁸⁹ John H. Kromminga, “Calvin and Ecumenicity,” in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 39, 53.

²⁹⁰ Calvin, “The Adultero-German Interim to which is added The True Method of Giving Peace and of Reforming the Church,” 243.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

While Calvin expressed a willingness to meet with Roman Catholic leaders,²⁹² he would become disillusioned over the years and expect little from such conferences.²⁹³ In 1540, Calvin attended the Colloquies at Ratisbon, arranged by Charles V as a conference between Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders. Philip Melanchthon led the Protestant delegation, and made up, with Bucer and Calvin, the three leading Protestant figures there. Both Bucer and, to some extent, Melanchthon tended towards compromise, producing a very broad and vaguely worded declaration on the Lord's Supper. This declaration bothered Calvin somewhat, and, while he did not oppose it, would not consider anything that suggested any form of transubstantiation. Calvin would write Farel following the conference to tell him that reconciliation with Roman Catholics would not be possible, because of disagreement on several topics where compromise was unacceptable: justification, doctrine of the Church and the Church's power in the world, confession to clergy, the invocation and honoring of the saints, and the Mass. Unity with Rome was impossible.²⁹⁴²⁹⁵

The *Adultero-German Interim* was a set of rules made to govern religion in the Holy Roman Empire until a new general council of Roman Catholics and Protestants could be called. Before it became law, Emperor Charles V circulated it throughout Germany, and, at the request of Bullinger, Calvin wrote a criticism of it.²⁹⁶ The *Interim* listed the signs of the Church as scripture, sacraments, unity, and universality, stressing

²⁹² Kromminga, 42.

²⁹³ John T. McNeill, "Calvin's Efforts Toward the Consolidation of Protestantism," in *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 66 – citing a letter from Calvin to an unknown person in January of 1545.

²⁹⁴ Reid, 103-104.

²⁹⁵ Kromminga, 44.

²⁹⁶ Calvin, "The Adultero-German Interim to which is added The True Method of Giving Peace and of Reforming the Church," 189-190.

the last two. It claims that all those outside the united, universal Church are necessarily heretics or schismatics (or both).²⁹⁷ It suggests that some practices that it considers legitimate and required, like paedobaptism, can come from tradition without any reference to scripture.²⁹⁸ It otherwise basically follows Roman Catholic doctrine down the line, including acknowledgment of a supreme pontiff, seven sacraments, the Mass as a sacrifice, intercession and veneration of the saints, and prayers for the dead.²⁹⁹

Emperor Charles V offered this to the people of the empire and their religious leaders as a solution to the religious conflicts that had divided the empire. This was, in his eyes, a means for peace. Calvin's response is a vehement rejection. Christians may not, Calvin writes, gain peace by sacrificing piety. It is sacrilegious to lose parts of the gospel, even for the sake of its fundamentals, for to do so would leave only "a half Christ".³⁰⁰ Calvin systematically criticizes nearly every point of the *Interim*, justifying his critique with scripture, tradition, and by pointing out inconsistencies. He is clearly trying to convince others that the *Interim* is wrong, and that Reformed Protestantism is right. He does not go very far to try to reach out to Roman Catholics, but rather aims to convince the undecided and those on the fence of Reformed Protestantism over Roman Catholicism. It is abundantly clear that Calvin is suspicious of any attempt to unify Roman Catholicism with the tenets of the Reformation through some sort of compromise theology. Disagreement on a number of issues clearly separates Roman Catholics from what Calvin thinks is the true Church, and he considers these issues too important to

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 205.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 206.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 207-239.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 240-242.

compromise on.³⁰¹

Conclusion

Calvin's works written in defense of Reformed doctrine or critique of Roman Catholic doctrine were not primarily intended to convince Roman Catholics, nor were they purely philosophical exercises, but rather were intended to equip Reformed Christians to be able to defend their faith in conversation with Roman Catholics and Anabaptist radicals in their towns and regions, and to encourage those who had already begun to doubt the Roman Catholic church towards a full rejection of it and an embrace of Reformed faith.

There are serious doctrinal issues separating Calvin and other Reformed from the Roman Catholic church. Calvin disagrees with the Roman Catholic understandings of Apostolic succession and reliance on human institutions, veneration of the saints and relics, justification, and, the practice of the Mass. Because of this, Calvin views Roman Catholicism as outside the bounds of the Church, though he balances this with some conception of a remnant of the Church still existing inside it. Calvin and the other reformers become regarded by non-Reformed as heretics or schismatics, opposed to the unity of the Church. Calvin himself perceives unity as built on right doctrine and allegiance to Christ alone, and rejects attempts to water down the Reformed faith in order to gain peace and a false unity with Roman Catholicism.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 239-358.

Chapter 4:

Calvin and Heterodox Protestants

This chapter deals with Calvin's interactions with Protestants whom he considered to be outside the bounds of the Church. These are Protestants who were typically heterodox in the estimation of the leading Reformers, and unaffiliated with Geneva, Zürich, or Wittenberg. Calvin came into contact with Anabaptists and wrote and dealt significantly with other followers of the Radical Reformation. The conflict with the Libertines in Geneva over state implementation of moral law will also be discussed here, as many Libertines had little interest in piety and organized religion, and as such, had a different status in Calvin's eyes than did typical church-going Genevans.

What is a city to do with heretics who espouse false doctrine? How is an orthodox religious community to deal with them? This question has frequently needed to be faced by any sort of religious orthodoxy when it comes to power. How does Calvin oppose improper doctrine, and how does he react to criticisms of the manner in which he opposes it? This is probably best understood through a set of cases, examining Calvin's confrontations with heterodox Protestants and critics.

Tolerance During the Reformation

Sixteenth century Europe had little conception of freedom of religion. Christian humanists, including Erasmus, began to develop ideas of and encourage tolerance of a wide variety of disagreements within the Church in the interest of unity, but even that had

a limit.³⁰² The Reformers, once in power, rarely showed any signs of toleration of what they saw as heretical beliefs. At some points early in the Reformation, Luther opposed, as a theoretical matter, the execution of heretics, and advised against severe punishment of crimes related to belief with the exception of blasphemy. As time progressed and the Peasants' War occurred and concluded, Luther accepted banishment as a punishment for blasphemy. Soon thereafter, the Diet at Speyer set a punishment of execution for blasphemy, which Luther accepted, and defined blasphemy broadly, including a rejection of any part of the Apostles' Creed. He would later further expand his understanding of blasphemy to include rejections of the ministerial office, and approve the interpretation of disrupting the function of a church as a seditious act.³⁰³ Zwingli would similarly approve the drowning of several Anabaptists, the scourging of an Anabaptist leader, and poor prison conditions that lead to the deaths of several other Anabaptists from malnourishment, even though he strongly opposed the use of violence against Roman Catholics.³⁰⁴ In Geneva, the use of the death penalty was not unusual, and a significant number of people, mostly women, were sentenced to death for devil worship or spreading plague. This was not done at the behest of the preachers, but neither did they, Calvin included, speak out against it.³⁰⁵

Pierre Caroli

One of Calvin's first open conflicts over orthodoxy after his arrival in Geneva was

³⁰² Christoph Strohm, "Calvin and Religious Tolerance," in *John Calvin's Impact on Church and Society*, ed. Martin Ernst Hirzel and Martin Sallmann (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 179-180.

³⁰³ Sebastian Castellio, *Concerning Heretics*, trans. Roland H. Bainton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 46-48.

³⁰⁴ James MacKinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1962), 34.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

with another pastor, Pierre Caroli. Caroli supported prayers for the dead, while denying the existence of purgatory, and, following criticism from Calvin and Farel for that, accused them of Arianism and anti-Trinitarianism. Calvin had used the term trinity in the edition of the *Institutes* available at the time, but in solidarity with Farel, he tried to argue that they were Trinitarians on the basis of a catechism they had written together, which, while lacking the term, seemed to conceptually argue for it. The conflict progressed, and Calvin wrote a very strong *Defensio* against Caroli. Before publishing it, he showed it to another reformer, Viret, who advised him to tone down the harshness of his attack. Ignoring the advice, Calvin published it unchanged. The *Defensio* is a good example of Calvin's bluntness, which is also displayed in some of his personal letters to friends – Calvin was unlikely to be very warm in his criticisms.³⁰⁶

This episode gave Calvin a greater sensitivity on the doctrine of the trinity. Calvin would strongly avoid the appearance of failing to support the doctrine, and harshly attacked those who, like Servetus later would, opposed it.³⁰⁷ Caroli himself would later leave the area, convert to Roman Catholicism, and then briefly convert back, during which he asked Calvin and Farel to admit guilt for his conversion away from Protestantism. After being furious about this, Calvin came around and actively defended Caroli as a Protestant, advocating stronger ties with him and greater support of him from the Reformed community.³⁰⁸ Calvin's conflicts were sometimes only as deep as the issues at hand, and when those issues were overcome, little personal animosity remained on his part.

³⁰⁶ Ross Williams Collins *Calvin and the Libertines of Geneva* (Toronto, Clark, Irwin and Company Limited, 1968) ,108-110.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

Conflict in Geneva

The Council of Geneva had been in conflict with Anabaptists and Libertines to some degree for an extended period before Calvin's arrival there. The city had maintained a ban on public dancing since 1487, and in 1490 banned gambling during Mass, which after the Reformation would be changed to disallow gambling on Sundays when the Lord's Supper was being celebrated. In 1534 a general ban on "indecent" dancing was established, to be followed with a ban of any street dancing the following year. In 1536 the ban on gambling was extended to ban all games of cards or dice during church services or after nine in the evening, and established a small fine for failure to attend services.³⁰⁹ Persecution of Anabaptists slowly increased in severity over the same period. Mostly, Anabaptists were only briefly detained and their meetings were disrupted, but decrees in 1538 and 1540 would require expulsion. 1540 also saw a major surprise police attack on a gathering of the Swiss Brethren, where roughly half of their congregation, 39 people, was arrested. The conflict with Anabaptists and Radical Protestants in Geneva would be resolved before Calvin gained significant influence over public life following his return to the city in 1540. There was little in the way of an Anabaptist underground following that.³¹⁰ The typical charge against Anabaptists and other heterodox Protestants in Geneva was propagation of heresy, and torture was used frequently in the course of investigations when a suspect was believed to be lying or covering something up.³¹¹

The Libertines, narrowly defined, were a sect of spiritualists originating in Lille,

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 98-99.

³¹⁰ William Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist*, trans. William J. Heynen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 127-128.

³¹¹ Ibid., 87-88.

France that was vaguely pantheistic and highly antinomian, opposing any imposition of moral law, and opposing the traditional Christian opposition to sinfulness as bad.³¹² Broadly defined, and using the language of much of the literature on this topic, Libertine referred to Calvin's opposition in Geneva, men who adhered to the principal of “do what thou will”, supporting freedom of conscience and relative freedom of morals.³¹³ Broadly liberal, they sought the end of pastors' power over personal morality, espousing an early conception of personal liberty. Theologically, they disliked the doctrine of absolute Predestination. Politically, they were nationalistic and strongly anti-French, a divisive issue in a city with a continually growing population of French refugees and immigrants. The key figures in the movement were the Favre family and Philbert Berthelier, who turned out to be problematic leaders because of their poor personal morality and the reputation they garnered because of that.³¹⁴

Though even from the beginning of Calvin and Farel's ministry in Geneva there was moderately strong discipline, including the requirement of subscription to a brief statement of faith, many were able to avoid subscribing to it,³¹⁵ and punishment for moral crimes was exercised inconsistently by the civil authorities.³¹⁶

Following the mandate of subscription to the statement of faith, at least two men left town, and another by the name of Gentile remained in town but continued to actively espouse anti-Calvinist, anti-Reformed theology. Under threat, he recanted, accepting the confession and apologizing for his hostility to Calvin. The Genevan Council, deciding

³¹² James MacKinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962), 94.

³¹³ Collins, 104.

³¹⁴ MacKinnon, 95.

³¹⁵ Balke, 92.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

that this was an insufficient sign of repentance, sentenced him to decapitation. He was able to save himself by repeating and saying in the clearest terms possible that he had erred. It was ordered that he march around town, publicly burn his own theological treatise, and not leave town. Despite this, he eventually escaped and traveled through France and Poland, preaching Anti-Trinitarianism there, before coming to Bern where he was executed for heresy in 1566.³¹⁷

The main conflict was centered on such issues of discipline.³¹⁸ In Geneva, as a general rule, Anabaptists suffered at most banishment, in contrast to the common practice of execution in Zürich, Germany, and most Roman Catholic countries.³¹⁹ In a particular incident, several individuals, including a member of the Council were imprisoned under suspicion of being Anabaptists. Two days of debate were permitted, after which the Council, unconvinced by the Anabaptist debaters, admonished two leading Anabaptist, asking them to recant their beliefs. Soon thereafter, another debate was held, this time between Calvin and two Anabaptists from Liège, neither of whom were well educated. According to Farel, Calvin's victory in the debate would quickly become well known, reducing sympathy for Anabaptism in the region. It was abundantly clear that Calvin was a strong debater, and he frequently pressed the Council to act against heterodox Protestants, but the Council was reluctant to oppose them, and was consistently slow to actually apprehend and banish Anabaptists.³²⁰

Jean Janin de Cologny, an early supporter of the Reformation, was arrested at the request of Farel and Calvin for suspected Anabaptism. For visiting him and arguing

³¹⁷ MacKinnon, 167.

³¹⁸ Collins, 182.

³¹⁹ Balke, 79.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 80-84.

against his punishment, Christophe Fabri, another leading Genevan, was criticized by Calvin who took his defense of de Cologny as a defense of his beliefs. Defending Anabaptists against persecutions frequently brought the defenders themselves under suspicion, making Reformed Protestants reluctant to speak out, even if they thought that such punishments were excessively harsh.³²¹ Another Anabaptist, Pierre Guyder, recanted while on trial, representing a success for the Genevan pastors. This sort of recantation was the primary goal of the prosecution of Anabaptists, as was it the stated goal of excommunication.³²²

Prior to 1540, the Anabaptists represented a significant faction in Geneva. While they generally opposed Calvin's perceived rising influence in the city, ironically, he was arguing for key Anabaptist values, such as greater discipline, and a strong church independent from the state.³²³ In 1537, Calvin and Farel convinced the Council to ask the pastors for lists of suspected Anabaptists, so that those on the lists might not be allowed to receive the Lord's Supper. When presented with the lists and seeing how many names were included, the Council ordered that the Lord's Supper be administered to Anabaptists as well, though it allowed the pastors to privately reprimand them. Refusing to accept this decision, Calvin and Farel conducted services as scheduled, but did not administer the Lord's Supper.³²⁴ Calvin wrote to Bullinger on the topic, saying "It does appear to me that we shall have no lasting Church unless that ancient apostolic discipline be completely restored."³²⁵ Speaking before the Council in early 1538, Calvin and Farel

³²¹ Ibid., 85.

³²² Ibid., 87.

³²³ Ibid., 95.

³²⁴ Ibid., 92.

³²⁵ Ibid., 93.

demanded that control over discipline, and, most importantly, over excommunication, be given to the pastorate rather than be retained by civil authorities. This conflict, along with Calvin and Farel's adamant refusal to obey the orders of the Council, resulted in their banishment from Geneva.^{326,327}

Exile in Strasbourg

At the beginning of their exile from Geneva, Farel and Calvin went to a synod in Zürich. The synod supported the two by denouncing their exile, but told the two that they had been too harsh with the Genevans. While in Zürich, Calvin called the Genevan Council a “Council of the devil” in a sermon, displaying his usual bluntness. From the meeting with the synod, a delegation from Bern was convinced that Farel and Calvin should be able to reconcile with the governing authorities, and went to Geneva for that purpose, but were rebuffed and not allowed to enter the city.³²⁸

Calvin eventually came to live in Strasbourg, an imperial free city at the time, which had a reputation for moderate religious tolerance. Strasbourg had been a city of refuge for Anabaptists for some time, and was generally lenient and tolerant, both in terms of freedom of religion and expression, and in terms of its relatively lenient criminal code.³²⁹ After Calvin's return to Geneva, it would later become less tolerant and establish a somewhat more stringent justice system, ironically provoked by the intolerance of local Anabaptists for other Protestants, but still remained lenient compared to other cities at the

³²⁶ Ibid., 92.

³²⁷ MacKinnon, 96, 106.

³²⁸ Collins, 118-121.

³²⁹ Balke, 12, 124.

time.³³⁰

In such a religiously diverse city, Calvin was frequently asked to comment on other religious views, particularly certain Anabaptist doctrines.³³¹ Here, Calvin encountered some Dutch Anabaptists who had been expelled from Geneva in 1537, and interacted with several people within the Anabaptist community.³³² He was able to convince some Anabaptists of Reformed Christianity, and baptized a number of Anabaptist children whose parents he had convinced. Those converted included some who remained unconvinced on Predestination, but, being convinced of other Reformed doctrines, were welcomed by Calvin into the church.³³³ One notable convert was Jean Stordeur, who, having previously debated Calvin in Geneva in 1537, became convinced of Reformed Christianity by Calvin in 1539. Jean Stordeur died soon after, and, at the advice of Martin Bucer, Calvin eventually married his widow, Idelette de Bure.³³⁴

Calvin instituted a strict system of discipline on the Reformed French church in Strasbourg, requiring the submission of self-examinations, preventing those who openly sinned from receiving communion, and requiring those wearing swords to remove them to receive communion.³³⁵ While Martin Bucer was becoming less tolerant of Anabaptists for what he perceived as their destruction of Church unity and their advocating of compulsion to belief by force, Calvin seems to have become relatively tolerant of conflicting religious viewpoints.³³⁶ Even though he thought them somewhat radical, Calvin wrote a letter urging unity between Bohemian and Polish Brethren groups,

³³⁰ Ibid., 126.

³³¹ Collins, 123.

³³² Balke, 128.

³³³ Ibid., 130-131.

³³⁴ Ibid., 135.

³³⁵ Collins, 121.

³³⁶ Balke, 151.

advising them against requiring priestly celibacy, and attempting to support them despite doctrinal differences. Similarly, Calvin sought to support other Brethren groups and the Waldensians, despite their Anabaptist leanings. These groups were neither revolutionary nor fanatical, both characteristics that would have made it harder for Calvin to tolerate them. Calvin's correspondence with them tended to bring them closer to Reformed doctrine.³³⁷

Return to Geneva and Libertine Challenges

In Geneva, unrest and opposition to the influence of the city of Bern led to the arrest and execution of a Council member and the death of another in an attempted escape during his arrest. As a result, a new party came to power in Geneva, one more amenable to the idea of Calvin and Farel returning.³³⁸ According to a Strasbourg friend of Calvin's, it was Farel's strongest, harshest letter against Calvin that finally convinced him to return to Geneva. That letter is now lost, but Calvin's reply indicates that Farel threatened to end their friendship if Calvin did not return to Geneva.³³⁹ The man sent by the Council to convince Calvin to return, Perrin, would ironically later become a key opponent of what would be the new church institution in Geneva: the Consistory.³⁴⁰

Upon his return to the city, Calvin began to set up a strong ecclesiastical government with a committee discussing a constitution for the Geneva church.³⁴¹ The "Ordinances" of the new church government established the Consistory as the only

³³⁷ Ibid., 148,150.

³³⁸ Collins, 134.

³³⁹ Ibid., 139.

³⁴⁰ MacKinnon, 97.

³⁴¹ Collins, 141.

church court, authorized only to punish individuals with demands for penance, and excommunication, though power over excommunication would continue to be disputed with certain Council members. Its jurisdiction was limited to cases of “drunkenness, disorderly conduct, swearing, wife-beating, family quarrels, adultery, and sorcery”, as well as non-attendance at church, which would be the most common case, one usually dismissed with only a simple admonishment.^{342,343} Though the institutionalization of ecclesiastical power over public morals represented a major success for Calvin, arguments with the Council over its jurisdiction in church affairs continued (the Council, for example, attempted to select and ordain a new minister over the disapproval of the current pastors).³⁴⁴

Among the key opponents of the Consistory were Jean and François Favre, since around the time of Calvin's return. The family came into frequent conflict with Calvin and the Consistory for issues of immorality, as well as dancing.³⁴⁵ The Consistory's process against François became increasingly politicized when he defiantly resisted the Consistory's conviction. Calvin was accused of using the Consistory to carry out a personal vendetta against the Favre family, and asserted that the Consistory was completely unbiased in its attacks against immorality.³⁴⁶ The whole issue turned into a crisis of jurisdiction between Consistory and Council. Though the Council confirmed the Consistory's verdict against Favre, a minister and chief accuser of Favre, Poupin, was chided for being too harsh, a fairly accurate criticism, but Calvin interpreted this

³⁴² Ibid., 147.

³⁴³ Palm, 23.

³⁴⁴ Collins, 149.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 154-158.

³⁴⁶ MacKinnon, 97.

involvement of the Council as a continuation of the attempts to bring the local church under state control.³⁴⁷

Pierre Ameaux, in 1546, after the Consistory had been slow to grant him a divorce following his wife's infidelity about a year prior, ranted against Calvin at a private dinner with four friends. The Council somehow heard about it, had him imprisoned, and eventually the civil authorities required him to retract his statements to Calvin in person. Calvin, considering this too light of a sentence, accused him of blasphemy. Supported by Farel and Viret, it was eventually required of Ameaux that he march around town in simple clothing, pleading for God's forgiveness, after which Calvin was willing to consider the matter sufficiently closed.³⁴⁸

Calvin's influence with the Council over civil as well as religious affairs grew. When an exception was proposed to laws regulating public dress to allow the wearing of slashed pants (prohibited as excessively gaudy) at an archery festival, Calvin convinced the Council not to allow it.³⁴⁹ Calvin was also able to partially influence the investigation of a friend of his accused of spying on behalf of France in 1547. Calvin slowed down the proceedings, and his friend was let go after his accuser fell from grace and fled the city.³⁵⁰ Libertines on the Council attempted to legislate in church affairs, but encountered steep resistance from Calvin. Calvin successfully fought against the Council's instructions to include more frequent use of the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in church services, eventually convincing the Council that it could not interfere in church affairs.³⁵¹

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 98, 106.

³⁴⁸ Collins, 154-155.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 158-159.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 160-161.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 165.

The Council had the power to, and at times did, overrule Calvin, but he pushed his points so stubbornly that he often got his way.³⁵²

The same year, an anti-ministerial and vaguely threatening sign was placed on the pulpit of St. Peter's church in Geneva, addressed against Abel Poupin, a minister there, and warning Calvin to leave the city immediately.³⁵³ Jacques Gruet, an eccentric bachelor living alone in Geneva quickly came under suspicion. Gruet had met Etienne Dolet in Lyons and been influenced by his anti-religious views. Arrested, he eventually confessed under torture, though the sign did not match his handwriting. Documents were found in his house incriminating him of heresy, and he openly criticized both Calvin and Reformed religion in general. In his trial, he argued against the use of state punishment for a religious crime, but was executed on charges of blasphemy and lese-majesty.³⁵⁴

A similar case occurred with Jerome Bolsec, a former Carmelite monk in the city. Bolsec criticized Predestination, saying that it would make God a tyrant.³⁵⁵ Bolsec accused the Genevan ministers, in propagating Predestination, of supporting false doctrine and heresy.³⁵⁶ A public debate was held between Bolsec and the Genevan ministers on the doctrine of Predestination. In the debate Calvin convinced the Council of his viewpoint, and Bolsec was be imprisoned for sedition and banished in late 1551.³⁵⁷ Other Protestant cities protested against this, criticizing Calvin and the Genevan ministers for being too harsh when they might just as well have ignored Bolsec's opposition, seeing

³⁵² Ibid., 185.

³⁵³ Franklin Charles Palm, *Calvinism and the Religious Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 26.

³⁵⁴ Collins, 161-162.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 166.

³⁵⁶ MacKinnon, 120.

³⁵⁷ Collins, 166.

as he did broadly subscribe to orthodox Reformed belief.³⁵⁸

Following this, and following the trial of Servetus, which will be discussed later in this chapter, the Libertines fully fell from power. In 1554, Berthelier, Council member, strongly pushed for the Council to take the power of excommunication on itself, but failed when his party lost ground in elections.³⁵⁹ Following a vague, possible attempt to incite a revolution or a coup by a leading Libertine, Perrin, and several attacks by mobs on French residents, the Council accused leading Libertines of attempting a revolution, and ordered the execution or banishment of about twenty people, most of whom were able to flee the city before they were apprehended. Doing this, the Council purged most of its Libertine or Libertine-sympathizing members and clearly ended their political strength in the city. This aided the two groups that the Libertines had most strongly opposed: the French immigrants, and the ministers, particularly Calvin.³⁶⁰

Circumstances helped Calvin secure power. The younger generation that had grown up under the Consistory was strongly pro-Calvin, and as they came of age, Calvin's success was virtually assured.^{361,362} Immigration actually turned out to be quite beneficial to the city. Most new immigrants quickly became Calvin supporters if they weren't already, and certainly opposed the anti-French, anti-immigrant platform of the Libertines. The French community continued to grow through the 1550s.³⁶³ From 1556 on, there was no opposition to Calvin in any of the Councils of the civil government, and his requests and suggestions, both ecclesiastical and secular, were granted. Calvin

³⁵⁸ MacKinnon, 120.

³⁵⁹ Collins, 185.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 192, 194.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 189.

³⁶² MacKinnon, 107.

³⁶³ Collins, 187.

became a sort of general advisor to the Council, not limited to religious topics, and was honored by the Council: in 1557 the Council passed a resolution to give him a nice coat for winter, and in 1559 would invite him to accept citizenship in Geneva.^{364,365}

Michael Servetus

Servetus was, even according to scholars sympathetic to his cause, a rather muddled man.³⁶⁶ A medical doctor, he experimented in theology, and other scientific and quasi-scientific (astrology) fields. He combined firmly held beliefs about the nature of God and proper doctrine with a fondness for debate similar to Luther or Calvin.³⁶⁷ Servetus was originally Spanish, but lived in various major European cities, continually on the run from the authorities in the previous city for his theological or other work. While in Paris, before Calvin left France, Servetus and Calvin apparently planned to meet together, at risk to both of them, but Servetus failed to show and they would not meet again until Servetus' arrest in Geneva years later.

Servetus would be forced to flee Paris following an incident relating to his combination of astrology with medicine and other sciences in public lectures he attempted to put on.³⁶⁸ Having left there, he went to Vienne, another French city, where he would remain for a considerable period of time as personal physician to the local archbishop, and was known only by the name of Villeneuve.³⁶⁹ From there he

³⁶⁴ MacKinnon, 161.

³⁶⁵ Calvin would decline this offer: he never became a citizen of Geneva, despite his significant influence in its governance, he always remained and considered himself a citizen of France.

³⁶⁶ Stefan Zweig, *The Right to Heresy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 95.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁶⁹ MacKinnon, 135.

corresponded with Calvin and a number of other leading theological minds of his day, and published a number of theological treatises, ultimately culminating in a book, *The Reinstitution of Christianity*, its name a clear reference to Calvin's *Institutes* which he had read and sent back to Calvin with notes and corrections,³⁷⁰ which Calvin considered to be a defilement of the book.³⁷¹ Servetus sent Calvin a draft copy of the *Reinstitution* before it was published, and eventually asked for the manuscript back, which Calvin ignored, neither returning it to him, nor turning it directly over to the Inquisition of Vienne.³⁷²

Following numerous attempts to convince him of his error, Oecolampidus, a German Reformer, wrote Servetus that he could not consider him to be a Christian so long as he opposed the doctrine of the trinity. After all, Servetus had published a treatise titled "On the Errors of the Trinity".³⁷³ If in nothing else, Servetus was far removed from orthodox Reformed doctrine by his divergent views on the trinity. His *Reinstitution*, published in 1553 included five books and two dialogues on the trinity, treatises on faith, righteousness, law and gospel, love, regeneration, signs of the kingdom of the antichrist, an Apology against Melancthon, and thirty of his letters to Calvin.³⁷⁴

Servetus was aware of the dangerousness of his claims. He expected martyrdom.³⁷⁵ After trying, early on, to convince Servetus that he was wrong, Calvin eventually gave up after giving Servetus what amounted to a final warning. Around the same time, in 1546, Calvin wrote to Farel, telling him that "If I am agreeable he promises

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Zweig, 103.

³⁷² Ibid., 104.

³⁷³ MacKinnon, 123.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 135.

³⁷⁵ Zweig, 108.

to come here. But I am unwilling to pledge my faith for him. For if he should come and my authority avails aught, I shall never suffer him to depart alive.”³⁷⁶ While not initially giving him up to the Inquisition, Calvin was also unwilling to give Servetus the implicit recognition that the granting of safe passage on a visit to Geneva would entail.

Whether Calvin did eventually give away Servetus' identity or not is not fully clear, nor is it, if he did, clear how willingly he did so. After the publication of *The Reinstitution of Christianity*, which listed its author only by his initials, M.S.V., Servetus remained safe in Vienne because he was known there only by Villeneuve, his last name, and hence could not readily be identified as the author of the book. Calvin, and his close associates in Geneva were of course aware of the identity of the author, since Calvin had received a manuscript copy of the book from Servetus, as well as having been the original recipient of thirty letters that were reprinted in the book. Guillaume De Trie, a French refugee in Geneva,³⁷⁷ wrote to his Roman Catholic cousin in France, Antoine Arneys, criticizing the French Roman Catholic authorities for harboring a fugitive as terrible as Servetus.³⁷⁸ Arneys tipped off the authorities, and a Viennese inquisitor wrote to De Trie, seeking information as part of his investigation of the matter. De Trie sent back a number of pages from Servetus' letters to Calvin. De Trie reports, however, that Calvin was reluctant to give those pages to him, preferring debate to force in combating heresy, and being reluctant to support the Inquisition in any way. At a time when the French Inquisition was persecuting Reformed Protestants, cooperation with it, even against a common enemy, was difficult to rationalize. De Trie hints that Calvin gave him the pages

³⁷⁶ MacKinnon, 131.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 137.

³⁷⁸ Zweig, 108-109.

for fear of appearing to support Servetus, to protect his image more than anything else, but given Calvin's past with the French Inquisition, it may have been more complicated than that.³⁷⁹ Calvin would later deny having had anything to do with the information that led to Servetus' arrest, but De Trie's object in writing to his cousin was clearly, as he explicitly states in his second letter, the arrest and trial of Servetus.³⁸⁰

After De Trie's initial letter, which included the title of Servetus' book, its table of contents, a transcript of its first four chapters, and Servetus' full name as well as his cover name, Servetus was investigated by the local Inquisition, but was able to delay their investigation enough to allow him to cover his tracks and get rid of the printing press on which the book had been printed.³⁸¹ Because of this, Servetus was able to avoid serious investigation until the contents of De Trie's second letter clearly implicated him as the author of, if nothing else, letters to Calvin espousing heterodox beliefs. He was arrested, but while imprisoned was given exceptional treatment, and because of the loose supervision he was under on the prison grounds, was able to escape on April 7th, 1553.^{382,383}

Four months later, Servetus turned up again, this time in a Genevan church service on Sunday, August 13th, 1553.³⁸⁴ Why he went to Geneva is unclear, and even less clear is why he would sit in the front row during a church service conducted by the one man in town who was both able and inclined to positively identify him for arrest.³⁸⁵ In any case, this choice reveals more about Servetus' unusual character than it does about Calvin's

³⁷⁹ MacKinnon, 138-139.

³⁸⁰ Zweig, 112-113.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁸³ Strohm, 178.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

behavior or theology, so it is somewhat peripheral, but of all the events from De Trie's writing of the letters to his cousin, through Servetus' arrest and escape, and his arrival and arrest in Geneva, his choice to visibly attend services that day is probably the most inexplicable.

On trial in a sort of debate setting between himself and Calvin, Servetus acknowledged that he was the author of both the book and the letters to Calvin (in Vienne, he had denied having written the book while admitting himself to be the author of the letters). As the trial began, Servetus bounced back and forth on the subject of infant baptism, allowing some suggestion that he could be convinced to support it despite his book's strong position against it. He remained, however, resolutely Anti-Trinitarian.³⁸⁶ The Calvin-Servetus debates became a major setback for the Libertine opposition to Calvin in Geneva. Berthelier attempted to hurt Calvin's power by supporting Servetus in the trial, but he was too radical theologically to gain much popularity, and his occasionally erratic behavior later in the trial made it hard to use it as a platform to embarrass Calvin.³⁸⁷

Early on, Servetus protested against the use of civil courts to punish a person for theological opinions. The request for the case to be transferred to the Consistory (which had much more limited ability to punish) or canceled was denied and the court tried to portray Servetus as a dangerous agitator in addition to his doctrinal crimes.³⁸⁸ The debates in court included arguments over his pantheism, Anti-Trinitarianism, and the

³⁸⁶ MacKinnon, 142.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 144.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 146.

basic allowance for the punishment of heresy in a civil court.³⁸⁹

International opinions, both sought after and not, were received. An emissary was sent from Vienne with a request for Servetus' extradition. Servetus pleaded with the court to do anything but send him back to Vienne, which gained him some popularity and encouraged the first swell of support from Calvin's opposition.³⁹⁰ Reformed Swiss cities were probed for their opinions on the case as well. Bern, Basel, Zürich, and Schaffhausen all condemned Servetus' theology and broadly supported its suppression, implying some punishment for him, but did not specifically endorse any particular method. It should also be noted that shortly before the Genevan Council wrote to these cities, Calvin wrote to his allies in the area, asking for their support against Servetus.³⁹¹

In one of his written replies during the trial, Servetus described Calvin as a “liar”, “thief”, “imposter”, “bestial fellow”, “perfidious blasphemer”, and “cacodemon”.³⁹² Considering his imprisonment, such language is hardly surprising, but it diminished sympathy for Servetus with members of the Council and the public. The support that was maintained for Servetus seems to have given him the idea that he was about to be acquitted, leading him to ask for Calvin's arrest “until the case should be decided by his death or mine or other penalty”.³⁹³ Following a series of personal insults against Calvin, Servetus also requested the Calvin be banished.³⁹⁴

Perrin, then a Libertine leader in the Council, sought a “not guilty” verdict, and tried to have the punishment reduced or the case retried by a different government

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 144-146.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 148.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 149.

³⁹² Ibid., 148.

³⁹³ Ibid., 149.

³⁹⁴ Zweig, 125.

committee. As that failed, Calvin purportedly requested that the death sentence be carried out with the sword rather than the more painful death by burning at the stake.³⁹⁵ Calvin wrote later describing this, but it does not actually appear in the Council minutes, which could either have any of a number of innocuous explanations, or could suggest that Calvin actually didn't try to, as he claimed, make the sentence less painful.³⁹⁶

The day he was to be executed, Servetus was visited in his cell by Farel, as well as, at Servetus' request, Calvin. Servetus asked for Calvin's forgiveness. Calvin told him in reply that he ought to ask it of God, rather than of him. At this point, Servetus tried again to defend his theology, at which point Calvin gave up, leaving and calling Servetus "self-condemned". Farel accompanied him as he was walked to the stake, and asked him to admit his fault. Declining to do so, Servetus was allowed to pray, and then was burnt at the stake, where, according to Farel, his last words were "Jesus, Son of the eternal God, have mercy on me". As poor in taste as it seems to us today, Farel used these dying words to claim that Servetus, in saying "Son of the eternal God" rather than the typical phrase "eternal Son of God", further demonstrated his Anti-Trinitarianism, confirming him to be a heretic.³⁹⁷

Sebastian Castellio

In the wake of the execution of Servetus, Calvin faced a prolonged conflict with another Protestant whom he considered to be, by that time, outside of the Church.

Sebastian Castellio and John Calvin had known each other closely for a long period of

³⁹⁵ MacKinnon, 150.

³⁹⁶ Zweig, 131.

³⁹⁷ MacKinnon, 151.

time. Castellio was a French refugee and a convert to Reformed Christianity. He had stayed with Calvin for a time in Strasbourg. While there, Castellio published a successful theology book, and trained for ministry. Around the time of Calvin's return to Geneva, Castellio came to be regent of the college there. While living in Geneva, Castellio applied as a candidate for ministerial ordination, but was rejected on the grounds of the examination of his orthodoxy. Castellio held that Christ literally descended to hell, against Calvin's interpretation of that line of the Apostles' Creed as figurative, and also considered the Song of Songs (the Song of Solomon) not to have been truly inspired, and, hence, not really canonical on the same level as the other books of the Bible. His questioning of the Song of Songs was considered problematic and potentially dangerous in a minister, endangering the basis of trust in scripture in general. However, while he was rejected, the recommendation was in no way unfriendly, but rather strongly stressed his positive qualities.^{398,399}

Following the execution of Servetus, Calvin anticipated the public debate that would follow. By his own account, he wrote his “Defense of the True Faith and of the Trinity against the Dreadful Errors of Servetus” in haste, and asked the other Genevan ministers to sign on to it, so as to present a united front against the criticisms that were soon to come.⁴⁰⁰ The “Defense” claimed, basically, that public espousal of false doctrine cannot be allowed, and that it is permitted for the state to use force for that purpose. Issued both in Latin and in French, it was accessible to both the elite who were the leaders of the Reformation, and to typical

³⁹⁸ Collins 150-152

³⁹⁹ MacKinnon, 113.

⁴⁰⁰ Zweig, 142-143.

Protestants in France and Switzerland, where this became an issue of public debate.⁴⁰¹

Castellio took serious precautions with the publication of his book criticizing the execution of Servetus and violent repression of heretics in general, espousing a more tolerant stance. Entitled *De Haereticis*, it was published under a false name, Martinus Bellius, and claimed to have been published in Magdeburg, when it was actually published in Basel.⁴⁰² The book was made up of different works by various theologians, including Erasmus, Augustine, Chrysostom, Luther and Calvin. The only parts actually written by Castellio were a single section from the preface to his Bible translation and the dedication, to Duke Christoph. Castellio makes the point that Christ and his disciples were put to death as heretics, and, as such, executing people for heresy ought to be avoided, lest true Christians are accidentally persecuted. Keeping this in mind, civil authorities should also be careful in punishing heretics, to avoid punishing them more than they deserve.⁴⁰³ Not all accused as heretics are actually heretics, a fact known well by the Reformers, given their persecution by the civil and religious authorities in Roman Catholic countries. Unlike Calvin, Castellio considers the fact that the definition of heresy is locally determined to be problematic – while Calvin assumed that the Bible could easily be clearly interpreted, Castellio thought proper interpretation difficult to determine.⁴⁰⁴

Persecutors should, Castellio argues, proceed very carefully when punishing those who publicly profess belief in Christ. Killing those who confess Christ is not and cannot

⁴⁰¹ MacKinnon, 154-155.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 156.

⁴⁰³ Castellio, 126.

⁴⁰⁴ Zweig, 155-156.

be God's work, but is rather the work of the devil.⁴⁰⁵ Despite this Castellio is willing to accept some state punishment used for heresy. Following excommunication, if the heretic continues to disrupt the local church, then the state certainly ought to stop them through punishment, but not execution. The most extreme punishment that could be used is exile.⁴⁰⁶

De Haereticis quickly spread throughout Europe, gaining influence in Scotland, the Low Countries, and of course Germany, France and Switzerland.⁴⁰⁷ Bullinger advised Calvin and Farel to ignore the book, to avoid popularizing it by suppressing it, but the two quickly opposed it and advocated its suppression.⁴⁰⁸ Beza, the eventual successor to Calvin in Geneva, took point on this suppression, writing the first response, “*De Haereticis a civili Magistratu puniendis Libellus*”.⁴⁰⁹ In this response, Beza went beyond Calvin's public position by advocating not only death, but a painful death for heretics.⁴¹⁰ He argued that the death penalty was acceptable, since excommunication and the other powers available to the Church were insufficient to prevent the spread of heresy. Heresy is a serious crime, and it deserves, Beza claimed, a serious penalty.⁴¹¹

Following the Genevan reply, Castellio issued a second piece, “*Contra libellum Calvini*”.⁴¹² The suppression of this treatise was swift and effective; due to the efforts of Calvin, Farel and Beza and their allies in other cities, it failed almost completely to

⁴⁰⁵ Castellio, 134.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 112-115.

⁴⁰⁸ Zweig, 167-168.

⁴⁰⁹ MacKinnon, 159.

⁴¹⁰ Zweig, 169.

⁴¹¹ MacKinnon, 159.

⁴¹² Ibid., 160.

spread.⁴¹³ The local government in Basel was convinced to ask Castellio not to write anything on theology or any sort of polemical work, and he complied for the next two years.⁴¹⁴ At this point, two years after “Contra libellum Calvinii”, Calvin issued a polemical work “Brief Reply in refutation of the calumnies of a certain worthless person” against Castellio on the presumption that he was the author of an anonymous polemical piece against Calvin.⁴¹⁵ The “Brief Reply” attempted to defend Predestination against what was presumed to be Castellio's position that the doctrine would make God a tyrant and the author of sin.⁴¹⁶

Following this criticism, Melanchthon wrote a letter of support to Castellio, acknowledging him as a Christian and legitimate theologian despite Melanchthon's own support of the execution of Servetus. The city authorities of Basel were convinced by this letter and by Calvin's attack to allow Castellio to write again.⁴¹⁷ In the “Brief Reply” and later letters and shorter treatises, both Calvin and Beza engaged in a serious polemic against Castellio, including personal attacks on his character.⁴¹⁸ Castellio replied by criticizing the harshness of their attacks, and stressing Christian love.⁴¹⁹ Soon thereafter, Castellio took the opportunity of being able to write again to publish a piece in French, “Conseil à la France désolée” on the futility of the fighting between Roman Catholics and Reformed Protestants in France, arguing for reconciliation between the two religious

⁴¹³ Zweig, 187-189.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 193-197.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 197.

⁴¹⁶ John Calvin, “Brief Reply in refutation of the calumnies of a certain worthless person,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954).

⁴¹⁷ Zweig, 203.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 197, 202.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 204, 207.

communities.⁴²⁰

Again, the suppression of the work was swift, and, with the aid of a General Synod of the Reformed Churches, was widely successful. Beza continued the attacks on Castellio, including accusations of blasphemy, Anabaptism, Roman Catholicism and Libertine pantheism.⁴²¹ Through the efforts of Calvin, Beza, Farel, and their allies in Basel, an attempt to have Castellio tried for heresy was successful.⁴²² The trial appeared to be tipping against Castellio, but before a verdict was reached, he died of natural causes at the age of 48, apparently related to overwork and exhaustion.⁴²³

Castellio's death brought what was perhaps Calvin's most embarrassing conflict to an end. Beza accused Castellio of having seriously diverged from Reformed theology, but readings of Castellio's work show him to have been incredibly loyal to Reformed theology despite his conflict with Geneva. Castellio's support by Melanchthon and his own writings suggest him to have been well within what Calvin generally defined as orthodox Reformed Christianity, but Castellio's criticisms of Calvin's handling of the Servetus case were not taken well. It is possible that just as Calvin became more sensitive to divergent opinions on the trinity after being accused of Anti-Trinitarianism by Caroli, the issues of state use of force against heretics discussed in his case with Servetus made him more sensitive to criticisms on that subject.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of his work in theology, Calvin was quite concerned with

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 211.

⁴²² Ibid., 212.

⁴²³ Ibid., 218.

clearly delineating the difference between heterodox radical Protestants and the orthodox Reformed. General support for the suppression and execution of Anabaptists and other heterodox Protestants in France, Germany, and Zürich meant that if Reformed Christians were to be spared persecution in France, they had to be clearly disassociated from the radicals. This informed Calvin's theological work considerably, making him extremely careful to avoid taking any action that might appear to support the Radical Reformation.

Strict laws on morals in Geneva preceded Calvin's arrival there, but became part of his effort to establish greater discipline in the church there. The conflict with the Libertines and nobles opposed to Calvin's programs centered on issues of church independence, particularly the authority over excommunication, which would lead to Calvin's brief exile. Church independence, church discipline, and issues of tension with the French immigrant community in Geneva all eventually went Calvin's way as his opposition fragmented and lost power. Calvin's inclination towards strong church discipline was a natural outgrowth of his desire for the Church to be pure and true for God's sake, while remaining somewhat lenient so as not to reject someone whom God has chosen.

While Calvin was concerned with church independence from the civil government, Servetus was very much concerned with civil government independence from doctrinal issues. His trial in Geneva represented the realization of Calvin's theoretical support for the suppression of radical heterodoxies (particularly, in Servetus' case, Anti-Trinitarianism and Anabaptism). In order to prevent the spread of heresy, those who loudly and publicly advocate dangerous and false doctrines must somehow be silenced. Since Calvin, on the basis of traditional theology and certain laws of the Old

Testament, considered execution a legitimate punishment for heresy, he advocated and endorsed its use against Servetus.

The Servetus affair led to the conflict with Sebastian Castellio. Castellio, who was, as the Genevan pastors themselves had previously acknowledged, not so far from Reformed orthodoxy, and who certainly was a true Christian, was persecuted by allies of Calvin for his opposition to the manner in which the Servetus case was conducted. The environment of the time, and the environment created by Calvin himself did not allow for any criticism of actions against heterodox Protestants. Calvin expected other Reformers to act as he had, in strongly criticizing and opposing the theology of Anabaptists in France for the sake of the Reformed church there. For a Reformer to appear to support a man like Servetus was nearly unthinkable to Calvin, and the logical conclusion for him was that Castellio himself no longer subscribed to the true faith, and, as a heretic, ought to be suppressed and punished.

Calvin's criticism of the Pope for persecuting any Protestant presence in Roman Catholic countries while permitting Jews and Muslims to freely exercise their religions there⁴²⁴ might have been well taken by Calvin himself, who, at least theoretically, permitted the free exercise of Jewish and Muslim religion (though not any conversionary activities) in Reformed cities, but advocated the harsh, and, at times, violent suppression of what he considered to be heretical Protestant sects. Calvin's support of strong penalties for heresy was more an outgrowth of his inclination towards church discipline (for which he accepted the use of state power) and towards clear disassociation with heresy so that orthodox Protestants in other countries might not be persecuted.

⁴²⁴ John Calvin, "Remarks on the Letter of Pope Paul III," in *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 264.

Conclusion

What should the life and thought of a man who lived 500 years ago mean to Christians in this century? In exploring, criticizing and learning from Calvin's life, we encounter important questions that are as relevant today as they were then. What is the meaning and the place of ecclesiology and Church unity? How do we deal with questions of who is and who is not a Christian? How can tradition and the historical Church be respected without being given more than their due? How can we learn from the mistakes of Calvin? How much importance should be given to right belief and practice? Finally, drawing on Calvin's theology, how is Reformed theology to be distinct from other theologies and rooted in God?

Ecclesiology and Church Unity

Calvin asks “What is the Church?” I want to ask “What is the purpose of the Church?” The Church is the community of saints – it is the community for God. Through this fealty and faith, unity and all the blessings of the Church proceed from Christ. This fealty is absolutely necessary as the practical side of ecclesiology.

The Church ought to do God's will. If it doesn't do that, then it matters very little if it's united or not, since then it's not the Church. “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things will be added to you.”⁴²⁵ Christians should be oriented so as to seek not earthly things, but heavenly things.

⁴²⁵ Matthew 6:33 KJV.

Christians come together as a Church because “it is not good that man should be alone.”⁴²⁶ We must come together in service and in deference to God. We do not come together to serve ourselves, to make our lives easier and to achieve earthly success. We come together to serve God. If we are to be unified as one, we must be unified under the leadership of the head of the Church, Jesus Christ, since there is no other means by which we can be unified and remain the Church.

As for the community of saints, the Church is made up of brothers and sisters in Christ, a holy family with God as its father and head. And who are these brothers and sisters? Christ tells us: “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven.”⁴²⁷ We should not judge whether others are meeting this standard, but rather should judge ourselves.

Long, drawn out committees and meetings on Church unity attempting to effect a united Church governance structure in the United States seem to be missing the mark. What fruit do such meetings bring? Christians in this country are no longer as divided as they once were. Joint programs, projects, serving and evangelizing efforts speak to the unity that has developed organically between denominations in this country through common purpose. Paul advises Christians to be of one mind.⁴²⁸ When ecumenical ventures are pursued in obedience to God and service to others, the Christians involved are certainly of one mind. Denominational lines are not blurred or even truly broken, but rather are transcended by God. All who do the Father's will are one family, one Church, bound together by the Holy Spirit through love and faith. This unity is superior to any organizational unity that might be effected by joint theological statements or arguments

⁴²⁶ Genesis 2:18 KJV.

⁴²⁷ Matthew 12:50 NRSV.

⁴²⁸ Romans 15:6, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 1:27, 2:2.

between ecclesiastical bodies because those things proceed from humans, but organic unity which is spiritual proceeds from God.

If there are differences between Christians, they ought to be addressed, and if some seek to lead Christians away from the will of God, then they ought to be dissuaded, but these things are only side notes in the story of the Church, the body which exists to do, and exists because it does, the will of God.

The Bounds of the Church

When we ask the question “who is a Christian?” we think that we ought to answer it by listing out some set of tasks which one need fulfill, or some confession of faith to which one need subscribe. These are the ways of humankind, not the ways of God. Any human test, even of confession of faith, requires something to be done by humans to reflect or prove their salvation. Salvation is wholly done by God, and the credit and the glory for it are due to him alone. Salvation is received through faith, and therefore may be trusted just as the one who gave it is to be trusted, but we do not need, nor are we intended to be able to know, the status of others.

Who is a Christian? Or better stated, who is saved? Only those whom God has, through his secret election, chosen from the beginning of the world. The election is secret – need God reveal his ways to the world?⁴²⁹ Election is frequently manifested by certain signs, of faith, of joy in God, and of love, but none of these things can be perceived by other humans with certainty. After all, only God can see and judge the human heart. Castellio is right in giving an expansive definition for whom we should

⁴²⁹ See, for example, the book of Job.

presume to be Christians, a definition based on love which sets a nearly impossibly high standard for Christians to strive to fulfill, and which provides a simple and easy standard by which we may presume others to be Christians without judging them, a right allowed only to God.

Claims which definitively exclude communities are thus dangerous, because, though they may be correct in accusing a particular community of straying from orthodox belief, they limit God's freedom in election. It may be for this reason that Calvin is unwilling to say that no one within the Roman Catholic church is saved.

Tradition and the Historical Church

In contrast both to Luther and to the Roman Catholic church, Calvin displayed strong respect for tradition, for the theology of historical theologians, while being careful not to overvalue it. Tradition is not authoritative, but it provides guidance. Looking back over Church history, over the theology of Christians of the past, and past conflicts can inform present discussions. By ignoring or nearly uniformly rejecting past theologians, we fail to utilize the resources that the Church provides.

When discussing a particular topic, or taking a particular action, Christians are obligated to look to God for guidance, usually through scripture, but thereafter, to look for good and right guidance from other Christians. That many verses in the Bible are difficult to understand is no surprise to a Church that has been interpreting and reinterpreting its holy text for centuries. In understanding theology, it seems foolish to disregard the opinions of the many Christian theologians who have honestly and often wisely sought to understand God's actions in the world.

Right Doctrine and Practice

In his relentless efforts against Servetus following his apprehension in Geneva, a zeal for truth and proper doctrine is visible in Calvin. Calvin's strong opposition of doctrines he thought to be unchristian, though it exhibited itself in unfortunate ways, reminds students of Reformation history the intense importance that proper belief had for the reformers. That zeal should not be lost from the Church today. While different methods should be used to encourage heterodox Christians towards proper belief, issues of right doctrine should not be overlooked.

Part of the will of God which the Church is called to obey is that Christians hold proper belief. Discussions of correct doctrine have become old fashioned, but understandings of infant baptism, of life after death, and of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, especially in comparison to the Roman Catholic Mass, are still important today. The questions of what is necessary for salvation, and the form of God's election are still pressing issues, important to the lives of individual believers, and therefore important to the Church as a whole.

None of these doctrinal issues should be allowed to supersede what is a clear commandment: to love each other as Christ loved us. Without love, such discussions are worthless, but with love, they can play an important role in the Church, as they did in the past.

Studying Calvin's life, we see his insightful theological work, but we also see how easily he was led to accuse a man, Sebastian Castellio, of blasphemy and heresy for his criticisms of Calvin's handling of the Servetus affair. While the execution of Servetus is understandable (though certainly not excused) by the practices of the day, Calvin's

persecution of Castellio is more difficult to pass by. Castellio, while diverging slightly from Calvin's theology, was easily within the bounds of Reformed theology by the standards of Calvin, of the other preachers of Geneva, and of other Reformed Christians in his time. This conflict within the Church needs to be avoided, but emotional responses can, as in this case, generate disturbances where none existed before. As Christians today see Calvin's mistake, Church leaders have an added warning against falling prey to this particular sin.

Like the young rich man described in the Gospels, Calvin's theology seems quite obedient to God. It is systematic and honest to scripture. It is practical, relating to the world without abandoning its roots in God. Calvin's theology stands up strongly for truth, and openly declares itself for God. But, like that young rich man, it lacks one thing. In Calvin's theological work, especially relating to Roman Catholicism, Anti-Trinitarianism and Anabaptism, there is very little mention of or appearance of love. The call of the Church, the call of the Gospel, and the call of God are all the call to love. For Reformed theology to be true to these, it must be understood and practiced with honest love for God and for others.

A Biblical and Distinct Theology

Calvin's theology, remained primarily rooted in God's revelation in scripture, but was also defined over and against competing Christian theologies of his day. While it does and necessarily must rely on God, Reformed Christian theology ought to be willing to enter into conversation with other theologies. Though this conversation mainly took a polemical tone in Calvin's day, it still allowed the Reformed to better understand their

own beliefs. Consider Calvin's letters in response to Roman Catholic leaders. He rarely took seriously the possibility that the Roman Catholic church could be truly reformed, but wrote instead with the goal in mind of equipping Reformed Christians to better understand their own beliefs, so that they themselves might not be misled by what he thought of as the false and dangerous doctrines of the Roman Catholic church. As this conversation has changed in tone but still continues today, it has become a means for mutual encouragement of faith and, perhaps, a means of guidance to bring groups closer to orthodox belief.

The Church is incredibly important. Conciliation and cooperation are also important, provided they are done with deference to God and with proper goals. As Calvin repeatedly affirms, nothing is greater and nothing can be greater than God, and all glory is due to him. With God in sight and love in the hearts of their practitioners, both theology and interactions between Christian denominations have great potential to honor God and build up Christians and the Church, as is visible in Calvin's ecclesiastical theology and his attempts to overcome conflict within the Church between Lutherans and Zwinglians and between particular individuals and communities. When the practitioner has little love and consideration for those others with whom he or she is interacting, God's will is no longer obeyed and the interaction can become damaging to the Church, as in Calvin's conflicts with Servetus and with Castellio. Christianity in this century ought to take the Church seriously, understanding the importance of right belief, the significance of the bounds of the Church. The Church ought to learn from other past and present Christians while focusing on God, serving him faithfully through love.

Appendix:

Ecclesiology

In looking at the ecclesiology of John Calvin and at his interactions with others in his day, there is an opportunity to explore the possibilities of what the Church should be today. In learning about the historical Church, Christians gain an added perspective on the Church in their own time. The questions that Calvin sought to answer in the theology that guided his relationships with other Reformed Protestants, with Lutherans, with Roman Catholics and with followers of the Radical Reformation are still very present issues. The origins of the Church, its nature, its marks and its bounds are all theological questions quite relevant to the Christian Church in this century.

Simply because it exists, it may be asked how the Church came to be. Historical analysis is the typical response to such a question today, charting developments from the early apostolic age through the official Christianization of the Roman Empire, the split between Eastern and Western churches, the Reformation, and various movements and events through to today. This origin story, while fascinating and informative, is insufficient to explain how the Church is what it claims to be: the Body of Christ, called and sanctified by God. Such claims require a discussion of the nature of the Church. How is it that this organization of people throughout the world can be part of the body of Jesus Christ? How is it that the Church is united, and yet made up of many different congregations throughout space and time?

Springing out of such ecclesiological discussions are practical questions. The

origin of the Church impacts the Church's marks in the world. Calvin's persecutions of Servetus and Castellio, and his criticisms of Roman Catholics and Protestant radicals seem incredibly harsh to modern scholars, but some practical need for Christians to understand what communities are truly Christian and which are not remains. Calvin's understanding of the marks of the Church deserves to be explored, and also ought to be checked against the standard which Calvin acknowledged in his day, and which Christians continue to acknowledge today: divine revelation in scripture. The practical bounds of the Church should be based on these marks. While attempts to limit God's saving power should be avoided, greater understanding of God's Church allows for a new interpretation of the bounds of the Church, one which leads the Church to serve God in the world, building others up while not being misled away from the Gospel. In a multi-religious country, questions about which communities are and which are not properly Christian are all the more important.

The Origin of the Church

Today, Calvin is most remembered for his championing of the doctrine of Predestination. This election, along with the person of Jesus Christ, forms the basis for a Reformed understanding of the origin of the Church. God's calling of the Church creates it. As God once called the universe into existence, so too has he called the Church into being. The Church is created by God, rather than by humans. God's call takes place in history through Jesus Christ, and in relation to all the revelation surrounding him. Today's Church is formed and maintained by God through his movements in the world in the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit in scripture, and in his presence and action in the

sacraments. Through these things, the Church is both historical and non-historical in origin. It is founded through actions in the world by a God who is not of the world.

The Church is in, but not of, the world. Its loyalty is to God and his son, Jesus Christ. This fealty exceeds any duty owed to people, organizations, and ideologies of the world. The Church cannot be explained solely through an historical progression, because those events have not formed the character of the Church, though God has partially formed that character through them. In the same way that the Church points to the God who is beyond it, the formation of the Church points beyond its historical events to the God who worked in them. The founder of the Church is none other than God himself.

The Old Testament describes God's relationship with humanity primarily in the covenant that he establishes with a particular people, the Israelites. Deuteronomy 7 describes God's election of Israel: "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors."⁴³⁰ God elected Israel not in response to some particular worthiness on Israel's part, but as a call to worthiness. It is an election out of love for Israel, and it is in response to this election, rather than in order to attain it, that Israel ought to "observe diligently the commandment – the statutes, and the ordinances."⁴³¹ Through this election, and through God's revelation and work in that community, Israel becomes and is God's people.

In the New Testament, the community that becomes the Church, the community of the elect, is a community of profoundly insufficient people, transformed by Jesus

⁴³⁰ Deut. 7:7-8 NRSV.

⁴³¹ Deut. 7:11 NRSV.

Christ, the overwhelmingly sufficient messiah. Again, God's chosen are not exemplary people, but rather sinners and tax-collectors, disloyal disciples, and even Paul, the very man who persecuted the Church and presided over the stoning of Stephen.

In this, the lack of value of Christ's disciples is extravagantly made up for by the value of Christ and of his sacrifice for their sake. The Church is created, redeemed, and sanctified by God. In the person of Jesus Christ, as Karl Barth describes, the infinite God fully intersects with the finite creation.⁴³² Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, allowing for and initiating a total relationship between humanity and God. The Church exists, and only exists, because of the enabling of this relationship. The bond between God and God's people that preceded the coming of Christ is not destroyed, but rather is fully realized.

The event of Pentecost has particular significance for this. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was sent and came upon believers in Jerusalem. Between Christ's miraculous appearances after his resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were in a period of waiting. The waiting ended not because of an action undertaken by the disciples, but rather, ended when God acted in the sending of his Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ, the Church was created, and on Pentecost, through the Holy Spirit, it was built up. Though the Christian community on earth is not yet fully sanctified, by the work of Jesus Christ and through sanctification by the Holy Spirit, glimpses of the eternal, perfect Church that is the body of Christ shine through.

God builds up the Church through the motions of the Holy Spirit in it.

Considering that tongues of fire coming down from heaven seem to be rare today, how is

⁴³² Karl Barth, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

it that the Holy Spirit works in the Church? God works in the hearts of individuals, to be certain, but there are also two means which the Spirit frequently employs to inform the Church. Holy scripture is the first of these. In scripture, theology and doctrine have an origin that is not human, not based on independent philosophy, but based on God's will and instructions, received through revelation. As a revelatory book, the Bible is used by the Holy Spirit to continue to speak to and guide the Church.

Since it is scripture, the ultimate author of the Bible is God. Like the Church, scripture was formed by God through human writers. The particular individuals involved in its development, various historical events, and even politics played a role in the development of the text, but Christians, by regarding the Bible as scripture, trust that God was the prime mover behind these things, guiding them with particular intentions in mind, meaning that the Bible is as God would have it be, and hence may be called holy scripture. Because these texts are from God, they are important to the community that seeks to follow God. They are used, and because of their existence and Christians' awareness of them, must be used by the Church that acknowledges them, so that community may better know God's will and respond to it.

The Bible itself records God working through people. God uses the betrayal and sale into slavery of Joseph by his brothers to be able to save the entire family from starvation during a famine. Moses is called by God despite his many inadequacies, and used by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. God works with, in, and through people. When God's will, to be identified in accordance with God's word, particularly God's revelation in scripture, is being done, when the Church is built up, directed in God's ways, and people love one another, God is certainly working.

Scripture can be difficult to understand. It should be acknowledged that some texts may be interpreted differently by different people, even if both are Christians loyal to God. Calvin never agreed with this, instead assuming that it should be easy to discern which interpretation is correct and which is false. There is a single text by which interpretations can be checked, but that text does not always speak completely clearly on specifics. On the Eucharist, the Bible does not clearly answer questions of how literally Christ's body is present in the sacrament. Hence, both Roman Catholics and Reformed Protestants are able to base their theology of the Lord's Supper on the text, but clearly have very different understandings. It is in part because of such variations in the interpretation of scripture, some correct, some incorrect, that there are so many different denominations. Because of variations in interpretation, two honest Christians can disagree on theological particulars without excluding each other from the Church. This is the manner in which Calvin disagreed with Melancthon on Predestination, and should have been the manner in which Calvin disagreed with Castellio on the use of force against heretics.

That two Christians may interpret a particular passage of the Bible differently while remaining on good terms with each other does not mean that they should not strive to interpret scripture properly. Interpretations can be, and frequently are, incorrect. Any interpretation of the text, even the most plain and clear passage, should be made with the willingness to be corrected by God. There are correct interpretations, and God can and does guide some individuals to them. Though others can criticize or guide an interpretation, God is the judge of the properness of an interpretation. Interpretation is obliged to take the whole of scripture into consideration. The best interpreter of scripture

is scripture, and many verses must be read or recalled in order to arrive at an interpretation with any degree of confidence. The Bible must be read carefully and prayerfully. Hopefully, interpretation will be guided by God, and therefore must be done with deference to God in mind, rather than to some sort of preconceived idea or ideology. Scripture is not meant for us to use to serve our own desires, but rather to alter our desires and to lead us to serve God.

In 21st century America, we have incredible access to Bible study resources, including the thoughts of many modern Christian and Jewish interpreters, as well as centuries worth of study of scripture. This prior interpretation can provide information helpful to us in reaching good understandings of scripture, but may not be completely relied upon. An interpreter of scripture must always return to the text, and must ultimately look to God, even while consulting the interpretations of others.

Additionally, God builds up the Church through the continuing practice of the sacraments instituted by Christ. As sacraments instituted by Jesus, as spoken to in scripture and interpreted in Church tradition, the sacraments are reliable as things of divine rather than human origin. In baptism, the Holy Spirit begins the realization of the redemptive process. Believers enter the Church as the process of their death to sin and new life in Christ begins. In the Lord's Supper, Christians are reminded of Christ's sacrifice. In receiving the body and blood of Christ, Christians are sustained and called to participate in sacrifice and God's forgiveness with Christ. Receiving the promises of Christ, the Church is bound by them. Receiving the effects of Christ's sacrifice, the Church begins to be able to act to honor that sacrifice. The change that the Holy Spirit effects in believers in baptism is encouraged and continued through God's presence and

work in the Lord's Supper.

This is not to say that scripture and sacrament are the exclusive means by which God builds up and directs his Church. In the days of the Judges, God raised up leaders to guide and defend his people. Later, God called the prophets to correct his people when they erred. God can speak to his people in myriad ways, but these two, the written word and received sacrament, are important and readily identifiable means by which God guides his Church. It was for this reason that Calvin identified the spoken and received word and the properly administered sacrament as the two marks of the Church. Since God frequently builds up the Church by these means, if they are not present in a particular community, it seems less likely that God has built that community up to be his Church.

Through these things, the Church's origins are both historical, and non- historical, both worldly and otherworldly. Though God is fully free in election, it seems that in establishing the Church, he works in the world. As the body of Christ,^{433,434} both human and divine, the Church has a dual origin from a single individual. The Church is built up and must continually be willing to defer to revelation, in the movements of the Holy Spirit where they are recognized, and in scripture. The Church is certainly informed by Church history, but must be willing to be corrected from historical errors. The Church is informed by tradition, but not constituted by it. God's actions in history have and continue to build up the Church, but the Church's ultimate origin is in nothing other than God himself.

⁴³³ Col. 1:24.

⁴³⁴ 1 Cor. 12:27.

Nature of the Church

In Christ, the Church is unified. There is only one Church, and it stretches across vast distances and over hundreds of years. The Church is constituted of many congregations, but is united in a single whole. It is both plural and singular. The Church is its constituent members, who are all members in it as a body – the body of Christ. In Christ, the Church is one. Christ is the head of the Church, directing and leading it, while individual Christians hold various roles. Though they are joined to the body of Christ, Christians continue to be distinct individuals. As members in the body of Christ, Christians fulfill different roles, but their purposes are subjected to and guided by the purposes of the head of the body, Jesus Christ.⁴³⁵

The Church is a divine institution, fully bound to God and the person of Jesus Christ. The Church is a human institution, constituted by imperfect people, existing in an imperfect world. Though certainly in the world, the Church belongs to God.⁴³⁶ The Church is both the Invisible and the Visible churches, which in fact are one. The Church is seen in the world in the actions of the elect in the service of God, but it exists apart from the constraints of the world, even the constraints of distance, of time, and of death. Existing with these contradictions, the Church is part of the relationship between humanity and divinity. As made manifest by God's election, the Church is the community of the elect. The Church is the community of the servants of God, of those who follow Jesus' commandments and the will of God as it has been revealed to his people.

This is the purpose of the Church, the purpose of election. Election is not a call of

⁴³⁵ Romans 12.

⁴³⁶ John 17.

God in response to actions of humans. It is a call of God which enables and encourages a response by humans. Being formed by God's election, the Church is meant to serve God. The unity of the Church has a purpose: "so that the world may know that [God] has sent [Jesus]"⁴³⁷ The Church must obey the commandments to love God and one another, which are greater than human tradition. To be the Church, to be the kin of Jesus Christ, is to serve the will of God.⁴³⁸ Being the Church is sacrificing for the sake of others in service to God. In John's phrasing, by abiding in love, the Church becomes the Church and abides with God. Without knowing love, it cannot know God.⁴³⁹

The Church may be explained in Peter's words to early converts: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."⁴⁴⁰

This repentance is not the beginning of the process of election, but rather is a response to a call. The call can be perceived in different ways. Here it comes in the form of a sermon preached by Peter, but it is accompanied by the work of the spirit in the hearts of the elect. On the day of this sermon, thousands joined the Christian community in Jerusalem, as a result of a work of the Holy Spirit. Peter cannot create a Christian, and cannot cause a person to repent. That being said, neither can the would be Christian. Humans are incapable of taking the step towards repentance without the Holy Spirit working in them. In Augustine's words, which I cited Calvin quoting in the third chapter, "God promises not to act so that we may be able to will well, but to make us will

⁴³⁷ John 17:21 NRSV.

⁴³⁸ Matt. 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35, Luke 8:19-21.

⁴³⁹ 1 John 4:8 NRSV.

⁴⁴⁰ Acts 2:38-39 NRSV.

well.”⁴⁴¹ Sins can be forgiven only when an individual has, by repenting, opened him or herself up to be forgiven, and an individual can repent only when God leads that person to do so.

Marks of the Church

The Church is the community of the elect. Therefore, in searching for marks by which the Church may be known, it is important to determine how election is manifested. Since election is not limited to a particular class of people, there is great uncertainty in saying that someone is or is not part of the Church. Because, however, election frequently brings with it certain blessings from God that manifest themselves in this life, there are some characteristics which, in a person or in a community, will suggest election.

A community of the Church is based on and therefore must be related to God's work in the world, its unification in Jesus Christ, and its guidance by the Holy Spirit. The Church must be guided by the Holy Spirit, so communities are likely to acknowledge the authority of God in scripture and to use scripture as a means by which they are guided by God. That being said, it can't be ruled out that a community might be guided by the Spirit apart from scripture, as God's people Israel was for significant periods of time in its history.

The Church is obedient to God, so if a group is transgressing against God, than it likely is not part of the Church. However, part of the Church might be temporarily misled into straying from God and thus leave the Church, only later to reunify with the Church by repenting and again becoming obedient to God. That a community is not

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 111.

fulfilling the will of God does not necessarily mean that they are not part of the Church, but it may be said that a person or group following the will of God is, as brothers and sisters to Christ, part of the Church.⁴⁴²

To say that a community follows or does not follow the will of God is somewhat abstract. How is such obedience manifested? What commands must be followed? Christ describes loving God completely and loving neighbor as self as the greatest commandments,⁴⁴³ saying that “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁴⁴⁴ As the greatest commandments, these must certainly be followed. Considering the nature of these laws, it is not easy to see if a community is fulfilling them or not, or even to say if the elect are fulfilling them. After all, neither the apostles nor many of the great heroes of the Old Testament always fulfilled the command to love God with all their heart, soul and mind, nor did they always love each of their neighbors as themselves. Far from it. Therefore, it is extremely difficult with any certainty to describe a community as outside the bounds of the Church, but where love of God and neighbor are, certainly there too is the Church.

Because the sanctification of the elect is not immediately fully realized, the Church in this world and its constituent members are still fallen human beings, subject to a corrupted nature. The members of the Church are still prone to sin, to transgress against God's commandments even when they know better. Christian churches won't always, and, in fact, frequently fail to live up to their name. Though the Church of God is present, its light cannot always be easily seen through the darkness of human sinfulness.

⁴⁴² Luke 8:19-21.

⁴⁴³ Matthew 22:36-39.

⁴⁴⁴ Matthew 22:40.

Though Christ's apostles were and are part of Christ's Church, the signs of the Church were hardly present among them when Jesus was betrayed and handed over to be executed, except with those few steadfast believers who stood with him, even at the foot of the cross. An external Christian, viewing that community at that time, should see the marks of the Church displayed in the small community of followers who stood by Christ, and, recognizing the Church there, join them. This is not to say that the apostles were not part of the Church. In fact, Jesus promises their election during his ministry. It is merely to say that anyone, even this elect community trained directly by Christ, can fail to live up to its call and fail to exhibit the marks of its election.

This is not at all dissimilar to the two marks which Calvin assigns to the Church. Correct administration of the sacraments is part of obeying God's will. More than that though, the celebration of the sacraments is a reception of the gifts of God. These gifts are certainly important to the life of the Church. In the sacraments, God acts to build up the Church. Again, it cannot be said that election necessitates the sacraments, but where the sacraments are properly administered, the Church very likely exists. The preaching and receiving of the word of God is the same as the following of the commands of God. Just as the Gospel ought to be preached in accordance with God's commands in it, it ought to be received and practiced.

The commands of God, God's building up of the Church through the sacraments, and the preaching and reception of the Gospel are all intricately tied to love. In fact, without love, the Church cannot be in relationship with God, and therefore, cannot be the Church.⁴⁴⁵ If there is no love in a community, it is doubtful that any positive marks of the

⁴⁴⁵ 1 John 4:8.

Church will be able to be discerned there, since whatever positive obedience to God might otherwise exist there, it is worthless without love.⁴⁴⁶ Where true sacrificial love is, there God is certainly being obeyed, so God's Church is certainly present.⁴⁴⁷

Bounds of the Church

The Church is those who are called by God to faith, to exist in this community, and ultimately called to salvation. This calling is secret, impossible for any outsider to confidently know. It is known only to God and the individual (according to Calvin's theology). God's election can be unexpected, not necessarily leading to any outwardly visible signs. The Prophet Samuel was unable to discern which of Jesse's children God had chosen,⁴⁴⁸ and the criminal next to Christ at his crucifixion was promised salvation by Christ despite not having been part of the visible community of followers of Jesus, and despite his serious crimes.⁴⁴⁹ The bounds of the Church are not always comprehensible.

Since the Church extends beyond its communities presently on Earth, its full extent cannot be completely known. The Church includes many who have died, and many who still have not been born. Jesus says that he has "other sheep that do not belong to this fold" (John 10:16). Though he is, in speaking to his Jewish followers, probably referring to the Gentiles who will be added to the Church, it serves as a reminder to the visible Christian community not to presume its members to be the only ones called by Christ. Christians ought to be open to the possibility that God's Church is much larger than it appears to be.

⁴⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 13.

⁴⁴⁷ John 8:31, that "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples."

⁴⁴⁸ 1 Samuel 16.

⁴⁴⁹ Luke 23:39-43.

Though the bounds of the Church are difficult to determine with any certainty, there are some practical clues and lessons which may be used in tandem with the marks of the Church to guide a person seeking to find a Christian community. A person searching for the Church should seek a community where God is active, where his commandments and Gospel are heard and received, and where people abide in love. Without these things, a community may still be part of the Church, but if it is in active revolt against any one of them, in active revolt against God, it should not practically be considered to be part of the Church. A community without love, without the gospel, without the Holy Spirit, is not of practical use to those seeking God.

In cooperation between communities, different considerations can be made. Christian communities should certainly work together with all others in fulfilling God's will. Even if the doctrine of another community seems improper, if that community is willing to work to follow God, then other Christians should certainly work with it. After all, it was a Samaritan, a man following heterodox doctrine, whom Christ described as an example of love for neighbor.⁴⁵⁰ Certainly, regardless of the doctrine of others, and regardless even of their intentions and actions, Christians must treat others with love.

While always abiding in love, Christian communities must be careful neither to allow their community to be misled, nor to keep true servants of God outside the Church. The purpose of the Church must constantly be remembered and returned to. Unity in the Church is not just for unity's sake, but for the better service of God. The Church must always retain its allegiance to God, acknowledging Christ as its head, and looking to the Holy Spirit as a guide. In all things, the Church must abide in love. The highest

⁴⁵⁰ Luke 10:25-37.

commandment, without which all other service is ineffectual, is to love God.

In applying these concepts, Christian denominations today would be free to focus fully and freely on God, serving him and fulfilling his commandments. The important theological issues that have historically divided denominations must be seriously addressed – they should be acknowledged as important issues – rather than being, as too many are willing to do today, overlooked and ignored in the interest of greater apparent unity. Cooperation in doing these things that are broadly acknowledged to be the will of God, like feeding the hungry, supporting the sick, and working to alleviate the worst symptoms of extreme poverty in this country and abroad, provides a natural basis on which to work towards being, as the Apostle Paul writes, of one mind.⁴⁵¹ Of course, this all must be done with service to God in mind, and, as with all things, must be done with love.

⁴⁵¹ Philippians 2:2

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