



Pia Conspiratio
Calvin's Commitment to the
Unity of Christ's Church
by Lukas Vischer

Theology and Worship
Occasional Paper No. 20
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Pia Conspiratio

**Calvin's Commitment
to the Unity of Christ's Church**

Lukas Vischer

Table of Contents

Preface	5
Introduction	7
Part I	
Calvin on the Oneness and Unity of Christ's Church	11
Part II	
Calvin's Legacy and the Divisions of the Reformed Churches Today	33

Pia Conspiratio

Calvin's Commitment to the Unity of Christ's Church

PREFACE

Our Lord prayed, “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Why, then, is there so little urgent commitment to the visible unity of Christ's church? And why, among those whose commitment is clear, is there such pessimism about the ecumenical future?

It is an odd time to talk about the church's unity. Vague affirmations of “invisible, spiritual unity” are confronted by all-too-apparent disunity among and within the churches. The excess of denominations in North America—and their contentment with independent existence—is now exacerbated by division within denominations. Mainline denominations such as the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and evangelical denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, experience the pain of informal fragmentation and formal schism. The unity for which Christ prayed appears always to be trumped by doctrinal, ethical, and political disputes.

In the midst of twenty-first century division, it may seem odd to turn attention to a sixteenth-century call for unity. John Calvin is our forbear in the Reformed tradition, but his time was so different from our own that his words may seem out of place. Calvin could not have imagined (and would have been horrified by) modern denominationalism. However, his forceful proclamation that the unity of the church is a Christian imperative may be able to shake us out of easy acquiescence to “the way things are.” Calvin's witness may turn our attention away from sociological reality toward the gospel's claims on our life together.

Lukas Vischer's *Pia Conspiratio: Calvin's Commitment to the Unity of Christ's Church* gathers together some of Calvin's statements about unity, and provides an interpretive framework for understanding Calvin, the Reformed tradition, and our own situation. Dr. Vischer has served the church with distinction for more than fifty years. Following studies at Basel, Strasbourg, Göttingen, and Oxford, and some years as a pastor, he began work with the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in the early 1960s, serving as its director from 1965-1979. He also served as moderator of the Theology Department of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches from 1982-1989. In "retirement," he continues to serve the church as program director of the John Knox International Reformed Centre in Geneva.

The Office of Theology and Worship believes that *Pia Conspiratio* is a significant contribution to the church's current struggles over the nature of the church and the character of ecclesial unity. We are pleased to make Lukas Vischer's work available to a wider audience within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Joseph D. Small
Director, Theology Worship and Education
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

© 2007 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
A Corporation, on behalf of the Office
of Theology Worship and Education.
All rights reserved.

Additional copies available at \$3.00 each
(\$2.00 each for 10 or more copies mailed
to the same address) from Presbyterian
Distribution Service (PDS) by calling
800-524-2612. Request PDS #21162-07-001.

To offer comments and responses to
Pia Conspiratio, contact:

Office of Theology Worship
and Education
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202-1396
Tel: 502-569-5334
E-mail: pfrankli@ctr.pcusa.org

Introduction

What help can Calvin's legacy give us as we confront the many divisions marking the Reformed churches today?

The situation in the Reformed churches today is anything but encouraging. In recent decades Christians of the Reformed tradition have been energetically engaged in the ecumenical movement among the churches; they were in the forefront of efforts to establish the World Council of Churches. Yet at the same time, the Reformed churches have continued the previous trend and have become more and more divided. The churches have grown. In many countries the number of church members has doubled, tripled, in some places even quadrupled, but they have not been able to preserve the "bond of unity" and have allowed themselves to be driven apart, often for quite insignificant reasons.

This state of affairs is not always fully acknowledged by members of the Reformed tradition. It is ignored or brushed aside as though this were simply a regrettable but ultimately unimportant aspect. Theologians elaborate their vision of the church, unperturbed by the realities of the churches' existence, and develop an image of the church that is far removed from the real picture. (1) Shortcomings are played down by the reminder that the Reformed tradition, in contrast to other traditions, is deeply attached to the principle of constant reform, and considers itself with all its failings not only as imperfect, but as provisional. That, of course, leaves the question of how this reform is to take place. Is such a process really going on? On what basis and by what means can it be brought about?

The first step has to be a realistic perception of the situation. A survey of the Reformed churches around the world has recently been produced (2) and the picture is both impressive and dismaying. A reading of it shows that there are hardly any countries without a Reformed presence, but also that there are almost none where there is only one Reformed church. The book contains information about some 750 churches in all. Many of them are small and inconspicuous, many are basically open to contacts with other churches, but in many cases the divisions run deep. At all events, the survey shows that communication among the Reformed churches is in a parlous state. Many churches simply go their own way with superb indifference.

These divisions hamper the churches' common witness. The common basis is not sufficient to allow them to speak as one communion on the national, let alone the international scene, so the Reformed voice remains diffuse. We do, of course, have the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, but there are also other international associations of Reformed churches besides the Alliance and, it has to be said, all these associations are weak instruments. The limited resources at their disposal are not sufficient to enable them effectively to coordinate dialogue and exchange. The churches in each country are essentially left to their own devices, which makes it much more difficult for them to participate in ecumenical dialogue and to tackle the great global issues of our times.

How has this sorry state of affairs come about? How was it possible for the Reformed churches in the course of their history, but especially in recent times, to grow away from one another in this way? Does the reason lie in the nature of the Reformed tradition, perhaps even in the legacy of Calvin himself? Or is this a distortion of an approach that is basically sound? If so, might it not then be

helpful to refer back directly to Calvin and Calvin's theology and praxis?

This is the question I shall explore here. To set the tone and lead us into the theme, the first part of the study comprises a selection of quotations from Calvin's works—the *Institutes*—but also his occasional writings, commentaries, sermons, and letters. They show how seriously Calvin took the call to unity of the body of Christ, of which he speaks again and again. True, isolated quotations give a one-sided picture so that other aspects which deserve attention recede into the background. That being said, the series of quotations which could easily be extended makes it clear how firmly Calvin understood the church as God-given, reconciled fellowship.

The second part of the study is an attempt to outline Calvin's understanding of the church and reflect on its significance for the church today.

I.

Calvin

on the Oneness and Unity

of Christ's Church

Called to One Inheritance

There is one body. Paul proceeds to show more fully in how complete a manner Christians ought to be united. The union ought to be such that we shall form one body and one soul. These words denote the whole human being. We ought to be united, not in part only, but in body and soul. He supports this by a powerful argument, as you have been called in one hope of your calling. We are called to one inheritance and one life; and hence it follows, that we cannot obtain eternal life without living in mutual harmony in this world. One divine invitation being addressed to all, they ought to be united in the same profession of faith, and to render every kind of assistance to each other. Oh, were this thought deeply impressed upon our minds, that we are subject to a law which no more permits the children of God to differ among themselves than the kingdom of heaven to be divided, how earnestly should we cultivate brotherly kindness! How should we dread every kind of animosity, if we duly reflected that all who separate us from brethren, estrange us from the kingdom of God! And yet, strangely enough, while we forget the duties which brethren owe to each other, we go on boasting that we are the sons of God. Let us learn from Paul, that none are at all fit for that inheritance who are not one body and one spirit!

Commentary on the epistle to the Ephesians, 4,4
transl. Rev. William Pringle, Edinburgh, 1854, p. 268

CO 51, 190-191 (1548)

The Church—Mother of Believers

But as our present design is to treat of the visible church, we may learn even from the title of mother, how useful and even necessary it is for us to know her; since there is no other way of entrance into life, unless we are conceived by her, born of her, nourished at her breasts, and continually preserved under her care and government till we are divested of this mortal flesh and ‘become like angels’.

Institutes 4.1.4

transl. John Allen, London, 1838, p. 196

Christ cannot be divided

Each time we read the word *one*, let us be reminded that it is used emphatically. Christ cannot be divided. Faith cannot be rent. There are not various baptisms, but one which is common to all. God cannot be torn into different parts. It cannot but be our duty to cherish holy unity which is bound by so many ties. Faith and baptism, and God the Father and Christ, ought to unite us, so as almost to become one human being.

Commentary on the epistle to the Ephesians, 4,5

transl. Rev. William Pringle, Edinburgh, 1854, p. 269

CO 51, 191

Unity—to the Glory of God

Romans 15,6. The sum of his prayer is, that he would bring their minds to real unanimity, and make them truly united among themselves: he also shows at the same time what is the bond of unity, for he wished them to agree according to Christ Jesus. Miserable indeed is the union which is unconnected with God and that is unconnected with God which alienates us from his truth. And that he might recommend to us an agreement in Christ, he teaches us how necessary it is: for God is not truly glorified by us, unless the hearts of all agree in giving him praise. There is then no reason for anybody to boast that he will give glory to God after his own manner; for the unity of his servants is so much esteemed by God, that he will not have his glory sounded forth amidst discords and contentions. This one consideration ought to be sufficient to check the wanton rage for contention and quarrelling, which at this possesses minds of many.

Romans 15, 7. He returns to his exhortation, and to strengthen this he still retains the example of Christ. For he, having received, not one or two of us, but all together, has thus connected us, so that we ought to cherish one another, if we would indeed continue in his bosom. Only thus then shall we confirm our calling, that is, if we separate not ourselves from those whom the Lord has bound together. The words, *to the glory of God*, may be applied to us only, or to Christ, or to him and us: of the last I mostly approve, and according to this import; - as Christ has made known the glory of his Father in receiving us into favour when we stood in need of mercy; so it behoves us, in order to make known the glory of the same God, to establish and confirm this union which we have in Christ.

Commentary on the Epistle of the Apostle Paul
to the Romans
transl. Rev. John Owen, Edinburgh, 1849,
pp. 518-519

CO 49, 272

Pia Conspiratio

If we want to prove our obedience to our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, then we must bind ourselves in a *pia conspiratio* and cultivate peace among ourselves. What? Should not the enemy, the devil himself, drive us to be united with one another?

Preface to the Catechism and the Confession of Faith

CO 5, 321 (1538)

Original text

Quod si imperatori Christo nostra obsequia approbare cupimus, piam inter nos conspirationem ineamus necesse est, ac mutuam pacem foveamus, quam suis non commendat modo, sed etiam inspirat. Quid? An non hostis quoque ipse aculeos nobis ad syncretismum agendum admovere debet?

The literal translation of *conspiratio* is ‘breathing together’. The term is normally used to designate ‘accord’ or ‘harmony’. For Calvin it has no doubt a deeper meaning: the Christian community shares in the same Spirit. Calvin uses the term possibly as the equivalent of the Greek *sympnoia* which occurs several times in the writings of Basil the Great (+379), e.g. Ep.164,1, PG 32, 636; Ep. 222, PG 32, 820A.

One and the Same Church throughout the World

And there shall be one fold and one shepherd. That is, that all the children of God may be gathered and united into one body; as we acknowledge that there is one holy universal Church, and there must be one body with one head. There is one God, says Paul, one faith, one baptism. Therefore we ought to be one, as we are called into one hope (Eph.4,5). Now though this flock appears to be divided into different folds, yet they are kept within enclosures which are common to all believers who are scattered throughout the whole world: because the same word is preached to all, they use the same sacraments, they have the same order of prayer, and everything that belongs to the profession of faith.

Commentary on the Gospel according to John, 10,16
transl. Rev. William Pringle, Edinburgh, 1847, vol. I, p.
406

CO 47, 387

The Unity of the Church—Witness of Reconciliation in a World Torn Apart

That all may be one. He again lays down the end of our happiness as consisting in unity, and justly; for the ruin of the human race is, that, having been alienated from God, it is also broken and scattered in itself. The restoration of it, therefore, on the contrary, consists in its being properly united in one body, as Paul declares the perfection of the Church to consist in believers being joined together in one spirit, and says that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors, were given, that they might edify and restore the body of Christ, till it came to the unity of faith; and therefore he exhorts believers to grow into Christ, who is the head, from whom the whole body joined together, and connected by every bond of supply, according to the operation in the measure of every part, makes increase of it to edification. Wherefore, whenever Christ speaks about unity, let us remember how basely and shockingly, when separated from him, the world is scattered; and, next, let us learn that the commencement of a blessed life is, that we be all governed, and that we all live, by the Spirit of Christ alone.

Commentary on the Gospel according to John, 17,21
transl. Rev. William Pringle, Edinburgh, 1847, vol. II,
p. 183

CO 47, 387

The Church's life comes from Resurrections

The meaning briefly is, that though the Church differed nothing for a time from a dead man, or at least from one that is maimed, no despair ought to be entertained, for the Lord sometimes raises up his people, as though raised the dead from the grave: and this fact ought to be carefully notices, for as soon as the Church does not shine forth, we think that it is wholly extinct and destroyed. But the Church is so preserved in the world, that it sometimes rises again from death: in short, the preservation of the Church, almost every day, is accompanied with many miracles. But we ought to bear in mind, that the life of the Church is not without a resurrection, nay, it is not without many resurrections, if the expression be allowed.

Commentary on Micah 4,6

*transl. In: Commentaries on the twelve minor prophets,
transl. Rev. John Owen, vol. III: Jonab, Micah, Nabum,
Edinburgh, 1847, p. 275*

CO 43, 353

The Spirit Gathers God's People

For at the present day the Church is not far from despair, being plundered, scattered, and everywhere crushed and trodden under foot. What must be done in straits so numerous and so distressing? We ought to lay hold of these promises, so as to believe that still God will preserve the Church. To whatever extent the body may be torn, shivered into fragments and scattered, still by his Spirit he will easily unite the members, and will never allow the remembering and the calling on his name to perish. Out of those fragments which are now broken and scattered, the Lord will unite and assemble the people. Those whom he joins together in one spirit, though widely separated from each other, he can easily collect into one body. Although therefore we see the nation diminished in numbers, and some of its members cut off, yet some present will be offered by it to the Lord.

Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, 18,7
transl. William Pringle, vol. II, 1851, p. 44

CO 36, 326

The Lord's Supper—Bond of Love

And while this must be general in every part of our life, it must be specially so in respect of charity, which is, above all other virtues, recommended to us in this sacrament: for which reason it is called the bond of charity. For as the bread which is there sanctified for the common use of all, is composed of several grains so mixed together that they cannot be distinguished from each other, so ought we to be united together in indissoluble friendship. Moreover, we all receive there one body of Christ. If then we have strife and discord among ourselves, it is not owing to us that Christ Jesus is not rent in pieces, and we are therefore guilty of sacrilege, as if we had done it. We must not, then, on any account, presume to approach if we bear hatred or rancour against any man living, and especially any Christian who is in the unity of the Church.

Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper

transl. Henry Beveridge, vol. II, Edinburgh, 1849, p.177

CO 5, 443 (1541)

God grants forgiveness in the Communion of the Church

Three things are here to be observed. First, whatever be the holiness which the children of God possess, it is always under the condition, that so long as they dwell in a mortal body, they cannot stand before God without forgiveness of sins.

Secondly, this benefit is so peculiar to the Church, that we cannot enjoy it unless we continue in the communion of the Church.

Thirdly, it is dispensed to us by the ministers and pastors of the Church, either in the preaching of the Gospel or in the administration of the sacraments, and herein is especially manifested the power of the keys, which the Lord has bestowed on the company of the faithful. *Accordingly, let each of us consider it to be his duty to seek forgiveness only where God has placed it.*

Institutes 4.1.22

Unity is a Precious Good—which needs to be respected

For we should not lightly separate ourselves from those with whom the Lord has united us in fellowship in his work. Especially I ask of you that, as you hold fast to the truth in which you have hitherto been so steadfast, you do not give the appearance that you are intentionally seeking disunion with those whose truth you cannot accept, for you and all the good must respect them as the vanguard among Christ's servants. Great God, what does this bring back? In the past we had to separate ourselves from servants of Christ with a feeling no different than if our heart were being torn from our body. And now it should be like a game to cut off not just any member, but the most important vital organ from our communion.

Calvin in a letter from Strasbourg to André Zébedée,
19th May 1539

CO 10/2, 346-347

The Violation of Good Order is not Reason enough to Separate

Nothing, most beloved brethren, has caused me greater sorrow, since those disturbances which had so sadly scattered and almost entirely overthrown your Church, than when I understood your strivings and contentions with those ministers who succeeded us. For although the disorders which were inseparably connected with their first arrival among you, might with good reason prove offensive to you; whatever may have given the occasion, I cannot hear without great and intense horror that any schism should settle down within the Church.....

Now, therefore, when, contrary to my expectation, I have heard that the reconciliation between your pastors and the neighbouring churches, having been confirmed also by Farel and myself, was not found to be sufficient for binding you together in sincere and friendly affection, and by the tie of a lawful connection with your pastors, to whom the care of your souls is committed, I felt myself compelled to write to you, that I might endeavour, so far as lay in me, to find a medicine for this disease.... This, however, is my earnest wish concerning those who in some measure fulfil the duty of pastors, that they may be tolerant, that you also may conduct yourselves towards them in a Christian spirit, and with this view that you may greater account of that which may be due by you to others, than what others owe to yourselves.

Calvin writing from Strasbourg to the community in Geneva, on 25th June 1539
transl. David Constable. In: Selected Works of John Calvin. Tracts and Letters. Eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet. Vol 4, Letters part 1, p. 142 f, Grand Rapids, 1954 (reprint)

CO 10/2, 351-352

The Foundation is sufficient for Maintaining the Unity of the Church

This, in brief, was the sum of our discussions: that among Christians there ought to be so great a dislike of schism, as that they may always avoid it so far it lies in their power. That there ought to prevail among them such a reverence for the ministry of the word and of the sacraments, that wherever they perceive these things to be, there they may consider the Church to exist. Whenever therefore it happens, by the Lord's permission, that the Church is administered by pastors, whatever kind of persons they may be, if we see there the marks of the Church, it will be better not to break the unity. Nor need it be any hindrance that some points of doctrine are not quite so pure, seeing that there is scarcely any Church which does not retain some remnants of former ignorance. It is sufficient for us if the doctrine on which the Church of God is founded be recognised, and maintain its place.

Calvin to Farel, 24th October 1538
transl. David Constable. In: Selected Works of John Calvin. Tracts and Letters. Eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet. Vol 4, Letters part 1, p. 101 f, Grand Rapids, 1954 (reprint)
CO 10/2, 275

Exhortation to the Refugee Congregation at Frankfurt

This indeed grievously afflicts me and is highly absurd, that discord is springing up among brethren who are for the same faith exiles and fugitives from their country; and for a cause indeed which in your dispersion should like a sacred bond have held you closely united. For in this sad and wretched calamity, what could you do better, torn as you were from the bosom of your country, than adopt a church which received into its maternal bosom, those who were connected with you in minds and language? Now, on the contrary, that some of you should be stirring up contentions about forms of prayer and ceremonies, as if you were at ease and in a season of tranquillity, and thus throwing an obstacle in the way of your coalescing in one body of worshippers, this is really to unreasonable. Nor do I blame the firmness of those who, even to fight in a just cause, are unwillingly dragged into the contest, but I condemn, and with justice, that stubbornness which clogs and retards holy efforts to form a church. Though in indifferent matters, such as external rites, I shew myself indulgent and pliable, at the same time, I do not deem it expedient always to comply with the foolish captiousness of those who will not give up a single point of their usual routine. In the Anglican liturgy, such as you describe it to me, I see that there were many silly things that might be tolerated. By this phrase I mean that it did not possess that purity which was to be desired. The faults, however, which could not straightway be corrected on the first day, if there lurked under them no manifest impiety, were to be endured for a time.

Calvin, in a letter on 18th January 1555
*transl. Marcus Robert Gilchrist. In: Selected Works of
John Calvin, Tracts and Letters. Eds. Henry Beveridge
and Jules Bonnet. Vol 6, Letters part 3, p. 117 f, Grand
Rapids, 1954 CO 15, 393-394*

The Duty to Intervene for the sake of Peace and Unity

Letter of the “Venerable Compagnie des Pasteurs de Genève” to the government of Neuchâtel on 29th September 1541

Most worthy Sirs! As we have heard that your church is still not free of the troubles and disputes which recently arose within it, we have considered it our duty to send a member of our company of pastors to you offering his services to you in this affair on due occasion; for our vocation and our ministry require us to help to suppress the discord which the devil has fomented among you. Therefore we have decided to send our beloved brother to you...We pray you, worthy sirs, to listen kindly to what he will say to you in the name of our company. We do this in obedience to our conscience, as is our duty in our service of the word which requires, indeed compels us to intervene in this matter, considering that it is a church matter and so concerns us too, as we are all members of one body...

Jean Calvin, Aimé Champereau, Jacques Bernard

Personal Instruction for the delegate Pierre Viret

....He shall excuse us for intervening in this matter by explaining that this is the duty of our ministry. For in the communion of saints it is so that neighbouring churches are mutually concerned for one another's preservation...

The Usefulness of Regular Exchange among Pastors

Meanwhile bad news is being spread here: the brethren in the neighbouring territory have been forbidden to assemble to discuss the Scriptures as they have been wont to do.These gatherings have been held to the greatest benefit and now the Council forbids them without explanation. Even if tradition, which is often a good school-master, has no weight with us, I urge you to consider the matter among yourselves. You will certainly find that the custom which is being abandoned is not only useful but actually essential.... The colloquies are the best bond with which to preserve the unity of doctrine for, if there is no consultation, each can teach what he pleases. Isolation leads to great freedom. He who comes to the assembly of brethren but once every quarter-year, for the rest of the time will interpret all kinds of things for himself without fear of the judgement and knowledge of others.

Calvin in a letter to Wolfgang Müsli on 22 October 1549,
after the decision of the government in Berne to forbid
regular meetings of the pastors in the Bernese territory
near Geneva

CO 13, 433

Coming together to work out a Doctrinal Agreement

Your opinion, most distinguished sir, is indeed just and wise, that in the present disordered condition of the Church, no remedy can be devised more suitable than if a general meeting were held of the devout and the prudent, of those properly exercised in the school of God, to confess their common mind on the doctrine of holiness....Yet the Lord, as he has done even from the beginning of the world, will preserve in a miraculous manner, and in a way unknown to us, the unity of a pure faith from being destroyed by the dissensions of men. And those whom he has placed on his watch-tower he wishes least of all to be inactive, seeing that he has appointed them to be his ministers, through whose labours he may preserve from all corruption sound doctrine in the Church, and transmit it safe to posterity. Especially, most illustrious Archbishop, it is necessary for you, in proportion to the distinguished position you occupy, to turn your attention as you are doing towards this object.... This other thing also is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, viz., that the churches are so divided, that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute amongst us, far less that Christian intercourse which all make a profession of, but few sincerely practise.... Thus is it that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding. So much does this concern me, that, if I could be of any service, I would not grudge to cross even ten seas, if need be, on account of it. If it were but a question regarding the rendering of assistance to the kingdom of England, such a motive would at present be to me a sufficiently just one. Now, seeing that a serious and properly adjusted agreement between men of learning upon the rule of Scripture is still a desideratum, by means of which churches, though divided on other questions, might be made to unite, I think it right for me at

whatever cost of toil and trouble, to seek to obtain this object. But I hope my own insignificance will cause me to be passed by.

Calvin responding at the end of April 1552 to a proposal made on 20th March 1552 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer
transl. David Constable. In: Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters. Eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet. Vol 5, Letters part 2, p. 345 f Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1954 (reprint)

CO 14, 312-314, cf Cranmer's letter CO 14, 306

Intercession for the Church

But since we are not instructed, that every individual should appropriate him (God) to himself exclusively as his father, but rather that we should all in common call him Our Father; we are thereby admonished how strong a fraternal affection ought to prevail between us, who, by the same privilege of mercy and free grace, are equally the children of such a father ... Now if we desire, as we ought, to exert ourselves for our mutual assistance, there is nothing in which we can better promote the interests of our brethren, than by commending them to the providential care of our most benevolent Father, with whose mercy and favour no other want can be experienced. And, indeed, this is a debt which we owe to our Father himself. For as he who truly and cordially loves any father of a family, feels likewise a love and friendship for his whole household; in the same manner, our zeal and affection towards this heavenly Father must be shown towards his people, his family, his inheritance, whom has dignified with the honourable appellation of the 'fullness' of his only begotten Son. Let a Christian then regulate his prayers by this rule, that they be common, and comprehend all who are his brethren in Christ; and not only those whom he at present sees and knows to be such, but all men in the world; respecting whom, what God has determined is beyond our knowledge; only that to wish and hope the best concerning them, is equally the dictate of piety and humanity. It becomes us, however, to exercise a peculiar and superior affection 'unto them who are of the household of faith'; whom the apostle has in every case recommended to our particular regards (Gal. 6,10). In a word, all our prayers ought to be such, as to respect that community which our Lord has established in his kingdom and in his family.

The Melody of Common Prayer

Now from this we are to understand the general doctrine that before we can be ready to pray as we ought we must have this fellowship which God commands us, and this union: for he does not want to hear each one of us separately, but wants there to be a melody resounding in the mouths of all, even if each one speaks, even if each be in his separate place and we pray to God in secret, nevertheless if our accord is to reach to heaven then we must all of us say in love and in truth, Our Father: the word Our must so bind us and unite us that there is but one voice, as though there were but one heart and one spirit....

All enmities must be set aside among us: for so long as we are divided, behold, God also will reject us for he will receive none save those who are members of his Son: and we cannot be members of Jesus Christ except we be governed by his Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of peace and union, as we have said....

And when we see that there is something which may prevent us from praying to God, let us be sure that it is the devil who places barriers before us, and let us flee it like the deadly plague. And this is another point of which we should take good note. For we shall see many who ask nothing better than to contend with one another in disputes and controversies as though the word of God were made to separate us one from the other. We have already said that the right purpose of the gospel is to call us to God, that we may be conjoined and united in our prayers and requests. Now if those engaged in contentious disputes pray in this fashion, and rise up against one another, they seek with all that is in them to destroy God's glory, they pervert all good doctrine, they overturn God's intention and battle against it to overthrow it. Therefore they should

not expect their prayers to be answered, because there is none of the union and concord with which we should reach out to God through our Lord Jesus Christ and in his name.

Sermon XVI on the first Letter to Timothy 2, 8

CO53, 191-192

II.

Calvin's Legacy and the Divisions of the Reformed Churches Today

The one church resurrected to new life

In the disputes for and against the Reformation, the representatives of Rome were fond of arguing that the reformers were in the wrong, if for no other reason than that the one body of Christ was being torn apart by their preaching. The debate between Cardinal Jacopo Sadolet and Calvin in the year 1539 centred largely on this question. Sadolet's carefully prepared treatise met with a wide echo, embarrassing the Geneva Council. The latter asked Calvin, whom it had required to leave the city not so long before, to prepare a reply. Calvin completed the task in a few days.

The Reformation was by no means the abandonment of the true church, he countered, but, on the contrary, the restoration of its unity. The church's original face had become distorted in the course of history. Now the miracle had happened. God had awakened the church to new life. Calvin saw God himself at work in the Reformation. God's people has existed at all times. However corrupted much had become under the rule of the papacy there had still always been believers. But now God had caused his Word to break in and stir hearts in a new way. Calvin was fond of the image of a "resurrection" of the church. "Today again," he says in more than one place, "God has infused new life into his church, as if the bones of a skeleton were once again clothed in flesh." (3)

The Reformation is quite simply the endeavour to assemble the people of God anew under the “banner of Christ.”

“As to the charge of forsaking the Church, which they were wont to bring against me, there is nothing of which my conscience accuses me, unless, indeed, he is to be considered a deserter, who, seeing the soldiers routed and scattered, and abandoning the ranks, raises the leader’s standard and recalls them to their posts....In order to bring them together when thus scattered, I raised not a foreign standard, but that noble banner of thine whom we must follow, if we would be classed among thy people....On this grievous tumults arose, and the contest blazed and issued in disruption.”

Basically the task is clear. But how is the borderline to be drawn between *vera* and *falsa ecclesia*? Calvin knows that ultimately it is God himself who will decide. His reply to Sadolet gives us some idea of the inner struggle that the impending split must have cost him. His argument concludes in the form of a prayer.

“With whom the blame rests it is for thee, O Lord, to decide. Always, both by word and deed, have I protested how eager I was for unity. Mine, however, was a unity of the Church, which should begin with thee and end with thee. For as oft as thou didst recommend to us peace and concord, thou, at the same time, didst show that thou wert the only bond for preserving it.” (4)

Calvin belonged to the second generation of reformers. The separation into two camps was the situation he met with from the start; the differences had become accentuated since the beginning of the Reformation. When he began his work the time was already gone for theses, manifestos, and programmes of reform that could be negotiated. The true church had to be made manifest. Calvin assumed that God had given him this mission and, just as God’s hand had touched Calvin’s heart, so Calvin wanted it to touch the hearts of all the waverers. Obedience to Christ demanded an unequivocal decision. As a reformer Calvin had something of

the clarity of the Prophet Elijah. Those who wanted to be true “*amateurs du Christ*” could not “go limping with two different opinions” (1 Kings 18:21), they had to make room for the true church.

This was also the crux of the matter in the encounters with the Roman adversary. For him the only point of these was to bring God’s Word to bear. In the early years of his activities Calvin accepted conversations in which the differences between the “two fronts” were negotiated: in Frankfurt (1539), in Hagenau (1540), in Worms (1541) and—as a delegate of the city of Strasbourg—in Regensburg (1541). (5) Even though he was under no illusions that an agreement could be reached—the impatience that can be detected in his letters is evidence enough (6)—every opportunity had to be taken to work through the controversy about the truth.

With the start of the Council of Trent in 1546 the opportunities for direct conversations became rarer. The consolidation of the confessions had become inevitable, the fronts became entrenched. To Calvin’s eyes it was increasingly obvious that the papal church had become the opposite of the church but, even then, he continued to defend the view that traces of the true church could still be seen in the church of Rome. (7)

He devoted himself more and more exclusively to the task of giving shape to the church of the Word. His work in Geneva was sustained by the passionate concern that all areas of life should be subject to God’s word—through preaching, pastoral activity, and church discipline, and through the introduction of new church orders. Studying Calvin’s legacy one is constantly surprised by the sovereignty and shrewdness of his judgement. His sermons, commentaries, personal interventions in messages and letters are

full of unexpected insights and perspectives. Calvin also saw it as part of his duty to take issue with positions and movements that seemed counter to the biblical message. Everything that jeopardised the work of the Reformation, not just the innovations from Rome, but also the errors of the Baptists, the Spiritualists and the anti-Trinitarians, had to be kept out of the church. The rigour with which he applied himself to this task is impressive but, as we know, it also led to excesses. We need not go into these in detail here, but the picture would be incomplete without mentioning them. Calvin could in fact fall a victim of his own rigour. (8)

The unification of the Reformation churches

Besides the concern to define the church, Calvin's work was also characterised by his commitment to church unity. He was tireless in his efforts to resolve disputes in the Reformation churches. Wherever his help was requested, he saw it as his natural duty to offer his services, and he was certainly not afraid of being accused of interfering in matters that were none of his business. "We do this in obedience to our conscience, as our duty in the service of the Word." (9) In this spirit, in 1541, for example, he sent a delegation to Neuchâtel to calm the unrest that had broken out there. (10) The disputes in the refugee congregation in Frankfurt were an object of his concern over many years. He wrote numerous letters trying to reach a settlement and, in 1556, he travelled to Frankfurt in person to put an end to the conflict still smouldering there. (11)

However, his concern reached far beyond the unity of the local church. Efforts for agreement among the churches of the Reformation camp run like a red thread through all the years of his activity in theology and the church. He sought to overcome the controversies within the evangelical churches through creative

proposals and to formulate theologically sound agreements. His “Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper” is a masterpiece and remains to this day a model for what genuine “ecumenical theology” can achieve. (12) Calvin differed from Martin Bucer in his efforts for consensus. He did not hold with compromises and distrusted euphemistic formulations. In his view, genuine agreement had to lead beyond the positions in the dispute; both partners had to be able to recognize themselves in the consensus, but neither should emerge as winner. Only a new formulation could bring about a lasting agreement. (13)

Using the language of his time, Calvin described the task as being to create a “syncretism” among the different Reformation churches. (14) What is meant is not the fusion of churches but the bringing together of churches to form a whole. Instead of living and working alongside or in opposition to one another they should recognise and support each other. Many examples of his efforts in this direction could be given, for Calvin tirelessly defended the superior interest of the Reformation movement as a whole. (15) “On the one God and the true way of serving him,” he writes at one point, “on the corruption of human nature, on the blessing of grace, on the path to attain righteousness, on the ministry and efficacy of Christ, on repentance and its effects, on faith which gives us the certainty of salvation, on prayer to God and all other essential points the same teaching is proclaimed among us..It would be strange indeed if Christ who is our peace, who has put an end to all strife and obtained for us God’s heavenly mercy, did not also make us to dwell in brotherly peace on earth.” (16)

Calvin’s advice was widely sought, his powerful personality was a unifying factor in itself. That the Reformation churches were able to establish themselves owes much to his thinking and his activities.

Again and again he tried to quench the flames of disagreement and keep the way open for dialogue (17), though in doing so he was made painfully aware of certain limits. Only with the church in Zurich, through the *consensus tigurinus*, did an agreement prove possible (1545). The wider hope of a tie with the Lutheran Reformation remained unfulfilled. The last years of his life were overshadowed by the never-ending controversy with the stout Lutheran Joachim Westphal, which consolidated the differences between the two Reformation approaches for an indefinite future. (18)

The Church—Mother of the faithful

Calvin's understanding of the church is deeply rooted in his understanding of God and God's plan of salvation for humankind. The church is founded in God from time immemorial. Belief in the triune God leads inevitably to the church. The God who created the world and all that is therein, the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ and brings salvation and redemption is now at work in the power of the Spirit through the Word in the church, that is, in the people who listen to his Word and give him the glory. At all times God has manifested his grace by choosing a people for himself. No age has been without experience of his mercy. (19) Since the advent of Christ the church has become the place of his mercy.

The church is not the result of human initiative. It is instituted by God. It is not we who decide to join the church, rather we are made part of God's people. Calvin speaks of the church as mother on several occasions. Right at the start of Book IV of the Institutes the title of the first chapter reads: "The True Church with Which as Mother of All the Godly we must Keep Communion" and the image is developed further in the body of the text: "...there is no other

means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels” (Inst. 4.1.4).

The church is the communion of those who adhere in faith to Christ, and for that very reason it is unthinkable that there should be more than one church. Just as Christ is one, so too the church is one. “Hence the Church is called Catholic or Universal for two or three cannot be invented without dividing Christ . . . All the elect of God are so joined together in Christ, that as they depend on one head, so they are as it were compacted into one body, being knit together like its different members; made truly one by living together under the same Spirit of God in one faith, hope and charity, called not only to the same inheritance of eternal life, but to participation in one God and Christ” (Inst. 4.1.2).

It is for us then to accept this gift of the one church, and to preserve and care for it. Everything must be done to ensure that God’s initiative is respected, for God has done all that is necessary for his Word to be heard.

“God, in accommodation to our infirmity, has added such helps, and secured the effectual preaching of the gospel by depositing this treasure with the Church. He has appointed pastors and teachers, by whose lips he might edify his people; he has invested them with authority, and, in short, omitted nothing that might conduce to holy consent in the faith, and to right order” (Inst. 4.1.1).

For human beings to take the church under their own government is to deny the nature of the church. The church then becomes a *falsa ecclesia*, as happened through the wilfulness and thirst for power of the western church, so that the church became

permeated through and through with human considerations and ordinances. The same happens, however, as a result of movements that break away from the church in order to form *new* churches. Something devised by human beings cannot be other than *falsa ecclesia*. Calvin invokes the example of the prophets who “did not form new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which they might have separate sacrifices” (Inst. 4.1.18).

By what, then, can the true church be discerned? Calvin’s answer to this was always the same—by its heeding of God’s word. What makes the church the church is the preaching of the word, so it is essential that this spring should flow abundantly. Where the word is preached and the sacraments are observed, the church is there. The word may get lost, but where preaching effectively has a “fixed abode” it will bear fruit. “But be this as it may, when the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard, and the sacraments not neglected, there for the time the face of the church appears without deception or ambiguity and no man may with impunity spurn her authority or reject her admonition, or resist her counsels, or make sport of her censures, far less revolt from her and violate her unity” (Inst. 4.1.10). It is essential that the proclamation of the word through preaching and sacrament should retain a firm place in the life of the church. Calvin therefore tirelessly urged regular preaching of the word; he also said on many occasions that the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated more frequently, preferably at every service. Referring to Acts 2:42 he says: “Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the supper and alms. We may gather from Paul that this was the order observed by the Corinthians” (Inst. 4.17. 44). (20)

The invisible and the visible church

“To God alone must be left the knowledge of his church of which his secret election forms the foundation” (Inst. 4.1.2). The church can and must be regarded from two different standpoints. To the extent that it is God’s people of the elect it is hidden from our knowledge and judgement. It is God’s secret. As the instrument of grace instituted by God, however, it is visible; it is the communion of all those on this earth who confess Jesus Christ. However much Calvin emphasises God’s secret election, he does not for all that distinguish between two churches, one invisible, the other visible. It is one and the same church. He stresses emphatically that those who have come to believe must hold fast to the visible community of all believers. The two standpoints cannot be played off against one another. God has bound up his salvation with the visible community of the church. Therefore, no one can be sure of belonging to the true church if he or she is not part of its visible earthly fellowship.

Calvin uses many different turns of phrase to stress the importance of belonging to the visible church. Those who cut the ties that bind them into the church and its worship run an immeasurable risk, for they place their salvation at stake. “Abandonment of the Church is always fatal”, says Calvin. (Inst. 4.1.4). Conversely, as we participate in the communion of the church we are strengthened in our faith and certainty of being part of God’s salvation. On the subject of forgiveness in particular, Calvin’s observations go far.

“Three things are here to be observed. First, Whatever be the holiness which the children of God possess, it is always under the condition, that so long as they dwell in a mortal body, they cannot stand before God without forgiveness of sins. Secondly, This benefit is so peculiar to the Church, that we cannot enjoy it unless we continue in the communion

of the Church. Thirdly, It is dispensed to us by the ministers and pastors of the Church, either in the preaching of the Gospel or the administration of the Sacrament, and herein is especially manifested the power of the keys, which the Lord has bestowed on the company of the faithful. Accordingly, let each of us consider it to be his duty to seek forgiveness of sins only where the Lord has placed it" (Inst. 4.1.22).

Discipline and restraint

There is a degree of tension running through Calvin's understanding of the church. On the one hand, he passionately defends the view that the true church must take visible form, and he does not stop at half-measures. The preaching of the pure gospel must be safeguarded. The sacraments are to be celebrated according to Scripture. A community must emerge in which the image of the true church can be discerned. It is not enough to confess God's gospel in the secret of the heart. Its truth must blaze forth—hence his at times almost merciless disagreement with the Nicodemites in France. The church cannot be other than a visible communion and, while he does not make discipline an actual *nota ecclesiae*, he cannot conceive of the church without the willingness and the will for mutual admonition and correction.

Yet on the other hand, Calvin's reserve is striking. He knows and repeatedly states that God's people here on earth is not and cannot be a perfect communion. The fact that the church is made up of good and wicked together, and its frequent failures, will not surprise believers, nor cause despair. Purists do not have Calvin on their side. Important as it is that the communion should take visible form, the parable of the tares among the wheat should caution prudence. "If the Lord declares that the Church will labour under the defect of being burdened with a multitude of wicked until the day of judgement, it is vain to look for a church altogether free from blemish" (Inst. 4.1.13). We cannot be members of the church without accepting to be part of its ambiguity in history.

A constructive path therefore has to be found between *laissez-aller* and purism. The communion can be endangered as much by indifference as by excessive zeal. Discipline must always be placed

in the service of communion. The door must always be open for the restoration of communion. In particular, Calvin discourses at length on the point that no believer has the right to separate from the church for the sake of the church's purity. "Notwithstanding the faults of a few or of many, there is nothing to prevent us from duly professing our faith in the ordinances instituted by God" (Inst. 4.1.19). Calvin suspects the zeal for purity of concealing pride. These people appear to defend the church but in reality they are seeking "to display their own superiority by despising all other men" (Inst. 4.1.16). "Those who think it sacrilege to partake the Lord's bread with the wicked, are more rigid in this than Paul. For when he exhorts us to pure and holy communion, he does not require that we should examine others, or that every one should examine the whole church, but that each should examine himself" (Inst. 4.1.15).

We should be guided by the example of the prophets: "Nothing prevented them from separating themselves, but a desire of preserving unity. But if the holy prophets felt no obligation to withdraw from the Church on account of the very numerous and heinous crimes, not of one or two individuals, but almost of the whole people, we arrogate too much to ourselves, if we presume forthwith to withdraw from the communion of the Church, because the lives of all accord not with our judgement, or even with the Christian profession" (Inst. 4.1.18).

The universal communion of the Church

Calvin's thoughts on the universal church deserve particular attention. Starting from a general definition of the universal church (Inst. 4.1.19), he concludes that the universal communion is characterised by far greater diversity than the local church. It is

the fellowship of believers collected out of all nations and regions. Individual churches in different towns or villages have the name and the authority of the Church and must order their fellowship in a way that reflects God's presence in their particular place. Between the individual churches there is room for considerable differences: only in the essential things is unity required. The foundation, the doctrine on which the church of Christ is founded (*doctrina qua ecclesia Christi fundatur*) cannot be called in question. (21) The Anti-Trinitarians are to be condemned because they cast doubt on all the principles of our religion (*omnia religionis nostrae principia*). (22) Conversely, in his discussion with Joachim Westphal Calvin can insist that they are in agreement about the *praecipuis capitibus* of doctrine. (23) Mutual recognition apparently does not require complete consensus. "If churches have the ministry of the word, and honour the administration of the sacraments, they are undoubtedly entitled to be ranked with the Church..." Calvin continues, "Thus we both maintain the Church universal in its unity, which malignant minds have always been eager to dissever, and deny not due authority to lawful assemblies distributed as circumstances require"(Inst. 4.1.9).

In keeping with this view, Calvin sees no need for a common confession of faith for all the Reformed churches. It belongs to the authority of each individual church to formulate its doctrine and order its life according to biblical precepts. In his view the universal church is a kind of federation of confessions. However much the churches have to agree in the essential affirmations of the faith, the confession of each individual church nonetheless retains its specific emphasis. (24) Exchange remains an urgent task, as genuine *consentire* in diversity will only be possible if churches are open to one another and prepared to give account of their affirmations.

How are decisions made in the church?

Basically Jesus Christ himself is the source of every sound decision in the church. No hierarchy can supplant him. He is so really present in the church through the power of the Holy Spirit that he needs no “representative.” “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” This promise holds at every level of the church. God’s word must therefore be the source of all decisions in the church and the church must be ordered in such a way that God’s word can point the way. Calvin has high expectations of the ministry of the word. To the extent that the word “dwells richly” in the communion of the church the decisions taken will be right and in conformity with God’s will.

One of the marks of the Reformed tradition is the diversity of ministries. At the local level, preachers are surrounded by elders and deacons (Inst. 4.3.8-9). Occasionally Calvin speaks of a fourth office, that of teacher, serving solely the explanation of Scripture (Inst. 4.3.4). The interaction between these ministries is essential for the church. As they work together to fulfil different basic offices of the church, they form a *collegium* of mutually complementary ministries, entrusted with the mission and the authority to lead the church in the way of God’s word. The ultimate validity of their decisions, however, lies in the degree to which they correspond to the teaching of Holy Scripture.

Less definite are Calvin’s observations on decision-making processes at supra-congregational or even universal level. He was clear in his own mind that it was necessary to distinguish between church and state. During his lifetime he fought for the independence of church structures vis-a-vis the civic authorities, but in fact church structures free of state influence only came about where the Reformed church

remained in the minority. It is in France that we find the model for a Reformed decision-making structure, in the form of a synod composed of representatives of local churches, with the power to take decisions concerning the life of the church. Authority lies not with a God-ordained hierarchy but with the local congregations and the office-bearers delegated by them. Here again the collegial element is determinative. The church receives God's guidance in listening together to God's Word.

Can this view be transferred to the universal level? In principle, Calvin thinks it can. Conciliar encounters are in his eyes an important instrument to promote and strengthen the unity of Christ's Church. In an extensive chapter on the general councils of the church we find this paragraph:

“We readily admit that when any doctrine is brought under discussion, there is not a better or surer remedy than for a council of true bishops to meet and discuss the controverted point. There will be much more weight in a decision of this kind, to which the pastors of churches have agreed in common after invoking the Spirit of Christ, than if each, adopting it for himself, should deliver it to his people, or a few individuals should meet in private and decide. Secondly, when bishops have assembled in one place, they deliberate more conveniently in common, fixing both the doctrine and the form of teaching it, lest diversity give offence. Thirdly, Paul prescribes this method of determining doctrine (1 Cor. 14:29). For when he gives the power of deciding to a single church, he shows what the course of procedure should be in more important cases—namely, that the churches together are to take common cognizance. And the very feeling of piety tells us that if any one trouble the Church with some novelty in doctrine, and the matter be carried so far that there is danger of a greater dissension, the churches should first meet, examine the question, and at length, after due discussion, decide according to Scripture, which may both put an end to doubt in the people, and stop the mouths of wicked and restless men, so as to prevent the matter from proceeding farther.” (Inst. 4.9.13)

Calvin had no opportunity to translate this vision into practice. Apparently the time was not yet ripe for a council of the

Reformation churches, but the obstacles were not in outward circumstances alone. Calvin was more concerned not to overstate the authority of the councils than to press the need for a renewal of conciliar practice. Again and again he repeats that the authority of a council cannot be measured by external criteria. (25) Set in the overall context of his reflections, the comments just quoted seem more like a concession than a programme. While he may lay the basis for a form of conciliar practice, he has not yet developed his thoughts.

What can we learn from Calvin for our situation today?

Calvin's understanding of the church stands as a warning reminder to the present. There can be no doubt that he would see today's divisions among the Reformed churches not just as a regrettable distortion, but as an actual denial of the gospel. If we begin to trace the reasons for such fragmentation, we will quickly realise that Calvin's observations are highly actual.

- a)In contrast to Calvin's understanding, the church today is not understood as being first and foremost *God's gift and creation*, but rather as the voluntary assembly of believers. Talk of the church as "mother of those to whom God is a father" (Inst. 4.1.1) is seldom heard in Reformed circles nowadays. Only *after* salvation, justification, and sanctification have been discussed does the subject of the church receive attention. Reformed Christians think of themselves first as individuals. They tend to measure the church by their own experience and to terminate their membership if it does not measure up to this. Their commitment to the communion of the church willed and ordained by God generally ranks low.

- b) In contrast to Calvin, who was not prepared to separate the *invisible and the visible church*, the predominant attitude among Reformed Christians today is critical towards church. What counts is personal faith. What happens at the level of the institution is from the start held in odium as “secondary.” Calvin did of course frequently say that there were no institutional guarantees of any kind for God’s truth and presence. But he was equally emphatic in demanding membership in the visible fellowship of the faith. He was able to say: “This is the virtue of the unity of the Church that it keeps us in communion with God” (*Telle vertu a l’unité de l’Eglise, qu’elle nous peut retenir en la compagnie de Dieu, Inst. 4.1.3*). In his view the *falsa ecclesia* can only be overcome by yet more decided adhesion to the true church. He would therefore have very little time for the equanimity, even indifference with which the divisions of the Reformed churches are accepted today. His doubts about the institution do not shake his conviction that God is at work in the power of the Spirit in the visible fellowship.
- c) In contrast to Calvin, who constantly reminded the *pasteurs* and other *ministres* of their servant role and demanded they be clearly bound into the college of ministers and elders, today the primary emphasis is placed on the performance of the ministers. This is why pastors can so easily become dominant figures in the Reformed churches. Outstanding preachers and leaders can be a blessing, they can contribute to opening new spiritual perspectives. But they have, especially in recent times, also been the cause of secession and division. The authority of the ministry can, as Calvin always maintained, give rise to *ambition* and *orgeuil*. Instead of serving the church through the word, the church can in no time at all become a personal affair.

d) In contrast to Calvin, who left us in no doubt about the need for *church discipline*, the emphasis today is on the freedom and self-fulfilment of the individual. As to the way in which church discipline was handled in Geneva, opinions may differ—the actual praxis in Calvin’s time belongs to the past and will and cannot be revived. But the basic insight that the visible fellowship of the church presupposes the readiness for mutual admonition and correction, on the other hand, remains important for the present. A church which does not rely on a hierarchy ordained by God is all the more dependent on the faithful and unshakeable commitment of its members. Unity rests on solidarity exercised in fellowship.

Going on beyond Calvin?

Does Calvin show us the way forward in every respect? Of course not. The churches shaped by his legacy live in a different world. Actual as Calvin remains in many respects, new perspectives have developed that inevitably lead beyond him. Indeed, in retrospect, it can be seen that there are actually limits to Calvin’s understanding of the church which have unintentionally and unwittingly fostered the divisions of the Reformed churches. (26) If we are to stand up to the challenges of our times, we have to move on, and here I see at least six important points to be considered.

1. The Reformation led to a break; unity could not be preserved. Calvin speaks, as we have seen, of two camps forming and, in time, these developed into mutually exclusive confessional traditions. Through his struggle for the true church Calvin helped to bring about the “Reformed tradition.” Now and then it is clear how deeply he felt the separation. In a letter to a disputatious theologian whose stream of criticism did not halt

even before the acknowledged leaders of the Reformation, he exclaimed, “Great God, what does this bring back! In the past we had to separate ourselves from servants of Christ with a feeling no different than if our heart were being torn from our body. And now it should be almost a game to cut off not just any member, but the most important vital organ from our communion?” (27) But Calvin saw no other option, and after the incision had been made from both sides, the difference became more and more unbridgeable. Certainly, Calvin continued to believe that traces of the true church were still preserved in the opposing camp, but the living interaction between the camps was broken off. Was this the final word? For many people that was and is the case right up to the present time and, on the basis of a superficial reading of Calvin’s writings, they believe they can claim his authority for this view. But could the fronts not shift once more? Could God not effect unexpected resurrections even in the camp of popes, cardinals, and bishops? Could the traces of the true church that had been preserved not awake to new life? And conversely, could confusion and disobedience not also develop in the Reformed camp? The supposition that the true church has been made visible for all time is not only an illusion, it certainly also does not correspond to Calvin’s deepest intention. The church lives from Christ’s love. At all times it is made up of the “*amateurs du Christ*,” those who give glory to God in this world. That is why, transcending the boundaries of the church, we constantly have to ask anew how the true church of Christ can take shape.

2. Calvin saw it as part of his vocation to bring clarity amidst the confusion that reigned in his time. Inwardly and outwardly Calvin’s life was a never-ending succession of conflicts. In the struggle for the *vera ecclesia* there could be neither ambiguity nor compromise. Calvin could in fact be merciless and on the face

of it almost unbearably harsh. The severity that characterizes many of his writings is the other side of his *passion for clarity* and unmistakable lines of demarcation. This can be explained partly by the fact that he saw the work of the Reformation threatened, but also partly by the circumstance that he was himself struggling with illness and pain, especially in the later years of his life. He himself admits that he was irritable and had a tendency to be impatient. Whatever the explanation for his style, the result is a strange contradiction. The impassioned exhortations to communion and mutual tolerance seem forgotten in the heat of controversy. Both the emphasis on communion, and the passion for clarity have left their mark on the Reformed tradition, with disastrous consequences in the case of lesser minds than Calvin. The result has been not only clarity, but dogmatism and, all too often, division. The question for us, therefore, is how to handle this aspect of Calvin's legacy. The underlying intention in all Calvin's work is beyond doubt to point to the centre—God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. This centre takes precedence over all borderlines and demarcations.

3. Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper stands in striking contrast both with the practice in the Geneva of his day and that of the Reformed churches up to the present time. In harmony with the Augsburg Confession he too counts "the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ" (Inst. 4.1.9) among the *notae ecclesiae*. Christ gave the Lord's Supper (*la cène*) to the church as a token of his presence; bread and wine are in a sense visible words that proclaim to us God's love in Christ. Calvin leaves it in no doubt that this sign of Christ's presence is to be celebrated regularly in each service of worship. (28) Yet this did not happen. The contradiction is obvious. The Reformation churches lack the fullness of a sign which, on their own affirmation, is one of the marks of the true church. Is this

perhaps one of the reasons why the understanding of the church as God's creation and gift has been lost from sight? Is this why preaching and, above all, the preacher have come to assume such a dominant role?

4. Calvin says almost nothing about the *universal mission of the church*. His attention focuses on the renewal of the church in his own day and age. He speaks emphatically of the *munus propheticum Christi*, in other words, he stresses the creative power of the gospel. (29) However, the object of his interest is Christianity as it then existed—the perspective of “mission to the ends of the earth” did not present itself to him, in contrast to Ignatius Loyola or Francis Xavier. For him, Christ's command was addressed to the Apostles; they were equipped with the gift of the Holy Spirit “to announce the gospel throughout the earth.” (30) Calvin was thus of the opinion that the “wonderful fullness of the gifts of the Spirit was only imparted to the church in the earliest times to ‘adorn’ the beginning of Christ's kingdom, to command respect for the gospel at its start and to announce that this was the time of divine visitation prophesied by Joel.” (31) For him, then, the people gathered from all the nations was already in existence. Calvin was not aware that precisely in his own century a new threshold was to be crossed, and more than two centuries went by before the Reformed churches came to realise it. This has changed totally in the meantime. Not only have the Reformed churches taken part in the missionary movement, but missionary work has become in a real way one of the marks of the Reformed tradition. (32) The Reformed churches have become a world-wide fellowship. Here too they are faced with new challenges and tasks in regard to church unity. How can the world-wide fellowship be preserved? Concerned as Calvin was to maintain the union of the Reformation churches then known to him,

his writings offer few pointers for a constructive solution to this question.

5. Calvin admitted *considerable differences in doctrine and practice* in the church. So long as the *notae* could be discerned he felt obliged to recognize a church as the church of Jesus Christ and to remain in communion with it. He considered that each single church had “the name and authority of the Church.” With this he laid the basis for a *communio* of churches at national and at universal level, conceived in the widest sense. He understands unity not as uniformity but as mutual recognition and communion in diversity. That, however, leaves the open question of how to articulate that which the different individual churches have in common. The Reformed tradition has never produced *one* common confession and this has certainly contributed to considerable freedom in the way they live with the heritage of the Reformation. At the same time, however, the question of the common basis has gone largely unanswered. Important as it is for the individual churches to recognize one another in their diversity, this still does not fulfil their common calling, as God’s people, to bear common witness. On what basis will they fulfil to this task?
6. Which road will they take in fulfilling them? Calvin did offer a first outline in his considerations on Councils, when he showed what role *synodal or conciliar structures* can have in the life of the church. However, his remarks remain strangely unspecific. Above all, he seems not to realize that the reforms taking place in his times could open up new horizons for the church and hence new challenges and tasks. He saw the function of synodal assemblies of the “bishops” of several churches as being first and foremost “to remove doubt among the people and stop the mouths of troublemakers.” The task of finding how the church

can respond to new challenges without losing its unity was not one he considered, and it is a task in which Reformed churches have failed again and again. Conservative and progressive forces have settled their disputes by separating and going their own way.

Calvin's understanding of the church can be of decided assistance to the Reformed churches in their present desolate state. The reformer's biblical perspicacity has lost none of its relevance and can lead us back to sources that hold the promise of healing. Yet at the same time we have to go beyond him. Calvin could not have foreseen that a world-wide communion would develop out of the Geneva Reformation. The idea of mission to the ends of the earth was unknown to him, so neither could he foresee the tasks that would develop out of it and because of it. These can only be tackled successfully if, *with* Calvin, we move on *beyond* Calvin. It is not a question of speculating about the future of the Reformed churches in a new millennium, nor even a new century. The task facing each and every Reformed church singly and collectively is to bear witness today to God's liberating grace in a credible way, that is, as a true fellowship of faith.

Is this even possible? Let us listen again to Calvin himself: "For at the present day the Church is not far from despair, plundered, scattered, and everywhere crushed and trodden underfoot. What must be done in straits so numerous and distressing? We ought to lay hold of these promises so as to believe that still God will preserve the Church. To whatever extent the body may be torn, shivered into fragments and scattered, still by his Spirit he will easily unite the members and will never allow the remembering and calling on his name to perish. Out of those fragments which are now broken and scattered the Lord will unite and assemble the people." (33)

Notes

CO refers to the complete edition of Calvin's writings: Joannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia, ed. G. Baum, E. Kunitz, E. Reuss, Braunschweig, 1887ff, 60 volumes (Corpus Reformatorum 29-88).

The Institutes are quoted from the latest version (1559).

- (1) A good example of this is Jürgen Moltmann's book about the church, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Harper & Row, New York, 1977. He states programmatically, "Once the churches have entered the ecumenical movement, the doctrine of the church can no longer be the slave of the self-understanding of our own particular denomination, and its difference from all the others." (p. 12) Important as it is for us to think beyond our own tradition, the reality of our own church cannot simply be slaked off even in the ecumenical movement. Unless we have deliberately worked through it and come to terms with it, we will not be capable of a constructive ecumenical discussion. Those who are not willing to see themselves as others see them are not of great value as partners in dialogue.
- (2) . . . Jean-Jacques Bauswein, Lukas Vischer, *The Reformed Family Worldwide*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999.
- (3) CO 28, 466
- (4) Reply to Sadolet, 1539, in CO 5, 409-410 and Library of Christian Classics, Tracts and Commentaries, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia.
- (5) In late 1541 Calvin published the *Acta* of the Conversations in Regensburg, CO 5 515-527.
- (6) Cf. Calvin's participation in these conversations as depicted by Karl Barth. *Die Theologie Calvins*, 1922, Gesamtausgabe, Akademische Werke 2, Zürich, 1993, pp. 532-543.

- (7) Calvin assumes that elect are also to be found in the Roman church and that the Roman church has also preserved remnants of Christianity. In a letter to Lelio Sozzini on 7 December 1549, he writes: "When I say that traces of the church have remained even in the papal church, I am not referring only to the elect scattered here and there within it, but I genuinely mean that the ruins of the destroyed church are present among the papists. Without need for long explanations, the authority of Paul must satisfy us here: he says the Antichrist will sit down in the temple of God," CO 13 487. Or again: "Therefore even in the corruption of papist baptism there remains something that is of God (*aliquid Dei proprium*)," CO 13, 308; cf also, CO 6, 583 and CO 10/2, 149.
- (8) However stringent the arguments used in the controversial writings, their caustic style makes large parts of them almost unbearable for the modern reader. The action deliberately taken by him against Michael Servet earned him the reputation of being a dictator. This image is certainly not true. Calvin's position in Geneva was so vulnerable that the survival of his work was by no means assured. It was long an open question whether he would succeed in imposing his concern for the reform of the church. Nevertheless, Servet's execution remains a spiritual error which not even the subtlest of explanations can begin to excuse; and it is entirely justified that there is not only the monument in the garden of Geneva university to pay tribute to the Reformers but also the memorial in Champel where Servet perished on the stake. Among the embarrassing aspects of Calvin's polemics is also the dispute with Sebastian Castellio in Basle who, on good theological grounds, had protested against Servet's being burned at the stake. Calvin became embroiled in a bitter dispute with his critic. His attacks culminate in the almost unbelievable phrase hurled at Castellio: May God curb you in, Satan (*compescat te Deus, Satan*)! Cf. Hans R. Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio, Humanist and Verteidiger der religiösen Toleranz*, Göttingen, 1997, p.163.
- (9) Letter from the Venerable Company of Pastors of Geneva to the Council of Neuchâtel, 29th September 1541.

- (10) The issue was that, in the eyes of Geneva, Farel had been unrightfully removed. Pierre Viret was sent to Neuchâtel to demand a proper procedure and to defend Farel.
- (11) His stay lasted for two weeks. Calvin describes his efforts to reach a settlement in a letter to Wolfgang Müslin in Berne, on 26th October 1556.
- (12) Cf. CO 5 and Calvin-Studienausgabe 1, 2, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1994.
- (13) Thus he writes to Martin Bucer: “In your explication of God’s word, especially in the points that are at issue today, you seek to tune your language in a way that will not give offence to anybody. We are certain that you do this with the best of intentions. Nevertheless we must heartily disapprove such a way of doing.” (Letter of 12 January 1538, CO 10/2, 142).
- (14) *Quid? An non hostis quoque ipse diabolus aculeos nobis ad syncretismum agendum admovere debet?*, Preface to the first edition of the Catechism, CO 5, 321.
- (15) In Karl Holl’s judgement: “Calvin had in mind the interests of Protestantism as a whole to a much greater extent than did the German reformers. Wherever an opportunity offered itself around him he seized it and did not consider his duty was done by sending a letter of greeting. He continued to work with those others, with such dedication that one sometimes regrets the time and effort he spent.” Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. III, Tübingen, 1928, p.273.
- (16) Letter of 5 January 1556 to the Saxon pastors during the disputes with Joachim Westphal, CO 9, 50.
- (17) He warned the church in Zürich, for example, not to answer Luther’s invectives (cf. letter to Bullinger of 25th November 1544, CO 9, 774). A vivid picture of Calvin’s efforts for union is to be found in G. Reichel, *Calvin als Unionsmann*, Tübingen, 1909.

- (18) In a letter to Heinrich Bullinger on 22 May 1558, Calvin gave vent to his disappointment at the statement in which Lutheran theologians had condemned the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper and to which Melanchthon had also given his assent. He attributes this step in part to the refusal of the church in Zurich to enter into theological conversations, "Now, however, when by your silence and implicit refusal, all hope of a peace accord was gone, Melanchthon and the others with him who were favourably disposed to us, easily surrendered to the stringency of the others." He assures Bullinger, however, that he will always defend the *consensus tigurinus*. "Wherever I journey I shall always be intent not to accept anything that does not agree with my belief, but also to defend our *Consensus* with the steadfast faithfulness which shall always hold between us." (CO 17, 174, tr. from: Rudolf Schwarz, *Calvins Lebeswerk in seinen Briefen*, vol 3, 1962, pp 946-947)
- (19) "*Il nous faut néanmoins resoudre qu'il n'y a eu nul aage depuis le commencement du monde, auquel le Seigneur n'ait eu son Eglise.*" Inst. 4.1.17.
- (20) From the very beginning of his activity in Geneva, in the church order of 1536, Calvin makes it clear that the Lord's Supper should in principle be celebrated "at least every Sunday." As the people were not yet ready for this, he considered it better to celebrate only once a month in a different church in the city in turn (CO I, 370). In the 14 Articles presented to the synod of Zurich in 1538, he also adhered to this order (CO 10/2, 190-193). Later he still considered it as the right order that "Each week, at least, the table of the Lord ought to have been spread for the company of Christians, and the promises declared on which we might then spiritually feed" (Inst. 4.17.46).
- (21) Calvin to Farel on 24th October 1538, CO 10/2, 275.
- (22) CO 14, 615

- (23) Calvin in his second reply to Joachim Westphal, January 1556, CO 9, 50
- (24) In the Institutes Calvin gives an example of an acceptable difference in the interpretation of biblical teaching: the question of where souls go after death (Inst. 4.1.12). On this: Otto Weber, *Die Einheit der Kirche bei Calvin*. In: Jürgen Moltmann (ed), *Calvinstudien* 1959, Neukirchen 1960, pp. 130-143.
- (25) At the very beginning of his reflections Calvin states: “I venerate them (i.e. the ancient councils) from my heart, and would have all to hold them in due honour. But there must be some limitation, there must be nothing derogatory to Christ. Moreover, it is the right of Christ to preside over all councils, and not share the honour with any man” (Inst. 4.9.1). Or again a little later: “...we are reminded by the examples of almost every age, that the truth is not always cherished in the bosom of pastors, and that the safety of the Church depends not on their state” (Inst. 4.9.4). How, in view of all these limitations, is trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit to develop?
- (26) Karl Holl: “However, the endeavour for wider communion in Calvinism clashes with the equally determined striving for certainty and clarity of personal conviction.... *In the course of history this side of the Calvinist spirit has mostly turned inwards against the Calvinist church itself rather than outwards. All the tensions contained in Calvin’s concept of the church have surfaced—admittedly in combination with other contributory factors—in the founding of separate churches. A strong tendency to form sects seems to be a characteristic feature of Calvinism.*” Holl adds the following interpretation *in bonam partem* to this observation: “It seems to me that the honesty of argument and the courage for independence evident on the Reformed side also deserve some respect. At all events, the relation of large to small church bodies here shows particularities that merit reflection. Elsewhere the rule is that the closer two entities are, the more strongly they will reject one another. Yet here we find that, despite strong competition, the separated denominations get along tolerably well together...The

development of numerous sects alongside the mother church seems to have served simply to open the way for a broader idea of tolerance. It was in the normal course of development that the union of the 19th century met with few difficulties among the members of the Reformed church and that the modern counter-movement against the continuing fragmentation of Protestantism received a powerful impetus precisely from this quarter.” op. cit. p. 275.

(27) *Quam si viscera nostra a nobis evellerentur*, Letter to André Zébédée of 19th May 1539, CO 10/2, 346.

(28) . . . In the “Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper” (1541) we read: “Therefore, the custom ought to be well established in all churches, of celebrating the Supper as frequently as the capacity of the people will allow. And each individual in his own place ought to prepare himself to receive it whenever it is administered in the congregation, unless there be some grave hindrance which compels him to abstain.” (CO 5, 446 and *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, p. 153). In the Institutes of 1559 Calvin goes further still: communion belongs to the fullness of worship (Inst. 4.17.44). His main concern was that the congregation should actually partake of communion. The practice hitherto had been to communicate once a year, and otherwise to attend the mass but without receiving the bread and wine. In Calvin’s opinion this was to neglect Christ’s institution (of the sacrament). Partaking of communion is an inseparable part of the Lord’s Supper. In this respect celebrating communion four times a year was already a step forward.

(29) Cf. on this Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV*, 3 Zollikon, 1959, pp. 18ff.

(30) “The lordship of Christ began in the world insofar as God wanted to know the gospel announced everywhere,” CO 43, 348.

-
- (31) Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, Berlin, 1957, p.329ff. In his book, Krusche quotes numerous other relevant passages.
- (32) Characteristically, the Westminster Confession was expanded by the following sentence in 1902: “Christ has commissioned his church to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. *All believers* are therefore under the obligation to sustain the ordinances of the Christian religion where they are already established and to contribute by their prayer, gifts and personal efforts to the extension of the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth.” *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 10.4, in *The Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, Richmond, 1965, p. 68.
- (33) Commentary on Isaiah 18.7, CO 36, 326.



100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, Kentucky
40202-1396



Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 1215
Louisville, KY