

## JOHN CALVIN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LORD'S CHURCH

PETER Y. DE JONG

*In abbreviated form the substance of this paper has been presented to several area meetings of Reformed Fellowship, Inc., as well as to the student body, faculty and friends of Seminario Juan Calvino, Mexico City. This may help the reader to understand why none of the areas of Calvin's life and labors is dealt with in the detail and depth which they deserve.*

*For those interested in exploring the themes addressed here books referred to throughout are usually available. The most complete collection of Calvinalia on this continent is found in the H.H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, located on the campus of Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Each year the Calvin Studies Society presents and publishes addresses on Calvin's life and work. A complete bibliography of articles and books in many languages on Calvin and Calvinism is also prepared annually at the Center.*

Few events since the days of Christ and the apostles have so much changed the course of history as the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Like a meteor it flashed across the skies of western Europe, arousing fear and frustration in the hearts of many while awakening others to the glories of the gospel which long had been shrouded in the mists of ignorance and spiritual indifference. Together with the Renaissance it ushered in the transition from the medieval to the modern world.

Much of its early élan may well have been lost; its fruits, however, can still be plucked with profit today.

As it helped reshape the lives of people and nations, it was itself also shaped by seeds, both good and bad, which had been sown in the previous century.

Social, economic and political changes made the Reformation possible. Without some understanding of these we cannot rightly understand the life of the early reformers. But at bottom the Reformation was that profoundly religious movement which offered light and

liberty in Christ to everyone who would follow God according to his Word.

Ever since the Black Death (1346-1351) struck terror into men's hearts by decimating Europe's population, changes which rocked the foundations of a civilization, once supposed to be so stable, sprang up everywhere. Cities grew in size and strength as commerce increased to stimulate a more free exchange of ideas. In several lands universities were established promoting discussion and debate. The Renaissance within a century reached full flowering in Italy from which its humanistic and humanizing ideals filtered across the Alps into France, Germany and the Lowlands. By 1453 moveable type had been invented, facilitating the printing of numerous books, not least the Bible. Meanwhile wars grew in scope and intensity. England's power in France was broken. Local conflicts between cities and small dukedoms by the end of the fifteenth century gave way to the rivalry between France and Spain which would disrupt the continent for another two and a half centuries. Portugal opened up sea lanes to the Far East while Spain, with the discovery of the Americas by Columbus in 1492, began reaping the untold wealth of that new world.

Meanwhile the Roman Church, despite its pretensions of pomp and power, saw its control over the hearts, minds and lives of the people weakening. Again and again its doctrines, firmly rooted in tradition rather than in Scripture, were being challenged. Calls for reformation of morals became the order of the day. But while these went unheeded or were repressed with severity, the day of reckoning could not be long postponed. Change in the way of God's good and gracious providence was bound to come.

In this way the Protestant Reformation was, indeed, the product of many factors operating in the history of mankind. At the same time it became the cause of such radical changes that, if those who had lived a hundred years earlier could have returned, they would no longer be able to recognize the world which had been their home.

The catalyst for these far-reaching changes was the Bible<sup>1</sup> to which all the reformers pledged their wholehearted loyalty.

---

<sup>1</sup>Shortly after 1453 Bibles appeared in print and became widely disseminated, in Latin (1456), then in German (1466), Italian (1471), French (1474), Catalan (1478), Czech (1488). Both Dutch (1526) and English (1535) were latecomers. The earlier ones were, of course, taken from the Vulgate. Cf. *The Book of a Thousand Tongues*, edited by Eugene A. Nida, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 475.

To this movement none made more pervasive contributions than John Calvin. As a second generation reformer he deeply appreciated and appropriated from Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bucer and Bullinger much that shaped his own convictions. But in no sense was he an imitator. His education in the humanities, theology and law, coupled with a Frenchman's love for precision and persuasiveness, set a unique stamp on what he said and wrote and did. Even those who so persistently misunderstood and maligned him could not ignore his influence on the world in which he lived. And by his voluminous writings of many kinds he, though dead and lying in an unmarked grave, still speaks to us today.

This influence the respected Calvin scholar, G.E. Duffield, summarizes in a few appropriate sentences.

Ever since his death in 1564, and indeed even before it, the name and theology of John Calvin have aroused intense feelings and vigorous reactions. To some he is a great hero. To others his very name is anathema. . . .The very fact that Calvin has been so much studied and attracted so much attention speaks of his significance in theology and church history. But his influence has been wider than that, for Calvin's theology was not restricted to narrowly ecclesiastical horizons, but rather reached out into the realms of politics, social theory, economics and culture. That Calvin is one of the key factors in the history of Christendom, it is impossible to deny.<sup>2</sup>

Hence for speaking on and writing about him I need make no apology.

Calvin, however, cannot be properly understood and evaluated except in the light of his passionate desire to be of service to Christ and therefore to his church.

According to him the church is by God's appointment indispensable for the salvation and welfare of humankind. Writing about it, also as a visible organization or structure, he asserts,

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,

---

<sup>2</sup>*John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays*, edited by G.E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), xi.

nourished at her breast, and continually preserved under her care and government till we are divested of this mortal flesh, and "become like the angels." For our infirmity will not admit of our dismissal from her school; we must continue under her instruction and discipline to the end of our lives.

Only there do we have any hope of the forgiveness of sins and salvation. And after quoting a few appropriate texts, he concludes,

In these words the paternal favor of God, and the peculiar testimony of spiritual life, are restricted to his flock, to teach us that it is always fatally dangerous to be separated from the Church.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind we turn to his signal contributions to the church of Jesus Christ.

— 1 —

Before proceeding to the subject at hand we do well to come to some understanding of the Genevan reformer as he lived and labored in the challenging but confusing years of the sixteenth century.

Such an attempt, as responsible scholars are now admitting, seems almost impossible. He wrote so much, on so many subjects and to so many individuals and groups under such widely differing circumstances, that doing him and his writings justice looks hopeless. This explains to a large degree why, despite all attempts at objectivity, disagreements on who Calvin really was and why he wrote as he did seem to grow ever greater.

Rarely did he speak about himself in the many letters, tracts and books as well as sermons which are available to us. Even when he did, this was often in oblique fashion. As soon as the veil is somewhat tipped—as in the preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*—it quickly drops to leave us with more questions than answers.<sup>4</sup> Hence the ongoing debates about the circumstances, nature and date of his conversion. Nor are we helped much by trying to explain his life and

---

<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by John Allen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), IV.I.vi. For easy reference we give the four books with Roman numerals in upper case; the chapters with Arabic numerals; the sections in lower case Roman numerals.

<sup>4</sup>On Calvin's conversion cf. esp. T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975), Appendix 2, 162-165.

labors in the light of the years in which we live. From the perspective of our days that century with all its changes and confusions and contradictions allows for no simple explanation. Everyone, let us admit this honestly, will be reading in and about Calvin conditioned by his own person and place in history. Far too seldom when engaging in historical studies and assessments do we remind ourselves of what St. Paul once wrote, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him" (1 Cor. 2:11a)?

Few if any can escape seeing Calvin and his work except through their own spectacles. This should guard against accepting too glibly what any may have said about him and his work, no matter how strongly this may be buttressed by scholarly apparatus.

Today in the popular mind Calvin is that dour, intolerant, even vindictive Protestant preacher whose only claim to fame is the burning of Servetus. Who can really be attracted to such a person who taught the total corruption of mankind, the joyless demands of obeying the minutiae of laws which no longer make any sense, and the everlasting fires of hell for all except a few "pious elect"? According to those who persistently pass on such a picture of the reformer, Calvin simply made God in his own image. But these betray their own ignorance steeped in personal prejudice against that man and his work. Were it not for their ongoing influence, we could dismiss them out of hand as unworthy of response or rebuttal.

The Roman Catholic writers, especially in bygone years, have presented this Genevan as the most dangerous and deadly enemy of the church and so of Christ's cause. He more than anyone else in his time is alleged to have sown seeds which spawned no less than the French Revolution with all its atrocities. Happily in those circles we now find a far more honest appraisal and appreciation of Calvin. His deepest intentions, so some will affirm, were sound and none too dissimilar from those of the famous Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Many have tried to understand Calvin and his work in the light of himself, or of the times in which he lived, or of some central and all-controlling theme which captivated his heart and thus can be traced in all that he put on paper. All these avenues can be legitimately pursued with some profit, if only it be remembered that not one or, perhaps, not all of them together will ever be definitive. For that, both Calvin himself and the times in which he lived are too elusive to be captured between the covers of a single book. Questions which press for more and better answers always remain.

Also we who are Reformed and heirs to much of the legacy which he left to the churches do well to remember our own limitations. Far too often he has been idealized and almost idolized by some as if he spoke the last word on issues which should be faced by every believer. Calvin would be the first to repudiate such efforts to rehabilitate his reputation as unworthy of Christ and his cause.

Nor are we helped much by those who, seeing him as "the great systematizer" of the treasures of the early Reformation, press with rigorous and relentless logic his convictions into an iron-clad pattern. Indeed, his views on the sovereignty of God over all men and events pervade his letters, dedicatory epistles and sermons as well as more specifically his theological writings, but never without doing justice to the full responsibility of each individual before the face of God. His unwearied insistence on divinely revealed law as the rule for men's faith and life by no means makes him the legalist which some deem him to be. To be sure, he took seriously the ravages of sin in consequence of Adam's disobedience on men, nations and even the created order. But this makes him no unrelieved pessimist like many of the existentialists of our day. He can speak eloquently upon occasion about the beauties and glories of this present world without stumbling into sentimentality. And while he praises always the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus as the only means by which our lives can be restored and refreshed, he counsels against despising the art, learning and practical wisdom produced by the pagan world.

Who, then, was this man John Calvin whose contributions to the Lord's church we are trying to understand and assess?

Was he a reactionary or a revolutionary? A mere imitator of the past or a creator of new and fresh and stimulating ideas? A conservative or a progressive? Did he at times speak with forked tongue when, unable to get his own way, circumstances compelled him to resort to compromise? All this and much else is being said about him after more than a century of increased research into the life of this man who simply cannot be ignored and forgotten.

Occasionally he has been accused of flagrantly contradicting himself on some important points. Then there are those who insist that he is largely the product of the spirit of early French humanism tinged with more than a modicum of that evangelicalism which was sweeping the lives of the upper classes for which his soul felt some affinity. Or was he, perhaps, a man living tenuously and tentatively between two worlds in competition, the one dying under the weight of age-old traditions and

the other striving to be born amid all those confusions which characterized the age in which he lived?

Especially this last intrigues one upon reading William J. Bouwsma's brilliant but at times baffling *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*. He explains carefully what he has tried to do in shedding light also on Calvin's thought.

But my book is not simply a portrait; it is a sixteenth century portrait. I am less interested in Calvin's inner life for its own sake than in using it to illuminate the momentous cultural crisis central to his century, which was at the heart of the Renaissance as well as of the Reformation and as crucial for Catholic Europe as for the peoples that separated from the Roman church. . . .For me the century was tense, driven, fundamentally incoherent, and riven by insoluble conflicts that were all the more serious because they were as much within as between individuals and parties. . . .That is why I present my cultural portrait of Calvin as a kind of dialogue between antithetical impulses, and Calvin's thought as an effort to balance between them. Balance, however, suggests political accommodation rather than reconciliation, and Calvin's success, like that of most political compromises, was tenuous and unstable. His limited success in meeting his own needs, however, paradoxically provides much of the explanation for the success of Calvinism as a movement.<sup>5</sup>

He sees two Calvins at war within himself: the first "a philosopher, a rationalist and a Schoolman in the high Scholastic tradition represented by Thomas Aquinas, a man of fixed principles, and a conservative,"<sup>6</sup> and the second "a rhetorician and humanist, a skeptical fideist in the manner of the followers of William of Ockham, flexible to the point of opportunism and a revolutionary in spite of himself."<sup>7</sup>

It is a book eminently worthy of being read reflectively, especially by us who as Reformed believers sometimes suppose we can draw a very straight and sure line from Calvin's every thought to what we believe and defend and try to put into practice today. It helps explain what seem to be ambiguities (Bouwsma calls them "insoluble contradic-

---

<sup>5</sup>William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup>*John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, 231.

<sup>7</sup>*John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, 232.

tions") in several of Calvin's writings as well as the reformer's accommodations to the situation which he faced in church and state at the time. We do well to see in him some of those same tensions we find in every believer who tries seriously to think and speak and live Christianly in a world which challenges him at every step of the way.

This book, and that perhaps is its most valuable contribution, helps make Calvin come alive for us; no longer a remote figure from the past whose writings can be read with a kind of impersonal objectivity but rather "a man of like passions with ourselves" who struggled as he wore himself out to offer comfort, counsel and strength when every foundation on which society, church and state had been built appeared to be crumbling into dust.

And this Calvin did as a man mastered by God. This was the one true God who for him had clearly and compellingly revealed himself and his will for the salvation of men in the Holy Scriptures. On this no doubt ever sprang up in his mind or heart. For that reason men, women and children in every station of life listened to and followed his leadership gladly.

To God he owed his life. That God in and through the Lord Jesus Christ had rescued him from the pit of ignorance, superstition and pride in which he had been trapped. And that God he would serve with the passion of a flaming heart by serving the church called not to serve itself but to show forth the grace and glory of the living God in every relationship of life. In that way he made contributions to the Lord's church which still deserve to be pondered and put into practice today.

— 2 —

Of all Calvin's contributions to the church none is more fundamental than his understanding and use of Holy Scripture. All the reformers turned to those writings as the rule for faith and life, but the Genevan leader formulated this teaching in a manner which has compelled the appreciation and admiration of evangelical believers ever since.

For this the time was more than ripe.

Although the Roman church through its leaders insisted that it was faithful to the Word, it had long since overlaid the gospel with the traditions of men. Many priests had little access to Scripture, relying instead on ecclesiastical decrees and legends of saints and martyrs which fascinated the people. Preaching, in so far as it was still heard, consisted of little more than a moralistic homily. Far more effective in molding people's lives were mystery and morality plays presented at the

church door or in the market place. Mass, as the chief component of worship, was offered entirely in Latin with which few except the highly educated were familiar.

With the invention of moveable type also the Bible became available. In an age of stimulating Renaissance learning it soon became the object of intense study and discussion. Already a few translations into the vernaculars had made their way into the world, but based exclusively on the Vulgate. Not until Erasmus published his version on the basis of better manuscripts could any marked advance in biblical scholarship be signaled. Now the call for reformation in church doctrine as well as morals became inescapable. For this the Bible, according to the reformers, served as the only and all-sufficient standard.

It was left to Calvin as a second generation Reformer, however, to develop the doctrine of Scripture more consistently and thoroughly.

In this he was soon followed by many who embraced the evangelical faith. Precisely on this point the Reformed Confessions differed from those drawn up for other groups which broke with the Roman Church. Many of these, especially the later ones, spell out in great detail what is to be confessed by Christians about the Bible, in language reminiscent of Calvin.

Foundations for this emphasis had been clearly laid before. Already Zwingli in his *Sixty-seven Articles of 1523* declared in the preface,

The following sixty-seven articles and opinions, I, Huldreich Zwingli, confess that I preached in the venerable city of Zurich, on the basis of the Scripture which is call *theopneustos*, and I offer to debate and defend them; and where I have not now correctly understood the said Scripture, I am ready to be instructed and corrected, but only from the aforesaid Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

Then follow several statements explaining his position.

- I. All who said that the Gospel (here meaning the total Word of God) is nothing without approbation of the Church err and slander God.

---

<sup>8</sup>\*The Sixty-seven Articles of 1523\* in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, edited by Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 36.

- II. The sum of the Gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, has made known unto us the will of his heavenly Father. . . .
- V. Therefore all who regard another doctrine as equal to or higher than the Gospel err and do not know what the Gospel is.<sup>9</sup>
- XIV. Hence all Christians should do their utmost that everywhere on the Gospel of Christ be preached.<sup>10</sup>

And he concludes this testimony in the same vein,

Hence let no one attempt to contend with sophistry or trifles, but let him come having Scripture as judge (Scripture breathes God's Spirit), in order that either truth be found or, when it is found as I hope it would be, that it be kept, Amen. May God grant it!<sup>11</sup>

The Disputation which followed was attended by 350 ministers, priests and others, and led the Council of that city to break with the rites of the Roman Church and to declare that henceforth only the gospel might be preached in all parts of the canton.

Similarly in 1528 *The Ten Theses of Berne* begin with the affirmations on the sole authority of Scripture.

- I. The holy, Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, abides in the same, and does not listen to the voice of a stranger.
- II. The Church of Christ makes no laws or commandments without God's Word. Hence all human traditions, which are called ecclesiastical commandments, are binding upon us only in so far as they are based on and commanded by God's Word.<sup>12</sup>

With those same convictions on the supremacy of Holy Scripture Calvin began his life and labors as Reformer.

Just when and how he arrived at his unswerving position is difficult to determine. Already early he was influenced by some evangelical

---

<sup>9</sup>*Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 36.

<sup>10</sup>*Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 37.

<sup>11</sup>*Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 44.

<sup>12</sup>"The Ten Theses of Berne" in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, 49.

French humanists, chiefly Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples.<sup>13</sup> We know he became acquainted with tracts of Luther and others, widely disseminated in France while he was a student. The corruptions so evident in the Roman church and its hierarchy had for a time deeply disturbed him. But as he wrote in a few sparse sentences, he was long enslaved by its superstitions until God overpowered his soul. Like his personal conversion to Christ as the gracious Savior, commitment to the absolute authority of the Bible may well have dawned upon mind and heart quite gradually. But once committed, he pursued this in depth with unparalleled devotion and dedication to duty as teacher of the Lord's people. When we listen to Calvin on Scripture—whether in sermons or commentaries or the several editions of the *Institutes*—we seem to hear him singing its praises endlessly.

By the time he began his life's work in Geneva, twenty years after Luther's heroic act at Wittenberg, the lines between conflicting parties were being much more sharply drawn. Among those who broke with Rome there was no unanimity on the place which the Bible ought to occupy in the church or, for that matter, in the lives of those who claimed to be Christians.

On three fronts, therefore, Calvin waged warfare, often in sharp and even bitter words, in defense of the principle of *sola Scriptura*.

The first were the Roman Catholic prelates who, while claiming to honor Scripture as the very Word of God, had perverted all sound doctrine and corrupted worship with their man-made rituals and rules. The battle lines became fixed by decrees adopted at the opening sessions of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). To these Calvin responded as early as 1547. At stake was the superiority and supremacy of the Bible. On four scores he repudiates and denounces its decrees on this issue,

---

<sup>13</sup>The life and labors of this man as one of the forerunners of the Reformation are still too little known and recognized among Reformed people. This lack is supplied by the recent volume of Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Lefevre: Pioneer of Ecclesiastical Renewal in France* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Beza spoke very highly of him (xi). Hughes shows how similar his "pattern of exegesis" was to that of the reformers: 1. The primary author of Scripture is God; 2. The proper sense of Scripture is that intended by God through the inspired human author; 3. This sense is at once the literal and spiritual sense; 4. The literal-spiritual sense may be historical, allegorical, topological, or analogical—or, more simply, historical or figurative—in accordance with the meaning proper to the text; 5. Christ is the true key to the understanding of Scripture, and saving faith in Christ is the true purpose and end of Scripture.

First, they ordain that in doctrine we are not to stand on Scripture alone, but also on things handed down by tradition. Secondly in forming a catalogue of Scripture, they mark all the books with the same chalk, and insist on placing the Apocrypha in the same rank with the others. Thirdly, repudiating all other versions whatsoever, they retain the Vulgate only, and order it to be authentic. Lastly, in all passages either dark or doubtful, they claim the right of interpretation without challenge.<sup>14</sup>

Each of these he exposes as making the Bible dependent on the church and thus, while mouthing many pious phrases, enslaving the Lord's people to the will and whim of ecclesiastical pronouncements.

Fully as inimical to the principle of *sola Scriptura* was a growing number of those who, to a greater or lesser degree, subjected the Word of God to the dictates of reason. Often these were individuals who drank too deeply from the streams of Renaissance learning and pressed the "right of private (personal) interpretation" to pernicious extremes. Here Calvin saw the pride of sinful men raise its ugly head to ridicule simple believers, undermine the foundations of salvation in Christ and blaspheme the Lord of heaven and earth. Not a few were men highly educated, often physicians whose skills were much coveted by the rich and powerful into whose confidence they soon wormed their way. Because they could no longer feel safe in strongly Catholic cities and lands, several fled for refuge to Geneva and found themselves in trouble with Calvin. One of these was Castellio, a thoroughgoing humanist and rationalist, who dealt with Scripture much as any other book and felt free to criticize its contents with almost unrestrained and opinionated reliance on his own insights. Another was Servetus who, after being warned, arrogantly returned to Geneva and paid with his life for his denial of the deity of Jesus Christ. At issue for the Council as well as for Calvin was the authority and clarity of Scripture.

The third group of opponents against whom he felt constrained to develop and defend the principle of *sola Scriptura* were the sects, including some Anabaptists. Within that amorphous and heterogeneous company, which in more recent years has been called the "radical reformation," the early Reformers made little if any clear distinctions. Here Calvin moved with greater caution and care. Some were simple, pious folk who desired only to live the Christian life free from all the

---

<sup>14</sup>"Acts of the Council of Trent with The Antidote," in *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), III:67-68.

follies which the Roman Church imposed on the people. For a time not a few became Reformed under the influence of the teachings of Calvin and his disciples. But early there were in this group those whose extravagant eschatological speculations helped produce the debacle of Munster. Others were classified by him as "libertine spiritualists" not entirely unrelated to those who exalted reason at the expense of Scripture. On the latter he poured his scorn. They "set no more by the Word of God than they do by fables; except it be what pleases them, and when as they may deprave it, and by force make it serve their devilish opinions." About the former group he wrote, ". . .that one, though she be full of wicked and pernicious errors, yet doth she abide in much more simplicity. For she yet receives the Holy Scripture, as we do."<sup>15</sup> At no point does he accuse them of following some "inner light" beyond and above the Bible. At issue between him and them was the right understanding and use of Scripture. In many of their views he saw serious threats to the authority, unity and perspicuity of the sacred writings.

Even to summarize what Calvin believed and taught about Holy Scripture would take far more pages than this essay allows. For this, quotations not only from the *Institutes* but especially from his sermons, commentaries and other writings would be required. There are nuances in his statements which should not be ignored. Also there is development in thought. But of his loyalty and complete subservience to the Word in its fullness there can be no doubt.

Against one and all he could often be scathing in denunciations of their presumptuousness. Not only did they deviate from the clear teachings of the Word to deceive themselves and others; they made themselves guilty of blaspheming the Lord of heaven and earth by making him a liar.

Again and again Calvin expounded the superior qualities of the Bible, a book so unique that no other can in any way compare with it. Apart from it no man can ever hope to attain any true knowledge of God, of himself and of the world in which he lives.

The first to which he repeatedly called attention is its *divine* character. Here and here alone we find *ipsissima Dei verba*. Above all others, this should persuade men wholeheartedly to embrace everything that it contains. Only when its authority is acknowledged will it also

---

<sup>15</sup>Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Radical Anabaptists*, translated by William J. Heynen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 10.

prove profitable for life and godliness. This supplies that stability of mind and heart for which the spirit of man yearns.

This is a principle which distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God has spoken to us, and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak at their own suggestion, but that, being organs of the Holy Spirit, they only uttered what they had been commissioned from heaven to declare.<sup>16</sup>

And on another passage relating to the divinity and inspiration of the Word he writes,

The meaning is, that the beginning of right knowledge is to give that credit to the holy prophets which is due to God. He calls them the *holy men of God*, because they faithfully executed the office committed to them. . . .He says that they were *moved*—not that they were bereaved of mind (as the Gentiles imagined their prophets to have been) but because they dared not announce anything of their own, and obediently followed the Spirit as their guide, who ruled in their mouth as in his own sanctuary. Understand by *prophecy of Scripture* that which is contained in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>17</sup>

This was no late insight into Scripture adopted by Calvin in order to forge with authority some rigid system of doctrine, as a few have suggested, but one shining through his writings from the beginning. As early as 1537 he wrote "to his Dear and very Excellent friend, N.C." who was seeking advice in a difficult situation,

Although you are already aware what course remains for you, since you see the direction in which you are led by the Word of God, to which all your deliberations ought to be conformed and confined. . . .Only be you on your part prepared and eager to listen to the voice of the Lord, and to execute his commandments with intrepid and unwavering constancy; and, finally, remember that in truth it is not so much a counsel given you by man, as an oracle pronounced by man's lips, but received from the sacred lips of Almighty God.

---

<sup>16</sup>*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 248-249.

<sup>17</sup>*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 248-249.

But how—so it was asked frequently in his time—can we be persuaded that these writings are indeed God's own words?

For Calvin this did not derive from some human intuition or from the use of reason which sought incontrovertible "proofs." Man himself is always prone to err. Nor does it derive from the church. Instead Scripture is *autopiston*, self-authenticating as carrying the full weight of authority within itself.<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, the Reformer does not hesitate to mention arguments advanced to persuade men of its authority and reliability. Among these are the dignity of its subject-matter, the loftiness of its moral code, the beauty of its language at many places, the fulfillment of many of its predictions, as well as the consent of the church through the long centuries. Acceptance of the Bible as completely true and trustworthy is for him reasonable. But all the "proofs" advanced can never convince the unbelieving and ungodly. Always because of the power of indwelling sin on men's minds and hearts they will resist the truth. Nor does the conviction of the believer that Scripture *in toto* is the very Word of God written, "the oracles of God" which cannot and will not lead us astray, depend on such evidences. For that God has provided a far safer and surer ground.

That assurance is worked in the hearts of God's children by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. This intimate and unbreakable relationship between Word and Spirit, a distinctive characteristic of Calvin's theology, deserves to be sharply underscored. It plays a decisive role in his understanding of the urgency and efficacy of preaching as well as in his understanding of the sacraments as signs and seals of God's covenant. On this subject he wrote,

Wherefore the Scripture will then only be effectual to produce the saving knowledge of God when the certainty of it shall be founded on the internal persuasion of the Holy Spirit. Thus those human testimonies, which contribute to its confirmation, will not be useless, if they follow that first and principal proof, as secondary aids to our imbecility. But those persons betray great folly, who wish it to be demonstrated to infidels that the Scripture is the Word of God, which cannot be known without faith. Augustine therefore justly observes, that piety and peace

---

<sup>18</sup>*Institutes*, I.7.v.

of mind ought to precede, in order that a man may understand somewhat of such great subjects.<sup>19</sup>

On what constitutes the *canon* of Scripture, he, without arguing at great length, is also clear. He repudiates the reliance of the Roman Church on the apocryphal writings. Instead, he insists that the Christian Church rightly receives as canonical only those books which the Jews in the days of Christ and his apostles so recognized. To that people, as Paul affirmed, had been entrusted by God himself, the "oracles" which are divinely inspired and thus authoritative.<sup>20</sup>

While insisting that the Bible is God's Word throughout, he was fully cognizant that it did not drop immediately from heaven. As a book it belongs to the created order. It was penned by men, each with his individual style and insights, and that in common language at different times over a period of many centuries. All this was to be taken seriously when trying to understand what God was saying. Thus Calvin turned away from any notion that Scripture consists of a series of eternal, impersonal propositions which are to be applied in any and every circumstance as of equal validity. More than that, he urged that in the Bible God "is accommodating" himself to us and our needs.<sup>21</sup> No one should be surprised, much less shocked, that the eternal and incomprehensible God should speak of himself as having ears and eyes and arms, even a heart which "repents." Not only did he create man in his own image; he also has endowed him with intelligible language which now he is pleased to employ as a worthy vehicle for making himself and his ways known. This, indeed, he has not done exhaustively but adequately for his sovereign and saving purposes.

Therefore Calvin never regards the limitations inherent in human language as producing errors in the Bible. The safeguard against such lies in its divine inspiration. Always that Word is trustworthy because God is trustworthy and thus to be trusted in all that he speaks and does.

---

<sup>19</sup>*Institutes*, I.8.xiii.

<sup>20</sup>Only scattered throughout his writings does Calvin speak on which books are canonical. He rejects the Apocrypha as books of equal authority with those of the Old Testament handed down by the Jews "to whom were entrusted the oracles of God." He quotes Augustine who speaks of the Jews as "the librarians of the Christian Church."

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Ford Lewis Battles, "God was accommodating Himself to Human Capacity" in *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 21-42.

This trustworthiness is for him not restricted to what it reveals about our salvation in Jesus Christ.<sup>22</sup> Although we frequently hear that this is the "scopus" of the Word, it requires for our understanding of the way of salvation the knowledge of God as Creator and Lord of all. This theme is far more than some backdrop for the scenario of his redeeming love. We can understand Christ in his person and work as the second Adam only in the light of the first Adam. Hence when God reveals in his Word the origin, nature and history of the world with man's special place and calling in it, he is to be fully believed and trusted in what is affirmed. Calvin is aware that this comes in man's language and in simple sentences for the common man. But even when at times couched in poetic and prophetic phrases, all that God says about the universe is true and trustworthy. Only wilful folly and unbelief leads many to ignore, doubt or reject what has so plainly been made known. Calvin argues that nothing is so inconsistent as to accept what God declares on one subject while refusing to endorse it on another.

Closely connected with this is his affirmation of the *sufficiency* of that Word. Again he distinguishes cautiously but clearly. Some might infer that believers are people of only one book who turn away from all intellectual and scientific investigation. But this is a palpable misrepresentation. At times Calvin will laud what "truth" can be found among the pagan Greeks and Romans. Hence his appreciation of the ordinary branches of learning as well as of the classical languages and writers, as his educational reforms in Geneva leading to the establishment of the Academy attest. But for the true knowledge of God and salvation the Bible is not only necessary but also *indispensable*. All man's speculations about the universe are inane, useless and highly presumptuous when they fall short of producing that obedient acknowledgement and

---

<sup>22</sup>B. Engelbracht, "Is Christ the Scopus of the Scripture?" In *Calvinus Reformatus* (Potchefstroom: University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), 192-200. The concluding sentences deserve careful attention,

for if Christ were to be the scope of all the intentions of God, if the *tota Scriptura* were to contain only *solus Christus*, then creation would fall away, the sanctification of life would fall away or it would be dissolved so completely in one act of divine salvation that it would only be vertically directed. This would mean a return, finally, to exactly that brand of theology of redemption which the Reformers left behind them. . . . The incarnation of the Word was only necessitated by one factor, namely sin, and once sin had been expiated, the world would be *theatrum Dei gloriae*, without spot or blemish. *This* is the scope of the Word—also of the Word who became flesh. . . .

worship of the one true God who created the worlds by the Word of his power.

Let us pause to hear him on this matter which is so much controverted today. On the first he reminds us appropriately of the purpose of Scripture. It never intends to tell us everything about the world. Always there is room for sciences of various kinds.

Thus it belongs to a man of preeminent ingenuity to examine with the critical exactness of Galen, the connection, the symmetry, the beauty, and the use of the various parts of the human body. But the composition of the human body is universally acknowledged to be so ingenious, as to render its Maker the object of deserved admiration.

And therefore some of the philosophers of antiquity have justly called man a microcosm, or a world in miniature; because he is an eminent specimen of the power, goodness, and wisdom of God, and contains in him wonders enough to occupy the attention of our minds, if we are not indisposed to such a study.<sup>23</sup>

But about the other—man's limitations and his inordinate tendency to exceed every proper bound—he says,

While experience testifies that the seeds of religion are sown by God in every heart, we scarcely find one man in a hundred who cherishes what he has received, and not one in whom they grow to maturity, much less bear fruit in due season. . . .Pride and vanity are discovered, when miserable men, in seeking after God rise not, as they ought, above their own level, but judge of him according to their carnal stupidity, and leave the proper path of investigation in pursuit of speculations as vain as they are curious. Their conceptions of him are formed, not according to the representations he gives of himself, but by the inventions of their own presumptuous imagination. . . .Whence it follows, that their folly is inexcusable, which originates not only in a vain curiosity, but in false confidence and an immoderate desire to exceed the limits of human knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>*Institutes*, I.5.ii-iii.

<sup>24</sup>*Institutes*, I.4.i.

If God exhibits so much of himself and his works in the created order, how then are we to learn rightly what can and should be known? For Calvin "general" and "special" revelation are not two distinct but equally valid and authoritative avenues by which to attain an understanding of God and the world. Neither is to be investigated in isolation from the other; hence also his insistence on the grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture. But every attempt at a "natural theology" was anathema to Calvin. Much less may the two "sources" of our knowledge of God and the world be pitted against each other. Always the former is to be explained in the light of Scripture which God has so graciously provided not only to supplement but also to illumine and correct what may be learned from his self-revelation in the universe.

For as persons who are old, or those whose eyes are by any means become dim, if you show them the most beautiful book, though they perceive something written, but can scarcely read two words together, yet by the assistance of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly,—so Scripture, collecting in our minds the otherwise confused notions of Deity, dispels the darkness, and gives us a clear view of the true God. This, then, is a singular favor, that, in the instruction of the Church, God uses not only mute teachers, but even opens his own sacred mouth; not only proclaims some god to be worshipped, but at the same time pronounces himself to be the Being to whom this worship is due.<sup>25</sup>

Nothing is rightly, truly and usefully learned unless it produces as its highest fruit the recognition and reverence for him whose goodness and glory are everywhere exhibited.

Hardly, then, need we speak at length about Calvin's insistence on the *necessity* and *profitableness* of the sacred book. Only from its pages can we learn about man in his original state, adorned with all the perfection of his likeness to God the Creator, and his present condition suffering the consequences of wilful apostasy from God who is his only true life. Even more, only the Bible, by showing us God's love in Christ Jesus, shows the way of reconciliation, redemption and renewal by grace.

What should be added is the Reformer's teaching on the *clarity* or *perspicuity* of the Word.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Institutes*, I.6.i.

Here he rages repeatedly against all who would take away the "key" to its understanding from the believer and place it in the hands of an educated elite, whether in the school or in the church. Indeed there are "some things hard to understand" in Paul's epistles. But these ought not turn us away from the Word to allow "the foolish and stupid speculations of some men upset us, by which they entangle and pervert the simple doctrine which ought to serve for edification." Rather we should bring to Holy Scripture "a calm and teachable mind." Such false teachers are found not only outside of the church but fully as much within its walls.

Again and again Calvin praises the clarity with which God addresses us in the Word to make known his will for our lives. But this does not mean that at first reading everything, especially in many of the prophecies, can be fully understood and appreciated. He then utters words of caution, as when the subject of angels and their ministry comes up in the book of Daniel.

Since Scripture is obscure to us through the darkness in which we are involved, let us learn to reject whatever surpasses our capacity, even when some dark veil envelops it, but let us fly to the remedy which Daniel used, not to seek the understanding of God's Word from angels who do not appear to us, but from Christ himself who in these days teaches us familiarly by means of pastors and ministers of the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

Or again in his second lecture on the prophecies of Ezekiel,

A vision is now to occupy our attention, whose obscurity so deterred the Jews that they forbade every attempt to explain it. But God appeared to his Prophet either in vain or not in vain; it is most absurd to suppose the former—then if the vision is useful, it is necessary for us to attain at least a partial understanding of it. . . . Now, if any one asks whether the vision is lucid, I confess its obscurity, and that I can scarcely understand it; but yet into what God has set before us, it is not only lawful and useful but necessary to inquire.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>*Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), II:48.

<sup>27</sup>*Commentaries on the Prophet Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), I:62.

To the unbelieving and ungodly, urging that Scripture is impenetrable because of its strange and irrational assertions, it will always remain a closed book. For this they have none to blame but themselves since, even under the pure preaching of the gospel, they love darkness rather than light. But when believers urge somewhat the same, they are guilty of sloth and disobedience to God who commands us to search the Word diligently which alone enlightens the eyes of our understanding to give sweetness and strength to life.

While warning against false teachers who arrogate to themselves the rank of experts, Calvin never for a moment minimizes the need for sound teachers and preachers. They are gifts from the gracious God through whose ministries Christ himself addresses us. By his appointment "every church has pastors and teachers according to its need, according to the number of the people, and according as the place requires." This he further explains,

Again, St. Paul proceeds afterwards to show us the inestimable benefit which we have by such order, and the fruit we reap from it. For (as I have said before) men have such lofty ideas in their heads that every one would be greatest. Therefore there is nothing better than to know that God procures our welfare by ordaining this form of government, namely that there should be pastors who teach us. For it is fighting against our own salvation when we act like cross-grained fools and will not be pleased with what God has ordained for our sovereign welfare.<sup>28</sup>

This leads necessarily to what Calvin has to say on the right to *interpret* the Word. This was, of course, a sore point in the controversy between evangelicals and Romanists. Like all the Reformers Calvin taught that because Rome erred so grievously in matters of doctrine and life, no one should slavishly submit himself to its officially endorsed interpretations. Rather, the duty of every believer is to "prove the spirits" and that according to the Bible alone. For this the Holy Spirit provides the enlightenment which is needed. But he was fully aware of

---

<sup>28</sup>*Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 373. Especially in his 25th and 26th Sermons (on Eph. 4:10-14) he warns, as in this passage, against supposing that people can do without the order of preachers which Christ has sovereignly ordained for the welfare of his people. Hence all the repeated admonitions in his writings to submit to their teaching so long as this brings the gospel.

the strange excesses to which this right of private interpretation soon led in his day. Thus he places it within its proper limits.

But here a difficult question arises: If every one has the right and liberty to judge, nothing can be settled as certain, but on the contrary the whole of religion will be uncertain. To this I answer, that there is a twofold trial of doctrine, private and public. The private trial is that by which every one settles his own faith, when he wholly acquiesces in that doctrine which he knows has come from God; for consciences will never find a safe and tranquil port otherwise than in God. Public trial refers to the common consent and polity of the Church; for as there is danger lest fanatics should rise up, who may presumptuously boast that they are endued with the Spirit of God, it is a necessary remedy, that the faithful meet together and seek a way by which they may agree in a holy and godly manner.<sup>29</sup>

For this he appeals to the work of the Spirit within God's children which not only provides enlightenment but also that meekness which is willing to listen to and learn from others.

But how should Holy Scripture as a book with many and varied writings by so many different writers be approached by preachers and people who seek to understand it? While giving full recognition to the wide diversity which it contains, he insists on its basic *unity*. According to him it contains no different, much less contradictory, theologies. Each part contributes to the beauty and symmetry of the whole. And how could this be otherwise? It comes from one and the same unchangeable God. It proclaims one and the same doctrine of salvation. It summons all men everywhere to that one spiritual worship of God which manifests itself in repentance, faith and godly obedience.

But more clearly than any other author in his day he discusses both the unity and the diversity of the Bible, especially with reference to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In two carefully written chapters he outlines this in his *Institutes*.<sup>30</sup> And the nuances to be observed by the reader can be found throughout many of his other writings.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 231.

<sup>30</sup> *Institutes*, II.10, "The Similarity of the Old and New Testaments;" II.11, "The Difference of the Two Testaments."

All that comes to us in Scripture possesses divine authority, yet not all is equally applicable for those who live in full gospel light. Here the Bible itself shows us the way. Many of the regulations and rituals laid down for Israel have been fulfilled for us in Christ Jesus. Hence Paul's sustained opposition to the Judaizers who would compel Gentile believers to submit to circumcision and other such ordinances. Even more, Hebrews as a kind of commentary on Leviticus reminds the church that the "shadows" have now been replaced with the reality who is Jesus Christ. Yet the Old Testament may never be lightly esteemed or dismissed. Without some clear understanding of it much of what the New reveals will be shrouded in mystery and lead to misunderstanding. Nor may it be forgotten that all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile by birth, are the Israel of God and therefore heirs of the promises made to the forefathers. Many of the ancient prophecies, so he urges, have already been fulfilled. Much more still awaits fulfillment. And here he cautions against speculation. What has not yet been clearly revealed we are to await in hope which never puts to shame. When dealing with the future of the church and the world, Calvin speaks with admirable restraint, always warning against trying to be wiser than the Word allows. We are to live by that "closed canon" which God has so graciously and generously entrusted to the church, since it is in every respect sufficient for faith and godliness in this age. When studied diligently and prayerfully, it provides all the knowledge, comfort and hope that is needed. By so bending heart and mind and ear to listen to God himself, we will learn that Scripture explains itself. By following this principle believers soon discover that light is shed by it on those passages which seem to be dark and difficult to understand.

Here we can learn much from his method of interpreting Scripture as reflected throughout his commentaries and sermons.

Repeatedly he warns against allegorizing the texts, a method which had found high favor in the church since the days of Origen. Such attempts to uncover deeper and hidden meanings in even the simplest texts not only misled believers but also demeaned God. Always the words of Scripture mean what they say. All the common rules for understanding language obtain when reading the Bible. Also the historical circumstances in which God spoke through his mouthpieces enables us to grasp better what and why he said what he did at any given time. But because this is God's revelation of his dealings with mankind, to its many and varied passages there is also an inescapable theological dimension. In each instance God comes the closer to us, so

that we learn the better to know, adore and trust him who is our true life in Jesus Christ.

Therefore the "key" to understanding Scripture is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ as he himself so clearly taught his disciples. Commenting on Luke 24:11, Calvin writes,

This passage shows us in what manner Christ is made known to us through the gospel. It is when light is thrown on the knowledge of him by the Law and the Prophets. For never was there a more able or skilful teacher of the gospel than our Lord himself; and we see that he borrows from *the Law and the Prophets* the proof of his doctrine. If it be objected that he began with easy lessons, that the disciples might gradually dismiss *the Prophets*, and pass on to the perfect gospel, this conjecture is easily refuted; for we shall afterwards find it stated, that all the apostles had *their understanding opened*, not to be wise without the assistance of the Law, but to *understand the Scriptures*. In order that Christ may be made known to us through the gospel, it is therefore necessary that Moses and the Prophets should go before as guides, to show us the way. It is necessary to remind readers of this, that they may not lend an ear to fanatics, who, by suppressing *the Law and the Prophets*, wickedly mutilate the gospel; as if God intended that any testimony which he has ever given respecting his Son should become useless.<sup>31</sup>

Here is a Christ-centered approach to understanding the Bible which Calvin further elaborates in his comments on the opening chapter of John's gospel.

In this introduction he asserts the eternal Divinity of Christ, in order to inform us that he is the eternal God, *who was manifested in the flesh* (1 Tim. iii,16.). The design is, to show it to have been necessary that the restoration of mankind should be accomplished by the Son of God, since by his power all things were created, since he alone breathes into all the creatures life and energy, so that they remain in their condition; and since in man himself he has given a remarkable display both of his power and of his grace, and even subsequently to the fall of man

---

<sup>31</sup>*Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), III:359-360.

has not ceased to show liberality and kindness towards his posterity. And this doctrine is highly necessary to be known; for since apart from God we ought not at all to seek life and salvation, how could our faith rest on Christ, if we did not with certainty know what is here taught.<sup>32</sup>

As in many other passages Calvin also insists on the unity of the biblical message, whether it speaks of creation or providence or more specifically of salvation. The one is incomplete without the rest. All is to be believed without question and connected with Christ. And this Christ is revealed, be it in shadows of various kinds, throughout the entire Old Testament. But again Calvin's caution is evident. He does not strain the texts to find "types" anywhere and everywhere. For that his grammatical-historical method stands him in good stead and can serve the church also today.

We have paused long, perhaps much too long for this essay, on Calvin's understanding of Scripture. Yet this is essential. Apart from it we cannot rightly understand, assess and appreciate any of his contributions to the Lord's church which remain to be considered.

— 3 —

Before turning to Calvin's theology for which he seems best remembered, let us reflect on what he accomplished to provide Christ's church with a biblical understanding of itself and its calling.

Also this began early in his career as teacher and preacher of the gospel. Over against the imposing structure of the Roman church headed by the pope and holding that outside of it there was no salvation, the evangelicals appeared to be in hopeless disarray. What was needed, so that these could live together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ with the pure ministry of Word and sacraments, was clear instruction from Scripture on the true unity of the church as a hedge against growing individualism and sectarianism.

As soon as Calvin arrived in Geneva at Farel's insistence, this issue had to be faced. Only in this way could the gains which had been made for the Reformation there and throughout much of French-speaking Switzerland be consolidated.

---

<sup>32</sup>*Commentary on the Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), I:25-26.

Williston Walker in his *John Calvin* summarizes the situation which obtained at that time. Farel had arrived in Geneva in 1532 to preach the gospel, assisted a year later by Viret. On August 10, 1535 these two preachers persuaded the Council of Two Hundred to suspend by decree the celebration of the Mass. However,

The Genevan Church lacked all organization, save that the city government favored Protestantism, supported Protestant preachers, and exercised a kind of ecclesiastical control over Genevan territories. It had no creed, save the determination of the General Assembly to live according to the Word of God, no separate discipline, no existence independent of the will of the civil rulers of the turbulent city.<sup>33</sup>

Calvin arrived in August 1536 and soon his presence was felt. To provide a proper foundation for the church's life three important documents, largely the fruit of Calvin's pen, were prepared: the *Articles* respecting church government, a *Catechism* for the instruction of children and a *Confession of Faith* to be subscribed to by the citizens of that city.<sup>34</sup> Here principles already laid down in the first edition of the *Institutes* were expounded and expanded. Step by step the documents were adopted but not without serious opposition. Although the Little Council voted that the *Articles* were "to be observed in full," difficulties on the matter of discipline sprang up. Many of the people were not ready to submit to such control over their lives. Not until January 1538, after Calvin and Farel had persuaded the government of Berne to approve, was the *Confession of Faith* put into effect.

On at least two points Calvin had to yield. While he urged that the Lord's Supper be celebrated every Sunday or at least for a time "because of the weakness of the people" once a month, the Council restricted this to four times a year. More decisive for future troubles which arose in Geneva, it decided, contrary to the wishes of the Reformers, that no one who wished to partake of the sacrament should be excluded. We can hardly, at this late date, begin to appreciate with what perplexities and pains the reformation of Christ's church had to be undertaken. It comes as no surprise, then, that Calvin repeatedly urged

---

<sup>33</sup>Williston Walker, *John Calvin*, 181.

<sup>34</sup>"Catechism of the Church of Geneva" with its dedicatory address to the Reformed preachers in East Friesland in *Tracts and Treatises* (edited and translated by Henry Bevendge; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), II:34-39; "The Genevan Confession of Faith" in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, 120-128.

that a Reformed church must always engage in reforming itself according to the Word. Far more was involved than simply breaking away from Rome with its rites and regulations.<sup>35</sup>

The *Confession of Faith* "which all the citizens and inhabitants of Geneva and the subjects of the country must promise to keep and uphold" lays down as the basic principle for ecclesiastical life,

First, we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other things which might be devised by the opinion of men, apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution according to the command of our Lord.<sup>36</sup>

Not be overlooked, also because of the many discussions and debates on the nature of the true church, is the eighteenth article.

While there is only one Church of Jesus Christ, we always acknowledge that necessity requires companies of the faithful to be distributed in different places. Of these assemblies each one is called Church. But in as much as all companies do not assemble in the name of our Lord, but rather to blaspheme and pollute him by their sacrilegious deeds, we believe that the proper marks by which to discern the church of Jesus Christ is that his holy gospel be purely and faithfully preached, proclaimed, heard and kept, that his sacraments be properly administered, even if there be some imperfections and faults, as there always will be among men. On the other hand, where the gospel is not declared, heard, and received, there we do not acknowledge the form of the Church. Hence the churches

---

<sup>35</sup>C. van Proosdij in his *Calvijn: Een strijder voor de anti-revolutionaire beginselen, toegelicht vooral uit zijne worsteling voor de vrijmaking der Kerk* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1899), shows that Calvin not only sought to maintain and consolidate the Reformation in Geneva but worked hard and long for the liberation of the church from the power of the magistrates in order that (1) the church would supervise its ministers rather than the government, (2) that the church would be free to open or to close administration of the sacraments, and (3) that the "consistoire" would be recognized as a fully authorized ecclesiastical assembly. This was far in advance of what Luther or Zwingli sought for the churches which were led by them.

<sup>36</sup>The Geneva Confession of 1536" in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 120.

governed by the ordinances of the pope are synagogues of the devil rather than Christian churches.<sup>37</sup>

With this the gauntlet was thrown down to the Roman Church with its long-standing pretention of being the one, only, true and catholic church. At the same time he repudiated the "pure church" ideal of those sectarians who denounced the reformatory labors of Luther, Zwingli and Bucer as ineffective and dangerous compromises. On this point Calvin will have much more to say in his commentaries, lest the union of all true believers with Christ and so with each other be irreparably damaged and disrupted.

Throughout his career he did not depart from these basic convictions taken early in his ministry. But as he worked through Scripture, we find many new and fresh insights into the manysidedness of the character and life of Christ's church.

No simple definition or even description of what the Bible has to say about the church does justice to it. Always and also here Calvin worked with pastoral insight and sensitivity to guide people into the riches of biblical truth without compromise. Had those who claimed to be his spiritual heirs listened more closely, not a few of the dissensions and disruptions which arose among them might well have been ameliorated or even avoided for their own spiritual welfare and the greater glory of the Savior whom they confessed.

Space allows us to comment on only a few of the most salient features of his teachings concerning the church.

Before considering distinctions which he made, it is essential to set forth the principles which he drew from the Word.

The church is God's new creation in Christ Jesus who as its true life is to be recognized as its sole Head and Lord. From him alone comes salvation. That "good news," made known only in Scripture, must be proclaimed without fear or favor everywhere. All who believe with the heart and confess with the lip its message are to be gathered into a "holy company" or fellowship separated from the unbelieving and ungodly who lie under God's wrath. Their life is thus hid with Christ in God throughout this earthly existence and into glory.

Already in the first edition of the *Institutes* he demonstrates both the depth and breadth of the church. It consists of "the total number of the elect, whether angels or men and of men, whether dead or alive." This statement was not intended to detract from the church as a visible

---

<sup>37</sup>*Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, 124-125.

organization in the world. But what he attempted to make clear is that "the secret choice of God is the foundation of the church." Nowhere does he discourse more eloquently and yet pastorally on this than in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Here salvation is linked with both election and gospel preaching.

Three causes of our salvation are mentioned, and a fourth is shortly afterward added. The efficient cause is the *good pleasure of the will of God*, the material cause, *Jesus Christ*, and the final cause is *the praise of the glory of his grace*. . . .He (i.e., Paul) now comes to the formal cause, the preaching of the gospel, by which the goodness of God *overflows upon us*.<sup>38</sup>

Nor did the Reformer hesitate to incorporate the angels in that blessed union and communion with Christ and the church.

. . .but what hinders us from saying that the angels also have been *gathered together*? Not that they were ever scattered, but their attachment to the service of God is now perfect, and their state is eternal. . . .So far as they are creatures, had it not been for the benefit which they derived from Christ, they would have been liable to change and to sin, and consequently their happiness would not have been eternal. Who then would deny that both angels and men have been brought back to a fixed order by the grace of Christ? Men had been lost, and angels were not beyond the reach of danger. By *gathering* both into his body, Christ hath united them to God the Father, and established actual harmony between heaven and earth.<sup>39</sup>

With this he proceeds to explain the church as "body of Christ." It is composed of all those redeemed by his blood. That state belongs to them and to them only who, responding to the gospel, embrace him and all his benefits by faith apart from any merit of their own. By such faith they are unbreakably joined to him as their true and only life. It rests alone in *the word of truth* which as the apostle insists is also *the gospel of your salvation*. But lest any should boast of his own insight as the source of such faith, Calvin adds,

---

<sup>38</sup>*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 200, 203.

<sup>39</sup>*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 205.

The true conviction which believers have of the word of God, of their own salvation, and of religion in general does not spring from the judgment of the flesh, or from human and philosophical arguments, but from the sealing of the Spirit, who imparts to their consciences such certainty as to remove all doubt. The foundation of faith would be frail and unsteady, if it rested on human wisdom; and therefore, as preaching is the instrument of faith, so the Holy Spirit makes preaching efficacious.<sup>40</sup>

All this is of God and by grace alone. Because it is his creation in the perfect Mediator and Savior, believers can also be rightly called "saints" and "faithful."

He, therefore, is its sole Head and Lord.

To his Word with all its promises and commands believers are to pledge whole-hearted allegiance.

Despite every trial and temptation to which the church will be exposed on earth because of Satan and wicked men, its life in Christ is fully assured for time and eternity.

Its foundation, so Calvin reminds his readers, is the simple confession *Thou art the Christ*, as affirmed by Peter

The confession is short, but it embraces all that is contained in our salvation; for the designation *Christ*, or *Anointed*, includes both an everlasting Kingdom, and an everlasting Priesthood, to reconcile us to God, and, by expiating our sins through his sacrifice, to obtain for us a perfect righteousness, and, having received us under his protection, to uphold and supply and enrich us with every description of his blessings.<sup>41</sup>

In him all who truly believe are "joined together, by a holy consent into a spiritual building, *that God may dwell in the midst of them*, (Ezek. xliii.7)." Therefore,

Against all the power of Satan the firmness of the Church will prove to be invincible, because the truth of God, on which the faith of a Church rests, will ever remain unshaken. . . . It is a promise which eminently deserves our observation, that all who are united to Christ, and acknowledge him to be Christ and Mediator, will remain safe to the end from all danger; for what

---

<sup>40</sup>*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 208.

<sup>41</sup>*Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, II:289.

is said of the body of the Church belongs to each of its members, since they are one in Christ.<sup>42</sup>

This, while fire, sword and dungeon threatened evangelicals in many lands, was the consolation which gave strength and sweetness to large multitudes.

But he in the same breath reminds them that God's people are pilgrims under attack. Hence they are ordered "to be always ready and prepared for battle."

To that Church, embroidering further on its unity, belong also the saints and faithful living in the Old Testament dispensation. While indicating the differences in administration, Calvin does stress strongly that Jew and Gentile alike were called to the same salvation. Even the Law given by Moses was an evidence of God's grace. Indeed, believers in Israel saw Christ only in the shadows of sacrifices and ceremonies but, looking in faith for his appearance, they were saved in a hope which did not put them to shame. From creation to consummation the church is one.

Especially his commentary on Hebrews 11 illumines the truth that faith in Christ is God's way of redemption, reconciliation and renewal for sinners.

Though God gave to the fathers only a taste of that grace which is so largely poured on us, though he showed to them at a distance only an obscure representation of Christ, who is now set forth to us clearly before our eyes, yet they were satisfied and never fell away from their faith.<sup>43</sup>

But then as well as now it is "not all Israel that is called Israel." Rich as was the covenant with all its privileges and assurances of divine faithfulness, Calvin did not offer, as his Roman opponents argued, a cheap grace content with mere lip service. Commenting on Hebrews 11:2 he explains.

That all the fathers from the beginning of the world were approved by God in no other way than by being united to him by faith; and this he shows, that the Jews might know that by faith alone they could be bound together in holy unity with the fathers, and that as soon as they renounced faith, they became

---

<sup>42</sup>*Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelist*, II:291-292.

<sup>43</sup>*Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 283.

banished from the Church, and that they were then no longer the legitimate children of Abraham, but a degenerate race and bastards.<sup>44</sup>

All the believing fathers, so he taught, demonstrated the genuineness of their faith in God as Savior by their obedience. Only such confidence in what God has said produces "the willingness to undergo so many toils" and the firmness of purpose "to overcome so many obstacles," so that,

It hence appears that faith alone is the teacher of obedience; and we may on the contrary draw this conclusion, that it is unbelief that prevents us to obey God. And at this day the unbelief of the world exhibits itself dreadfully in this way, for there are a very few who obey God.<sup>45</sup>

Rome boasted that it alone was the one, true, holy, catholic and apostolic church. All who left its fellowship were heretics and schismatics without any hope of salvation, since these refused to listen to her voice and receive God's grace through the sacraments entrusted to her by way of an apostolic succession. This meant submission to the ecclesiastical hierarchy and especially to the pope as "the vicar of Christ."

Much more was involved, according to Calvin, than a question of church polity and organization. God's grace was thereby shut up in the hands of unworthy prelates and priests who lorded it over the Savior's blood-bought people and so dishonored him who is Lord of the church.

For him not only the unity, holiness and catholicity of the church but fully as much its apostolicity was grounded in Jesus Christ. Already early he began to press this point in his response to Cardinal Sadoletto's "Letter to the Senate and the People of Geneva" (1539).<sup>46</sup> That bishop with persuasive words urged the people to return to the bosom of the one true church for the sake of their soul's salvation. Only in the Roman church, so he argued, had the true faith been preserved by an unbroken succession of bishops and popes from the time of the apostles. When no one else challenged the bishop of Carpentras, Calvin

---

<sup>44</sup> *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 263.

<sup>45</sup> *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 276.

<sup>46</sup> "Sadoletto's Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva," in *Tracts and Treatises* (edited and translated by Henry Beveridge; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), I:3-22.

in exile from Geneva wrote his epoch-making reply.<sup>47</sup> He pointed out not only glaring inconsistencies in tracing that supposed succession but especially flagrant departures from apostolic teaching and practice which corrupted the Roman church. True apostolicity, according to Scripture, was found only where Christ according to the promise given his apostles raised up faithful preachers of the Word.

In much the same vein he responded in his "Articles agreed upon by the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris. . .with the Antidote" (1542).<sup>48</sup>

Two years later at Bucer's request he penned his vindication of the Reformation to be presented at the Imperial Diet at Spire. This he entitled "The Necessity of Reforming the Church." Addressing that august assembly he wrote,

Here mighty Emperor, and most Illustrious Princes, it will be necessary to recall to your remembrance what I formerly observed, viz., that the safety of the Church depends as much on this doctrine (i.e., the sole authority of Scripture) as human life does on the soul. If the purity of this doctrine is in any way impaired, the Church has received a deadly wound, and, therefore, when I shall have shown that it was for the greater part extinguished, it will be the same as if I had shown that the Church had been brought to the very brink of destruction.<sup>49</sup>

He then exposed the many corruptions in doctrine, worship and government still championed by Rome despite repeated pleas for reform. To clinch the argument Calvin stated in a few simple sentences wherein true apostolicity consists.

Christ gave to the Apostles an authority similar to that which God conferred on the Prophets, an authority exactly defined,

---

<sup>47</sup>"Reply by John Calvin," in *Tracts and Treatises*, I:27-68.

<sup>48</sup>"Articles. . .with the Antidote," in *Tracts and Treatises*, I:72-120. To refute these theologians who professed their loyalty to Scripture and the church fathers, Calvin in each instance simply refers them back to the Bible, appealing occasionally to the church fathers whom he seemed to know far better than the theologians of Paris. In challenging their appeal to church tradition as a norm for doctrine in addition to Scripture, Calvin quotes from Chrysostom after appealing to the Bible: "As Christ declares that he spoke not of himself, because he spoke from the law and the prophets; so if anything beside the gospel is obtruded upon us under the name of the Spirit, let us not believe it. For as Christ is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, so the Spirit is the fulfillment of the Gospel."

<sup>49</sup>"The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Tracts and Treatises*, I:137.

viz., to act as his ambassadors to men. Now the invariable law is, that he who is entrusted with an embassy must faithfully and religiously conform to his instruction. . . . If it is asked what the authority is with which their successors were invested, we have the definition of Peter, which enjoins all who speak in the Church to speak "the oracles" of God.<sup>50</sup>

Reading through this and his many other writings we marvel at the ease with which he quotes Scripture, appeals to the fathers of the early church and refers to ancient ecclesiastical decrees to demolish Rome's pretention to apostolicity. After an incisive review of the subject in the final edition of the *Institutes*, he concludes,

It follows, therefore, that their plea of uninterrupted succession is a vain pretense, unless the truth of Christ which was transmitted from the fathers, be permanently retained pure and uncorrupted by their posterity.<sup>51</sup>

But how, in the welter of all the confused and contradictory claims, can the true church be distinguished from the false?

Here he speaks often of the "marks" of the church. For every believer instructed by the Spirit in God's truth these are clearly observable. At times Calvin mentions only one; more often, two; occasionally, also a third. But the first and fundamental one is the pure preaching of the gospel. On this, as we will note later, the Reformer has much to say to our present ecclesiastical confusion. Apart from the preached Word we have little hope of the experience and enjoyment of salvation. Never may this be divorced from the two sacraments which our Lord has instituted since—here he again appeals to Augustine—these are "the visible words of God." Neither may be defaced with any human accretions which may happen to appeal for a season. Rather, the simplicity of form which the Bible indicates is to be rigorously observed. And in obedience to Christ and his apostles discipline in matters of doctrine and conduct will also characterize the true church. Only so can the church through its appointed officers carry out its high calling.

That ministry, mandated by no one other than Jesus Christ, is simple and straightforward. By the Word it is to call all within reach of its voice to repentance and faith. In this way it seeks to instruct, to

---

<sup>50</sup>*Institutes*, IV.2.ii.

<sup>51</sup>*Institutes*, IV.1.iv.

comfort and to correct its members, so that their lives may be well-pleasing to the God of their salvation. No one who is unbelieving and ungodly may be admitted to its fellowship. And those members who refuse, upon frequent admonition, to mend their ways are to be excluded, especially from the holy sacraments.

No church, however, will ever demonstrate these marks perfectly in this world. Hence the "marks" are not to be found in the perfection of its members or the worthiness of those who administer the Word and sacraments. Sin always rears its ugly head so that all must be called to daily remembrance of their sins and of the only remedy which God has provided in the perfection of the Mediator. But here is no excuse for or compromise with sin. Yet this provides no warrant for schism so long as the Word is purely preached in reliance on God's promise that the Spirit will work in and with and through the gospel to lead people to drink ever more deeply of the rivers of grace.

In this way Calvin addresses himself to the visibility of the church on earth. It is not hidden away somewhere beyond the ken and reach of those who seek after God. It manifests itself in a visible organization and structure. Often he speaks eloquently of it as "the mother of the faithful." In it we are brought to that new birth which unites us with Christ. By its faithful ministries we are nourished and refreshed. And none may presume to dismiss himself from its communion, so long as he is still in this life. When he then discourses on the distinction between the visible and invisible church—which Augustine and afterward also Zwingli had done—Calvin will not allow for any notion that these are two distinct churches. Only in the church visible can we discover Christ gathering and defending and preserving for himself those who are saved. Hence we are to render the church which sincerely seeks to fulfill its calling all due honor and reverence, despite whatever failings in doctrine or discipline may still cling to it. Even the Corinthian congregation with its many sins and shortcomings was still recognized by God as his church. Thus Calvin feels free to write,

But the word *Church* is frequently used in Scripture to designate the whole multitude dispersed all over the world, who profess to worship one God and Jesus Christ, who are initiated into his faith by holy baptism, who testify their unity in true doctrine and charity by a participation in the sacred supper, and preserve the ministry which Christ has instituted for the purpose of preaching it. In this Church are included many hypocrites, who have nothing of Christ but the name and appearance; many

persons ambitious, avaricious, envious, slanderers, and dissolute in their lives, who are tolerated for a time, either because they cannot be convicted by a legitimate process, or because discipline is not always maintained with sufficient vigor.<sup>52</sup>

While all errors in the church's doctrine, worship and discipline are serious, some are far more serious also in their consequences than others. By way of illustration he mentions a few of the latter. Others which do not dim God's rich grace in Christ and jeopardize salvation may have to be tolerated for a season. Here he speaks sharply.

I would not be understood to plead for any errors, even the smallest, or to recommend their being encouraged by connivance or flattery. But I maintain, that we ought not, on account of every trivial difference of sentiment, to abandon the Church, which retains the saving and pure doctrine that insures the preservation of piety, and supports the use of the sacraments instituted by our Lord. In the meantime, if we endeavor to correct what we disapprove, we are acting in this case according to our duty.<sup>53</sup>

And this responsibility he puts on every member as well as on the leaders of the church.

From which it appears, that every member of the Church is required to exert himself for the general edification, according to the measure of his grace, provided he do it decently and in order; that is to say, that we should neither forsake the communion of the Church, nor, by continuing in it, disturb its peace and well regulated discipline.<sup>54</sup>

His concern for the church, however, was by no means limited to the congregation which he served for many years. It would take us too far afield to mention his many labors to promote the true unity of Christ's church throughout the world in which he lived. Almost from the beginning he engaged in discussions and debates with the Roman opposition. Only the intransigence of its leaders, together with their wiliness, caused him to cease from those efforts. But he was able to bring close fellowship between the two churches which had sprung up

---

<sup>52</sup>*Institutes*, IV.1.vii.

<sup>53</sup>*Institutes*, IV.1.xiii.

<sup>54</sup>*Institutes*, IV.1.xii.

in Switzerland. He was also eager to seek better relationships with the followers of Luther. Of Luther himself he always spoke with deep respect. Melancthon he regarded as one of his dearest friends in Christ. Not only did he urge in letters and addresses those nobles, princes and emperors to whom he wrote to break with Rome's false doctrines and idolatrous practices, but also to reform the churches in which they had influence and so promote the unity of all who embraced the evangelical faith. But for those who denied the Trinity, the atoning death of the Savior and other cardinal teachings of Holy Writ he would allow no place in the church.

Firmly was he convinced throughout much of his life that a doctrinal basis for the union of all true Protestants could be attained, if only the leaders did not press to unwarranted extremes every expression in the creeds which several churches had already adopted.<sup>55</sup> For this he set an example by subscribing in good conscience to both the *Augsburg Confession* of the Lutherans and the *Consensus Helvetica* of the Zwinglians. Convinced that differences between them were largely a matter of words, this act for him was no compromise. Upon one occasion he proposed an international conference of representatives from the churches of Switzerland, France, England and Germany to settle matters in dispute. And when invited with other leaders by Archbishop Cranmer to such a conference at Lambeth Palace to devise a creed to which all could subscribe, he responded by letter,

As for myself, if I should be thought of any use, I would not, if need be, object to crossing ten seas for such a purpose. If the assisting of England were alone concerned, that would be motive enough for me. Much more, therefore, am I of the opinion that I ought grudge no labor or trouble, seeing that the object in

---

<sup>55</sup>On Calvin's view of the place of creeds and confessions for Christ's church much more needs to be said than is found here. He esteemed the early ecumenical creeds highly, since in them the church by common consent established God's truth revealed in Scripture to ward off heresy. He defended the church's right also to use in them terms not found in the Bible itself when these illuminated sound doctrine. At the same time he warned repeatedly against the insistence of some, especially among second generation Lutherans, that sound doctrine could and had to be expressed only in one way. Always "the substance of sound doctrine" had to be confessed clearly and concisely as a guide to understanding what Scripture said. On Calvin's refusal to subscribe to an early creed at the insistence of Peter Caroli, who had accused the Genevan pastors of heresy on the point of the Trinity (a case which aroused suspicions of their unorthodoxy throughout the whole Protestant world), cf. B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1956), 203-212.

view is an agreement among the learned, to be drawn up by the weight of their authority according to Scripture, in order to unite widely severed Churches.<sup>56</sup>

Only the death of Edward VI and the subsequent martyrdom of Cranmer himself prevented such a conference.

But what about proclaiming the gospel to all nations? Was not Calvin, if not derelict, at least very deficient in addressing himself clearly to this aspect of the church's duty? Already Erasmus, by no means an evangelical, had raised his voice on behalf of foreign missions in his *Ecclesiastes sive Concionator Evangelicus*. With his writings the Reformer, who seems to have read all he could lay hands on, was well acquainted. But he may seem to us unduly reluctant to summon the church to this ministry. He writes frequently and at length about the ingathering of the Gentiles. He mentions the promise given to Abraham and comments on the Psalms and prophecies which pointed forward to its fulfillment. He does not doubt for a moment that God has his "elect" among all nations. But even when discoursing on Christ's commission to the apostles, he fails to lay this calling to proclaim the good news everywhere upon the churches of his day.

It cannot be denied that his immediate concern was the reformation of the churches of Christendom as he knew it. Even in the dedicatory address to Lord Nicolas Radziwill of Lithuania for his *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles* (the missions manual for the church of all ages), he pleads for an ongoing and thorough reformation of these churches already existing.

But his deeds, let it be remembered, spoke louder than any words could.

Full well he recognized that his countrymen lay steeped in ignorance and superstition, so that he could not content himself or the Genevan congregation and council with work done at home. With passionate zeal he taught and sent out an ever-growing number of men to France and elsewhere to lead people to Christ and salvation. And when opportunity arose to bring the gospel to the heathen, he was quick to seize it.

---

<sup>56</sup>The letters of the Archbishop of Canterbury to several leading Protestant theologians, including Calvin, are found in the collections of his letters published by the Parker Society, part of which is reproduced in *Letters of Calvin*, edited by Jules Bonnet (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1857), II:330-1, footnote 2. Calvin's response is found in A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin* (London, James Clarke & Co., 1950), 164.

Lest this be dismissed too lightly, let us rehearse a few of the salient facts.<sup>57</sup>

The evangelicals in France at that time were living in great fear of persecution. At the instigation of Admiral Coligny an expedition was sent to Brazil in 1555 in the hope that there the Huguenots might find a happier home. When a settlement had been established near Rio de Janeiro, the leader, de Villegagnon, requested that two ministers be sent with additional colonists. This was passed on to Calvin who promptly appointed Pierre Richer and Guillaume Chartier as the first Protestant foreign missionaries in the hope of also leading some of the natives to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Richer wrote the first report which, to say the least, was discouraging. The lands are largely desolate and the natives scarcely different from senseless beasts, without the knowledge of any God and incapable of discerning good from evil. How, then, could Christ be proclaimed to them? But by giving instruction to the youth he cherished high hopes that "this Idumea will still become a possession of Christ." But soon Romanist machinations in the motherland spelled the doom of this venture. The Calvinists had to flee for their lives into the wilds. After some time the pastors with twenty others were taken aboard a Breton vessel which soon sprang a leak. Returning to shore all were without mercy hurled over a steep cliff to become the first Protestant martyrs in the new world.

This biblical view of Christ's church and its calling gave shape to the Reformed churches. Many of its salient points have been embodied in their confessions and catechisms. Hence rather than summarizing his views we have as much as possible let Calvin speak in his own words.

His ideals were not fully realized in Geneva under his leadership, even though John Knox did call that city "the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles."

This failing is hardly chargeable to Calvin. The fault lay elsewhere: in the violent opposition of many leading citizens, in the control which the civil magistrates for a long time exercised over the church and its pastors and, most of all, in the spiritual weaknesses from which no believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is ever completely freed in this life. Only by continually reforming itself in obedience to Holy Scripture will the church and its living members begin to become what the Lord intends and demands.

---

<sup>57</sup>A brief account of this missionary effort can be found in Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, 159-160.

Few have equalled Calvin as a theologian; none ever excelled him in his commitment to be faithful to Holy Scripture. For this, so he frequently wrote, one must first with heart and mind believe the Word. Only then can a man understand and interpret it rightly according to the Spirit's intent.

Knowing that his life was drawing to its close, Calvin on August 25, 1564, called in his notary, Pierre Chenelat, to draw up his last will and testament. Testifying that his hope for salvation lay only in God's grace, he added,

Moreover, I declare that I have endeavored to teach His Word undefiled and to expound Holy Scripture faithfully according to the measure of grace which he has given me. In all the disputations which I led against the enemies of the truth, I employed no cunning or any sophistry, but have fought His cause honestly.<sup>58</sup>

With this he gives us a glimpse into that profound humility of soul which characterized him. Looking back on his life-long labors, he confesses,

But, oh, my will, my zeal were so cold and sluggish that I know myself guilty in every respect; without His infinite goodness, all my passionate striving would only be smoke. Indeed the grace itself which he gave me would make me even more guilty; thus my only confidence is that He is the Father of mercy who as such desires to reveal himself to such a miserable sinner.<sup>59</sup>

Unless we take this confession at face value we will never begin to understand Calvin "the theologian." The guiding principle of all his study, meditation and teaching was the conviction that Christian doctrine is always unto godliness (*pietas*).

Without question his one, great, systematic work on Christian doctrine we find in the final edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). Most of what follows refers to it.

Let it be remembered, however, that all he said and wrote was, directly or indirectly, theological. It throbs in every one of his sermons.

---

<sup>58</sup>Emil Stickleberger, *Calvin*, translated by David G. Gelzer (London: James Clarke and Co., 1959), 148.

<sup>59</sup>Emil Stickleberger, *Calvin*, 148.

It is inescapable in the countless letters which flowed from his pen. It echoes in the prefaces and those dedicatory letters addressed to men of high or low estate as well as on nearly every page of his commentaries. Even in the fiercest debates with opponents Calvin cannot help but speak of that one, true, living God who had mastered his life. Only when listening to him who has so graciously revealed himself in the Word can we know the truth and experience that grace which keeps life sweet and strong.

Here is no abstract, cold, intellectualistic systematizing of divine truth; rather, a Christian believer speaking from the heart through the mind in the hope of reaching deeply into the souls of others. To be sure, he can argue clearly and cogently. He at times thunders vehemently, even too violently for our twentieth century sensitivities, against those whose pride and perversity pit themselves against what the Lord of heaven has said and done. He instructs; he exhorts; he rebukes without fear or favor. But anyone who reads widely in his writings soon discerns accents of pastoral tenderness as he teaches and pleads and prays. To all the tensions of a Christian soul Calvin was no stranger. Always he strove, be it imperfectly as he openly acknowledged, to speak out of faith, in hope to be of help, and with a passionate love for the Lord and the church which he had been appointed to serve.

Yet you say: this tells me about the man, but not much about his theology. The answer is clear. As with Athanasius, Chrysostom and perhaps most of all Augustine so with Calvin: the man was his theology and his theology reveals the man. In every activity and life-relationship he sought to live by what he believed from the heart. Small wonder that his writings soon caught fire in countless hearts throughout Europe in his day and are still read with profit today.

Shall we begin with a few sentences about his ability to communicate successfully?<sup>60</sup>

All reputable scholars recognize that he was a master in languages. He knew Greek well, having been instructed by some of the best teachers of that time. His Latin was not that of some crabbed scholastic but rather of one whose expressions were molded by the best in Roman prose and poetry. Almost daily he preached in French and himself wrote or translated several of his works into that tongue with an

---

<sup>60</sup>Summaries of Calvin's educational background and its influence on his theology can be found in the many reputable biographies. The most complete and that with an amazing amount of detail is Emile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 7 vols. (Lausanne, 1899-1929).

elegance that far surpassed that of his contemporaries. Here we find the vitality and vivacity so expressive of the French spirit. But his theology was in no sense uniquely French, in distinction from that produced in German, English or some other language. Clearly is it universally Christian because it is so consistently biblical. Because he was able to use language proficiently, the claims of his theology come through clearly, often concisely and compactly, and occasionally with that measure of circumlocution which is appropriate when attempting to expound the deepest mysteries of the gospel. Even when resisting or rejecting his views, no one can really miss the point of what he wrote. Here we find nothing arcane, much less dull or sluggish or opaque. Always there is a liveliness and directness which is inescapable. Perhaps if Christian doctrine were so presented now, it might well receive a wider reading.

This, however, only tells us a little about the mold in which his theology was presented. Far more significant is its substance. And as soon as we inquire into this, a host of compelling questions confront us.

What, for Calvin, was the source of his theological convictions? How did he arrive at these? In how far did he draw on others who before him wrote on Christian doctrine? For what purposes did he pen his many diverse writings? Can we derive, either inductively or deductively, some understanding of his methodology? Why did these fruits of his pen win such wide reading in his own day? Is there a clear structure evident in his attempt to systematize his teaching? If so, what was it; whence did it come; why did he employ it? In how far, if at all, can we find some central and all-compelling theme which like a golden thread runs through his works? Was his thought in its substance as well as its expression as deeply tinged by the spirit of that French humanism to which he had been early exposed, as some have suggested? And what for him is theology and the "object" of theological science?

Now we have only tipped the veil a little. More ink has been spilled in writing essays, treatises and entire volumes on Calvin's labors as a theologian than can be read and evaluated in a single lifetime. And the research continues, attesting to the inescapable fact that he was among the most influential men in molding the life and times in which he lived. We can only marvel increasingly at his many-sidedness. Whether one agrees or disagrees or simply dismisses him contemptuously, Calvin both as man and theologian simply does not lie down to pass away in oblivion.

Bearing this in mind the reader will realize that we can only skim the surface in the hope of whetting the appetite.

Although he had published two earlier books, Calvin's rise to fame as "the theologian" of the Reformation sprang from the first edition of the *Institutes*. This was published shortly after he fled France to find refuge in Basel. Having been educated as a diligent student in the humanities, theology and law, he soon found himself after his conversion solicited by many for insight and advice on spiritual matters. Much as he longed for quiet to devote himself to his studies, he could not ignore the plight, as he wrote, "of my poor countrymen" who were still devoid of the true knowledge of God and the way of salvation. At the same time others of evangelical persuasion were being ruthlessly harried out of the land or imprisoned and persecuted with the approbation of the king. Hence in writing this comparatively little book, he prefaced it with an impressive address to Francis I. This decision somewhat changed the complexion of the work. In it we find a simple and straightforward confession of the evangelical faith which intended to demonstrate once and for all that those who protested against the doctrines and practices of the Roman church were neither fanatics nor revolutionaries but simple believers who did not deserve the treatment they were forced to endure.

The title should not escape our attention, the more so since Calvin retained it for each new edition.

*Institutio* derives from the Latin word which means "to give footing to someone who does not have it, to teach, to educate."<sup>61</sup> Such "institutes," and of these there were quite a few in the ancient world, served as textbooks. Some aimed at giving instruction in rhetoric, others in law. Still others provided *eruditio* or *doctrina*, and in this sense the term was adopted by Lactantius shortly after A.D. 300. At that time Christians were suffering the severest persecution in the Roman empire, while pagan religions could no longer appeal to the mind or give comfort to the heart of the educated. This Christian writer, who was both a rhetorician and a jurist, attempted to instruct in Christian doctrine and to defend fellow-believers against iniquitous and unjust persecution by the authorities. In it he employed *disputatio*, a debate or discussion with another who either objects or asks for further explanation. This creates liveliness while sustaining the thread of the argument throughout.

---

<sup>61</sup>For several details we are indebted to H.W. Simpson, "The *Editio Princeps* of the *Institutio*. . ." in *Calvinus Reformator*, 26-32. He also mentions how rarely this work appeared in translation: in Spanish (1540,1958), in German (1887), in English by Ford Lewis Battles (1975); now in a fourth language, Afrikaans (1982).

We find Calvin doing much the same in his *Institutes*, evident also in his own translation of it into French.<sup>62</sup> The explanation lies at hand. He recognized that the common people needed sound instruction from the Word in those things that pertained to life and godliness. In addition, the foes of evangelical truth were fierce in their sustained attacks on the pure gospel. And with deep concern for their lives he aimed to defend them against false accusations which occasioned their sufferings. Here he pleaded their case brilliantly as one thoroughly trained in the art of jurisprudence,

Wherefore I beseech you, Sire—and surely it is not an unreasonable request—to take upon yourself the entire cognizance of this cause, which has hitherto been confusedly and carelessly agitated, without any order of law, and with outrageous passion rather than judicial gravity.<sup>63</sup>

With this he details many of the continual and cruel sufferings inflicted in France on believers and their families, to conclude with a warning and reminder.

You have now, Sire, the virulent iniquity of our calumniators laid before you in a sufficient number of instances, that you may not receive their accusations with too credulous an ear.<sup>64</sup>

But if the king preoccupies himself too much with slanders to execute true justice, then "shall we in patience possess our souls, and wait for the mighty hand of the Lord, which undoubtedly will in time appear." Few defenses of the poor and oppressed have ever matched the dignity, the elegance and eloquence of language which Calvin here penned.

But the slender volume itself is quite simple and straightforward. From the title page we glean valuable information as to its content and

---

<sup>62</sup>For a comparison between the Latin and French editions, cf. Jean Daniel Benoit, "History and Development of the *Institutio*" in *John Calvin* (ed. by Duffield), 104-107. "The 1541 French edition is of great importance. First, from the point of view of language. With it Calvin is hailed as one of the masters, or rather, one of the creators, of what we now call modern French. . . . The Latin *Institutio* addressed itself to the educated as a learned work. The French *Institutio* was popular for artisans, farmers, business men and the petty bourgeois. . . . This popular *Institutio* abounds in repetition, in explanations, superfluous to the learned readers. . . . He adds incidents to clarify, to explain, to make points more articulate. . . ." The language is also racier, especially in the names and descriptions he gives to his opponents.

<sup>63</sup>*Institutes*, "Dedication," 21.

<sup>64</sup>*Institutes*, "Dedication," 40.

aim. It is a *summa pietatis*, that is a *compendium praeceptorum doctrinae Christianae*. It presents the way of salvation, the *doctrina salutis*. It serves also as a *confesio fidei*, so that the king and every other reader can learn what evangelicals believed and how they sought to live.<sup>65</sup>

Both in content and structure we find little that is new. Calvin followed the traditional method of instructing in the Christian faith. The first three chapters explain the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Then follows another on the sacraments, a fifth on the false sacraments, and a sixth on Christian liberty, church government and the civil magistracy.

Much here reminds us of Luther for whom Calvin always expressed great admiration. But he also goes his own way. Throughout there is deep concern for the salvation of those whom he seeks to reach. Often in attacking abuses in doctrine and ritual by which Rome had corrupted the gospel he uses strong language, urging its prelates to rethink their views in the light of Scripture and the practices of the early church.

The book was written in Latin, the "universal" language of western Christendom at that time. By 1542 he translated it with several additions into French. Without changing his convictions he continued to revise and expand its contents until the final edition appeared in 1559. What holds all these together is the opening affirmation:

True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves. But, while these two branches are so intimately connected, which of these precedes and produces the other, is not easy to discover. . . . The knowledge of ourselves, therefore, is not only an incitement to seek after God, but likewise a considerable assistance to it.<sup>66</sup>

But the author does not want to be misunderstood. Left to himself man can never by exercising any of his faculties attain true knowledge. He adds therefore,

On the other hand, it is plain that no man can arrive at the true knowledge of himself, without having first contemplated the divine character, and then descended to the consideration of his own.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> *Calvinus Reformator*, 30.

<sup>66</sup> *Institutes*, I.I.i.

<sup>67</sup> *Institutes*, I.I.ii.

As he develops this especially in his final edition we are reminded that all knowledge and therefore also wisdom depends on God's revelation. And man, in distinction from all other earthly creatures, has an increased capacity to receive and so to respond for his own good or ill.

This approach to Christian doctrine to a large degree circumscribes Calvin's theology.

Here we find no curious and fruitless speculation into God as he exists in himself. Rather, we are bound by that revelation which he gives of himself, in words and works, in his relationships to the world, including man endowed with intelligence and will. Always man is dealt with as standing before God's face: a creature responsible to his Creator, corrupted by sin and yet summoned to seek salvation in the grace of the Redeemer.

Immediately upon its publication Calvin's name and fame spread far beyond the confines of Switzerland. He was young; only twenty-five or twenty-six, when he penned its pages and not yet twenty-seven when the book flowed from the press. By this time other significant evangelical writings had been written and widely read. Yet none appealed so immediately and convincingly to large numbers as did this work. In his *On the Literary History of Calvin's Institutes*, B.B. Warfield offers an explanation for its popularity:

In estimating the nature of this performance, there are two other facts which we should take into consideration, one of an enhancing, the other of a moderating character. We must bear in mind, on the one hand, that the young Calvin's book had practically no predecessors, but broke out a new path for itself; but also, on the other hand, that when it was given to the public it was far from being the complete treatise in dogmatic theology which we know, but was, as he himself describes it. . . a "brief handbook," a "little booklet." From that small beginning it grew under his hand from edition to edition, and was transformed from a short handbook on religion for the people into a scientific treatise in dogmatic theology for students of theology.<sup>68</sup>

But despite the author's opinion, the consequences of its appearance on the European scene were little short of startling. It changed the course of Calvin's life by opening the way at Farel's insistence for his

---

<sup>68</sup>"Literary History. . ." in *Institutes*, xiv.

effective ministry in Geneva. It consolidated to a large extent the Protestant movement, then in danger of being hopelessly divided. It led not a few to embrace the Reformed faith with enthusiasm. In seeking to undermine the evangelical faith Rome's leaders began to focus their attacks increasingly on Calvin and his views. In him they found their most formidable opponent. Geneva rather than Wittenberg soon became the strongest center from which Protestantism in the second and third generations expanded.

Here we pause to record how its publication prepared the Hungarian people for the Reformed faith.

Long had that nation suffered under abuses inflicted by both church and state. In 1526, ten years before the first edition of the *Institutes*, the Magyars had received a stunning blow to their identity and independence at Mohacs in a battle against the invading Turks. Now the nation was divided into three parts. By this time some stirrings of reformation were discernible and Luther's tracts were known and read by many. But their German source made them less than congenial because of Magyar fears of encroachments by the House of Hapsburg.

Matthias Biro of Diva became the first apostle of the Swiss reformation. Upon reading the first edition he eagerly embraced the Reformed faith, including Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper. Within two years he wrote his own summary of Christian doctrine, the first such prepared in and for Hungary. It shows clear evidences of the impact which Calvin's theology made on him. Less than a quarter century later (1562), Peter Juhasz (in Latin, Melius) wrote his *Catechism*, modeled after and in large part drawn from the *Institutes*. For years it was to serve as a textbook on Christian doctrine in the schools.

To comment in detail on the definitive edition of this work should be regarded as unnecessary. It is far too well-known and far too easily accessible.

What deserves to be mentioned, however, is the information which the author provides in his preface. According to him he "handled the subject for the most part in a superficial manner, as is usual in small treatises." But its wide reception encouraged him to labor diligently for its expansion and improvement. He then adds,

But though I repented not the labor then devoted to it, yet I never satisfied myself, till it was arranged in the order in which

it is now published; and I trust I have here presented to my readers what their judgments will unite in approving.<sup>69</sup>

History has indeed proved him correct on this estimate. The numerous editions through which it passed in less than a century are almost legion.

He attributes the lateness of its appearance to several serious ailments which had been afflicting him. He seeks only to fulfil the "office of a teacher in the Church" and that with "no other object in view than to profit the Church by maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness." Let no one, then, believe a "report (which) had been circulated of my defection to popery, and received with unbecoming eagerness in the courts of the princes." He concludes with a clear statement on his aim:

Now, my design in this work has been to prepare and qualify students of theology for the reading of the divine word, that they may have an easy introduction to it, and be enabled to proceed to it without any obstruction. For I think I have given such a comprehensive summary, and orderly arrangement of all the branches of religion, that with proper attention, no person will find any difficulty in determining what ought to be the principal objects of his research in the Scripture, and to what end he ought to refer any thing it contains.<sup>70</sup>

Its structure is far more systematic and logical than that of previous editions; each section being successfully integrated with the whole with such effortless proficiency that the reader cannot fail to discern the inescapable and exquisite harmony of Scripture truth. Indeed there are digressions where Calvin feels constrained to challenge and refute false teachings. But this is as much a part of his sacred office as to set forth God's truth positively and pastorally. Few dangers, according to him, loom so large to disturb simple believers, to destroy the existence of the church and to defame and dishonor the God of all truth as those heresies which arise from within to corrupt and pervert the Word. Without a strong and sound defense the faith once for all delivered to the saints cannot be preserved and much less propagated to the glory of God. But the over-all emphasis remains on the positive, so that the

---

<sup>69</sup>*Institutes*, "Author's Preface," 17.

<sup>70</sup>*Institutes*, "Author's Preface," 18-19.

reader by growing also through this book into a fuller knowledge of the one true God and of himself may taste "true and substantial wisdom."

Such knowledge is far removed from that cold and intellectualistic apprehension of Christian doctrine of which Calvin has been often accused. Listen to his own words:

By the knowledge of God, I intend not merely a notion that there is such a Being, but also an acquaintance with whatever we ought to know concerning him, conducing to his glory and our benefit. . . . For though our mind cannot conceive of God, without ascribing some worship to him, it will not be sufficient merely to apprehend that he is the only proper object of universal worship and adoration, unless we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of all good, and seek for none but in him. . . . For this sense of the divine perfection is calculated to teach us piety, which produces religion. By piety, I mean a reverence and love of God arising from a knowledge of his benefits.<sup>71</sup>

To underscore even more clearly what such knowledge entails, he adds,

For, till men are sensible that they owe everything to God, that they are supported by his paternal care, that he is the Author of all the blessings they enjoy, and nothing should be sought independently of him, they will never voluntarily submit to his authority; they will never truly and cordially devote themselves to his service, unless they rely upon him alone for true felicity.<sup>72</sup>

For as God so freely gives himself in Christ for man's happiness, so man experiences salvation only by that knowledge which embraces the response of his total person.

To assist in attaining that experiential knowledge of God, Calvin has arranged the material, without any disjunction, under four rubrics:

On the Knowledge of God the Creator;

On the Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, which was revealed first to the Fathers under the Law and since to us in the Gospel;

---

<sup>71</sup>*Institutes*, I.2.i.

<sup>72</sup>*Institutes*, I.2.i.

On the Manner of receiving the Grace of Christ, the benefits which we derive from it, and the effects which follow it;  
On the external means or aids by which God calls us into communion with Christ, and retains us in it.

All this is written with such personal address and precision that the fluidity of his prose carries us along from one section to the next; whether of positive affirmation, of abundant biblical substantiation or of compelling argumentation against the views of those who attack God's truth.

Here can be gleaned many of the rich and ripened fruits of Calvin's eminent scholarship. Few in his day knew the Bible better. With ease and at length he can refer to the church fathers, to ecclesiastical decrees and to later theologians. Without any obtrusiveness or pride in learning he makes mention of classic poetry and philosophy. When it suits his purpose, he discourses on the beauty and glory of the created order as well as on man who came forth so resplendently from the hand of the Creator. All this is grist for the mill of his mind and heart as he seeks to stir up his readers to strive more diligently to attain that true knowledge of God and self which gives meaning, strength and joy to life. No wonder that the many abridgements of this book, helpful as they may be for an introduction to Calvin's theology, never satisfy. Not even the translations, and several of these are excellent, supply that taste of Calvin's thinking which dipping into the original provides. But for the sympathetic reader his writings, above all the *Institutes*, are always rewarding.

How, then, shall we begin to summarize his theological contributions to Christ's church?

Is there, perhaps, some central theme from which all the rest can be legitimately deduced? That there is unity and coherence few will care to deny. Some, therefore, have argued that Calvin's thought is dominated by his conception of the ineffable majesty, sovereignty and glory of God. Others have found the clue in his doctrine of divine predestination; still others in the union and communion of Christ with believers. Then there are those who claim that he did little more than summarize the best in Christian thought of all that had been written before.<sup>73</sup> The first, so scholars today recognize, fail to do his thought

---

<sup>73</sup>Although dated, one of the most incisive responses to such an evaluation of Calvin's theology can be found in Emile Doumergue's essay, "Calvin: Epigone or Creator?" in *Calvin and the Reformation: Four Studies* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1909). He

full justice; the last by seeing him as little more than a compiler have failed to recognize those insights of his which have stimulated the development of a classic Christian theology. For that reason alone Calvin, despite any strictures which may be levelled against him and his writings, is dismissed by Christian theologians, pastors, and believers only to their own disadvantage.

In a sentence or two we mention a few of these distinctives which ought not be overlooked.

His view of Scripture, while not addressing himself to all the issues which spring up today, is more insightful and balanced and persuasive than any that was written before his day. He recognizes its diversity within the organic unity of its authority, efficacy and message. Only by quoting incidental passages out of context can Calvin be made to say what he doesn't believe and teach.<sup>74</sup>

On the doctrine of the Trinity he enabled the church, in so far as it is willing to listen, to rid itself of the last vestiges of subordinationism. Always a tendency in this direction seems to plague preachers and people to our own day. But in his writings Calvin moves carefully and cautiously and yet as completely as he dares to give honor to each "person" without violating the essential and indivisible unity of God. While deeply appreciative of the efforts of the church Fathers to safeguard the basic doctrine of the gospel against the rampant heresies of those times, he acknowledges limitations in the terms which were used. Hence he refuses to quibble about words so long as the "substance" of what Scripture teaches is clearly affirmed.

Always he addresses creation, redemption and consummation in their intimate and ineluctable connection with each other in trying to understand God's purpose with the world. Thus he lays foundations for a sound Christian life-and world-view.

Nor may we forget the significance of his discourses on predestination and providence, clearly distinguishing while never divorcing the one from the other. Always the absolute sovereignty of God and the full responsibility of each individual are taught within the tension of biblical affirmations.

---

responds to the positions on Calvin championed by Ritschl, Troeltsch and Max Weber.

<sup>74</sup>The clearest and most cogent response to those who argue that Calvin held a "looser" position of Scriptural authority than that maintained in the classic Reformed creeds is found in John Murray, *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 11-51.

And then there is the way he broke through the form-matter scheme of viewing reality, inherited from Greek philosophy and rebaptized by Roman Catholic scholastics into a nature-grace dualism with all its fatal consequences for sound Christian doctrine and practice.

To this should be added the fullness with which he developed the biblical teachings of our salvation in Christ; he for the first time stressed the threefold "office" of the Mediator. Now the prophetic task receives its full due next to the priestly and the kingly.

None of the theologians before him ever spoke so fully of the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit in creation, providence and redemption as did the Reformer of Geneva. Somewhere B.B. Warfield has rightly called him "the theologian of the Holy Spirit."

With this it must not be forgotten that he stressed as none before and too few afterward the unbreakable connection between Spirit and Word.<sup>75</sup> This colored not only his estimate of the unique power of gospel preaching; it is central also to his classic understanding of Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper. This explains much of his stern and sustained antagonism to Roman Catholic sacramentalism and especially the Mass, while he far transcends the one-sidedness of both the Lutheran and Zwinglian views of that holy ordinance.

In expounding the doctrine of the church he goes far beyond Cyprian and Augustine, both of whom he often cites with approval.

But enough of this for the moment.

We elaborate instead for a little on Calvin's view of divine predestination.<sup>76</sup> That for two reasons. First, it is still regarded by many as the dominant and determinative theme for his theology. Then, also, because for his teaching on especially this doctrine he has been in his day and now so much maligned both by those who refuse to submit to Scripture and by those who have not read what he wrote.

Hopefully one or two pages may help to set the record somewhat straighter.

---

<sup>75</sup>By no means has the last word been written on this crucial issue for rightly understanding Calvin's views here. Not that the reformer fails to speak clearly, rather, as he at times mentions, this relationship far exceeds our human attempts to analyze it fully. A helpful introduction to it may be found in Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin's Theological Method: Word and Spirit, a Case Study" in *Calviniana*, edited by Robert B. Schnucker, (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1989), 63-75.

<sup>76</sup>It should be noted that Calvin in his *Institutes* (1559) does not discuss predestination together with election and reprobation until long after his teachings on God, creation, the fall, salvation in Christ, and faith together with the Christian life (III:21-24).

For Calvin it was no simple matter to address himself to this profound doctrine. Here he must deal with some of the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith. Already the highly esteemed Augustine had written voluminously on the matter. So, too, had Luther in the early days of the Reformation. But opposition to the doctrines of sovereign grace had intensified and misunderstandings of it had so proliferated by his time, that some evangelical leaders deemed it best for the sake of the common people to say as little as possible on this subject.

Against this he protested with his whole soul. How dare the church and therefore its teachers keep silent on what God had so clearly taught in Scripture? And why should true believers be kept in ignorance of what the gracious God had revealed for their strength and consolation?

Already in his earliest doctrinal, catechetical and creedal writings he mentioned the electing counsel of God who works all things according to his will.<sup>77</sup> But soon the attacks on such a view of God began. One of the earliest was raised by Albertus Pighius, whom Calvin later described as

a man of evidently frenzied audacity, who attempted at the same time, and in the same book, to establish the *free will* of man, and to subvert the secret counsel of God, by which he chooses some to salvation and appoints others to eternal damnation.<sup>78</sup>

When Pighius passed away, Calvin felt little need to respond to his views. But soon that poison began to spread even among some who claimed to be evangelical. Nine years later another took up cudgels to rob—as Calvin states it—the sovereign God of his honor and so subject Christ's church to the loss of its sure foundation.

Thus in 1552 he penned *The Eternal Predestination of God*. Step by step he emasculated with the sharp knife of Scripture the arguments of his attacker. But the opposition refused to be silenced. Within a few years another whom Calvin calls the "Calumniator" vilified him for his

---

<sup>77</sup>Note, for example, how it is introduced in *Catechism for the Church of Geneva in Tracts and Treatises*, II:50. "M. What is the Church? The body and society of believers whom God hath predestined to eternal life. Is it necessary to believe this article also? Yes, verily, if we would not make the death of Christ without effect, and set at nought all that has hitherto been said, For the one effect resulting from all this, is that there is Church." Cf. also *Confession of Faith* (1542), Art. 9, 142.

<sup>78</sup>*Calvin's Calvinism*, two treatises, translated by Henry Cole (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 25.

doctrine. In a series of fourteen articles he argued with vehemence that the Reformer made God the author of sin, that man now sins by necessity, that when man sins these wickednesses therefore, according to Calvin, proceed from God's will. No doctrine was for the opponent more objectionable and inimical to true godliness than what had been taught about original sin. How could God be considered just, if he would condemn anyone on the basis of a sin committed by the progenitor of the human race? After diffusing that argument from Scripture, Calvin retorts, "Curse me as long as you will, but blaspheme not the adorable God." Each of those fourteen articles together with their rebuttal are reproduced in Calvin's companion volume, *The Secret Providence of God*.

Seldom had the scurrilous attacks on Calvin's person risen to such fever pitch against the doctrine which had been set forth as in the allegations of "Calumniator." In those articles Calvin is accused of many crimes, not the least of which is that of making his followers guilty of the same crimes by believing in the Reformer's "false God" who makes Satan a liar so that Satan is not the cause of his own lies but God is! Hence they like their teacher are "cruel, envious, proud, slanderers, carrying one thing on their tongue, and another in their heart."

To each of the arguments the Reformer posits a pointed response, first with respect to the doctrine which "Calumniator" proposes as sound.

With respect to the second member of your argument, that no one can justly be condemned until after his crime, just weigh in your own balance the lightness and emptiness of your loquacity herein. Why, your own masters, Pighius, Servetus, and all like barking unclean dogs, will at least confess that all those whom God foreknew to be worthy of eternal destruction were condemned by him before the foundation of the world; whereas you will not grant unto God the right to condemn any to eternal death, but those who have first been brought before earthly judges for their actually perpetrated crimes. From such arguments as these, readers may at once gather the marvelous extent of your insanity, which hesitates not to root out, in absolute sport or jest, all the solemn order of the Divine justice!<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup>Calvin's *Calvinism*, 335.

Then on another point,

You dazzle the sight of the ignorant and inexperienced by setting before their eyes, as a shining cloud, your doctrine that God will have all men to be saved. . .let me ask you this question: How is it, that if God willed all men to be saved, he did not show unto all nations and all men the way of salvation?<sup>80</sup>

And when the opponent insists "that Christ was sent down from heaven in order that His righteousness might over-abound wherever sin had abounded," the response is crisp and clear.

For if, wherever sin abounded, the righteousness of Christ was designed of God to super-abound, the condition of Pilate was just as good and sage as that of Peter or of Paul.<sup>81</sup>

Having said this he continues, in his consistent manner of presenting sound doctrine, to appeal to and explain several Scripture passages drawn from Old and New Testament alike, ending with the very words of Jesus whose grace this man so erroneously claimed to be defending.

Here Calvin also defends himself against the vile accusation of cruelty, calling attention to a fact which has often been overlooked.

For what particular act of mine you accuse me of cruelty I am anxious to know. I myself know not that act, unless it be with reference to the death of your great master, Servetus. But that I myself earnestly entreated that he might not be put to death his judges themselves are witnesses, in the number of whom at that time two were his staunch favorers and defenders.<sup>82</sup>

Even longer is the defense of his followers against anyone who slanders them and their conduct.

What are the real fruits produced by my doctrine, both in this city and far and wide throughout many nations, I leave to the consideration and reflection of all men. Out of this very school, which you so atrociously attack, and increasingly rend to pieces, God daily chooses to himself men of the highest principles, and of the sweetest odor of His truth, to illustrate the doctrine of

---

<sup>80</sup> *Calvin's Calvinism*, 343.

<sup>81</sup> *Calvin's Calvinism*, 343.

<sup>82</sup> *Calvin's Calvinism*, 346.

His gospel, and to be the victims of malice and cruelty. All those who really grow and make any advancement in the doctrine of the gospel (of the number of whom neither the world nor the Church needs to repent or to be ashamed), live a life supported by the slenderest means, with difficulty indeed, but with the greatest patience and with the greatest kindest towards all men; . . . they all, as one man, resigning the world and self-enjoyment, aspire to the hope of a blessed immortality.<sup>83</sup>

But he does not, even after all this argumentation, fail in his personal concern for "Calumniator" himself.

Nevertheless, I will not cease to wish and pray that you may yet bow to the manifest truth of God, though such a thing I scarcely dare to hope.<sup>84</sup>

Driven, as he tells us, by necessity to stand for God's truth and defend it against vicious and blasphemous attacks, he exhorts himself and, indirectly, all who love the truth to that forbearance exemplified by David when cursed by Shimei. Those curses that king "knew, by reflection, to be directed by the ever-ruling and secret Providence of God." He then concludes with a pastoral reminder to any who endure reproach for the sake of the truth,

And, indeed, no man will ever bear the assaults of the devil and of wicked men with a composure and moderation, but the man who can turn away his mind and thoughts from those assaults to God alone, who ordained them.<sup>85</sup>

On that high spiritual level he binds together two of the most memorable treatises which ever flowed from his fertile pen.

Here we have touched only lightly on his treatment of the most profound and mysterious doctrines of Holy Scripture, letting Calvin speak for himself. Even on these subjects he cannot be accused of being an abstract, an abstruse, a cold and calculating theologian whose superior intellectual gifts constrained him to win at all costs an argument and to force the teachings of Holy Writ into a system which is as relentless as it is rigorous. Those who so judge his theology have failed to read him with an open, sympathetic and understanding mind.

---

<sup>83</sup> *Calvin's Calvinism*, 346.

<sup>84</sup> *Calvin's Calvinism*, 349.

<sup>85</sup> *Calvin's Calvinism*, 350.

How then, shall we characterize Calvin's theological contributions to the church?

Several have already been mentioned. It is always *clear* and *precise*. It seeks to be consistently *biblical*, saying neither more nor less than Scripture itself allowed. It is *comprehensive* more than any before and very few after him. It is *genuinely pastoral*, person-oriented in the sense of seeking to win his readers for the doctrine which promotes godliness. It is *honest* in quoting, frequently at great length, the views of his opponents before slashing these with the sword of the Spirit. Upon reading we may at times shiver and shy away from "how" he wrote. Rarely, if we are honest with ourselves as believers, with him as a servant of the Lord's church and above all with the Scriptures as our standard for truth and goodness, dare we disagree with "what" and "why" he wrote as he did.

One last characteristic deserves mention. His theology is genuinely *catholic* or *ecumenical*. It is "church theology" in the best sense of that term. It draws from and builds upon the riches transmitted from the past. It was shaped in the pressures and perplexities of the believing congregation in his own time. In several ways it laid foundations for the future reflection of God's people as they would have to face new issues in new situations. About him and his writings there is nothing that smacks of sectarianism. His one deep and passionate concern was for the unity of all believers in the one invincible gospel. For this, as he once wrote, he would willingly cross ten seas and even lay down his life. And since the adoration of the one true and living God is the chief "end" for which the church has been called into being, its all-embracing duty is so to know and worship and lovingly serve Him in all that it says and does in response to the Word.

Calvin never claimed to have spoken the last word. Nor may the church, its leaders and its people content themselves by resting on what he has left. Yet to ignore or dismiss his writings lightly is to rob ourselves and the churches of that inheritance which the Holy Spirit through this "teacher of the church" left for us to use with gratitude and in good faith before the face of our God.

Among Calvin's fruitful contributions to the church is his pattern for ecclesiastical organization and order. This, fully as much as his theology, was a matter of obedience to Scripture which alone can guarantee "the freedom for which Christ has set us free." Wherever

this conviction was cherished, not only individuals but also congregations, no matter how small and struggling, could withstand the fiercest persecution.

But striving for this he soon found himself confronted with opposition on three fronts. First, the Roman hierarchy with its man-made traditions and regulations had enslaved people's consciences, thereby subjecting them to ignorance, fear and superstitions which undermined true peace with God through the perfect work of the Savior. Then there were those of Anabaptist vintage whose insistence on "the right to private interpretation" threatened the unity of Christ's church with disruptions and disorders. But even more personally painful for him was the opposition of the civil magistrates in Geneva who persistently, until shortly before his death, urged their right to speak the last word on matters ecclesiastical. Hence much of what he wrote on this, often in strong language, was forged in the fires of those unsettled and unsettling circumstances. Only when bearing this in mind, will we be able to assess rightly why he wrote as he did.

By the time he took up residence in Geneva the Reformation had been officially embraced by the magistracy.

This had been achieved, together with ratification by the citizenry under solemn oath in St. Pierre's church, with the pledge to live by the gospel as their only rule for faith and life. The overlordship of the bishop and the duke of Savoy had been overthrown with the expulsion of monks, priests and bishop. Now the small republic, its government in the hands of the political authorities elected by the people, set out to enjoy its freedoms. But despite the pure preaching of Froment, Viret and Farel little peace and order prevailed within its walls. Stickelberger describes the situation which obtained:

The transition was rough, even more than in other Swiss cities. It was accompanied by iconoclasm, tumult, and battles with the Bishop and the Duke of Savoy. Famine and inflation were added. The leaders of the Reform movement were put in prison several times, expelled, and by a miracle escaped being poisoned. Not only had the superstition of the old faith to be overcome, but also the reaction which could already be noticed. Unbelief and immorality realized their opportune moment had come.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup>Stickelberger, *John Calvin*, 44-45.

Those in power could do little to stem the rising tide of unrest. Nor had the thundering of Farel from the pulpit held the restless populace in check. For this, as that Reformer knew, a man of keener intellect, steadier spirit and greater organizing ability was sorely needed. What Calvin found upon his arrival is summarized by Philip Schaff in the first volume of *The Creeds of Christendom*.

Geneva was then a city of only twelve or fifteen thousand inhabitants, but within its narrow limits it was to become "the scene of every crisis and every problem, great or small, which can agitate human society." It then represented "a tottering republic, a wavering faith, a nascent church." Calvin felt that a negative state of freedom from the tyranny of Savoy and Popery was far worse than Popery itself, and that positive faith and order alone could save the city from political and religious anarchy. He insisted on the abolition of immoral habits, the adoption of an evangelical confession of faith and catechism, the introduction of a strict discipline, Psalm singing, and monthly celebration of the Lord's Supper, with the right of excluding unworthy communicants.<sup>87</sup>

How he set about doing this constitutes a fascinating study. Although many scholarly studies on his contributions to church government have been penned, we find little in the way of a comprehensive survey available in the English language. Well may his views here be compared to an intricate mosaic, each piece inserted into a consistent whole to establish a strong church faithful to the gospel in all things. To this end he early directed his tireless energies to become, as Hunter rightly says, "the master architect of a new structure."<sup>88</sup> It differed radically from what Rome and the Anabaptists as well as the earlier church orders of Wittenberg, Zurich and Strassburg championed.

Also here, however, he did not work *de novo*. He learned from those who had gone before, even from the early church fathers. But nowhere, so he was convinced, had the full and rich light of the New Testament fallen on matters of ecclesiastical polity as clearly as it should have.

---

<sup>87</sup>Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York, London: Harper & Brothers, n.d.) I:429.

<sup>88</sup>Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, 200.

For Luther these were at best subsidiary and secondary issues. His chief and all-controlling concern was restricted to the pure preaching of the gospel. Throughout he made a sharp distinction between matters "internal and spiritual" and those which were "external and material." By God's appointment the latter were entrusted to the state; the former to the church. In this his conception of law and gospel played a decisive role. At one point he did endorse the possibility of having elders serve in the church but only to supervise sound doctrine. After the Peasant Revolt of 1525 control in and over the church passed largely into the hands of those princes sympathetic to the gospel. With considerable ease of conscience Lutherans soon acquiesced in the principle adopted throughout the empire of *cuius regio eius religio*.

Far different was the course taken by Zwingli in leading the Reformation in Zurich. He felt quite at home with the *corpus Christianum* ideal dating from the time of Constantine and maintained throughout much of the Middle Ages. To all practical purposes membership in the congregation was coterminous with citizenship. For him there is no radical distinction between church visible and invisible; hence his dictum *Regnum Christi etiam externum*. Visiting Strassburg on his way to the Marburg conference he stated with conviction, "The Christian is no other than a faithful and good citizen and a Christian city is no other than the Christian church."<sup>89</sup> But since only the church with its pastors possessed the prophetic office, civil magistrates should heed what it teaches. Imposition of censures and penalties, however, was the responsibility of the state.

Far more influential on Calvin's thought were the views of Bucer. During his exile from 1538 to 1541 he developed a cordial relationship with the Reformer of Strassburg who urged the freedom of the church from all government interference. Each congregation was to be served by its own officary for the sake of a wholesome discipline of life as well as the maintenance of sound doctrine. As early as 1531 Bucer together with Oecolampadius had prepared a church order for Ulm embracing these ideas. Although never fully implemented in Strassburg, Bucer did see it followed in large measure by many congregations throughout southern Germany.

How deeply church governmental issues flow from biblical doctrine is clear from the way in which Bucer distanced himself from Luther

---

<sup>89</sup>*Inleiding tot de studie van het kerkrecht*, edited by W. Van't Spijker, L.C. van Drimmelen (Kampen: J.H. Kok, n.d.), 90.

on several significant points. For him justification is not simply a declaratory act of God; it must and will become fruitful in the sanctification of believers who as a congregation live that new life in a fellowship of love and faith under Christ's rule. The true church, thus, is to be conceived of as a Christocracy experiencing the Spirit's operations. This conflation of several basic biblical teachings comes to clear expression in his description of the true church.

Christ's church is the assembly of those who in Christ our Lord are so gathered out of the world by his Spirit and Word and so joined together that they constitute one body and are members of each other, in which each has his office and calling for the education of the body and all its members.<sup>90</sup>

Such an understanding of the nature of Christ's church left no room for either the hierarchicalism and tyranny of Rome or the individualism so rampant at that time among the Anabaptists. While Luther's conception of the "priesthood of all believers" received its rightful due, it was here wedded to the church as a visible and well-organized corporation. Within that body only what fully agreed with Scripture possessed divine authority and could bind the conscience. Again the intransigence of the magistracy prevented Bucer from realizing his ideals. And when he left for England in 1551, he found himself in an ecclesiastical situation hardly congenial to his views.

All this and much else was grist for the mill of Calvin's mind and heart. But as in his theology, so here he went far beyond even the best of his mentors.

For him church organization and order was a matter of whole-souled obedience to the Word by which Christ rules his people.<sup>91</sup> Although not every detail is spelled out in the New Testament, it clearly enjoins that all things in the church are to be done "decently and in good order."<sup>92</sup> On this in connection with liberty of conscience he has much to say to suppress both tyranny and anarchy among the faithful. Rules may never be laid down simply for the sake of expedience; still

---

<sup>90</sup>*Inleiding tot de studie van het kerkrecht*, 96.

<sup>91</sup>Repeatedly Calvin speaks of Scripture as the "scepter" by which Christ rules his people. His insights into the relationship of church and kingdom deserve an in-depth study.

<sup>92</sup>This text, drawn from 1 Corinthians 14, is his "favorite" when speaking of the church. Consistently has it been incorporated into the Church Orders of many Reformed churches.

less to win the approval of the people or to increase the prestige and power of ecclesiastical leaders. Much less can he be accused of imposing Old Testament precepts and patterns on the Lord's congregation.<sup>93</sup> For this he drew the lines too clearly between the administration of the old and new covenants.

Within weeks upon his arrival he, together with Farel, submitted to the city magistrates his *Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église*. No church can exist, so the document insisted, in a pure form unless it ordains what its Lord had laid down in his Word. With this the struggle for its freedom began. Although the council approved several important articles, it refused on some which were crucial. The church through its pastors was not given the right to exclude from the Lord's table those whom it deemed unworthy. The elections of ministers of the gospel and of elders to supervise the lives of the membership were still left in the hands of the syndics.<sup>94</sup> Within less than a year and a half this led to the summary dismissal from Geneva of its faithful pastors, Farel, Viret and Calvin.

Removing them, however, brought no tranquility to the town. Soon open breaches of the law increased. With this instability the independence of the Republic was threatened by neighboring Berne, jealous of Geneva's rise to power, as well as by Savoy. Now the Bishop of Carpentras saw an opportunity of bringing the people of Calvin's city back to Rome's fold. With sweet and subtle flattery Cardinal Sadoletto addressed his *Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva*.<sup>95</sup> He blamed all the disturbances which disturbed them on the Reformers who

. . . had turned the faithful people of Christ away from the way of their fathers and ancestors, and from the perpetual sentiments of the Catholic Church, and filled all places with strife and sedition (such is always the appropriate course of those who seek new power and new honors for themselves, by assailing the authority of the Church).<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup>That he appeals often to Old Testament regulations and illustrations of good and bad government in Israel is not in dispute. But none are *per se* definitive in his views for the structure and administration of Christ's church. In fact, on this score he often accuses Rome of reintroducing a Judaizing in its rituals and regulations.

<sup>94</sup>"Syndics" is the term used for the Genevan magistracy which consisted of three groups: the Little Council, the Council of 60, and the Council of 200.

<sup>95</sup>In *Tracts and Treatises*, I:3-22.

<sup>96</sup>In *Tracts and Treatises*, I:5.

When no one else responded Calvin penned his impressive *Reply*,<sup>97</sup> widely reputed to be one of the finest pieces of early French prose. Here he refuted every accusation levelled by the Cardinal against those who preached the gospel and discoursed at some length on matters relating to church order and worship.

His three years in Strassburg were highly productive for developing and applying his convictions. During this time he pastored the small but growing French-speaking congregation which enjoyed comparative freedom from state interference. He wrote his famous tract on the Lord's Supper, his commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans and a revision of Olivetan's translation of the Bible. As Strassburg's delegate he took part in three important conferences on church unity. He learned first hand more about the Reformation in Germany, forming an intimate friendship with Philip Melancthon which he cherished for the rest of his life.

But the peace and contentment enjoyed there did not long continue.

The situation in Geneva deteriorated swiftly. Soon both council and citizens began to urge his return. Finally with a heavy heart he yielded. His return was greeted with great enthusiasm. The authorities supplied him with a house and garden in the vicinity of St. Pierre's church, a handsome salary of five hundred florins, and an allotment of wheat and wine.<sup>98</sup> Never would he again leave the city for any length of time. Although soon widely recognized throughout Europe as the first leader of the Reformed churches, the hearts of the people still had to be won and their morals mended.

Immediately he began his work of preaching and teaching. Soon he submitted to the magistracy his *Ordonnances Ecclesiastiques*.<sup>99</sup> Among much else the church's relationship to the civil authorities was clearly defined. The purpose of these regulations, to which the syndics with the citizens were to subscribe, was that

. . .above all else. . .the doctrine of the holy gospel of our Lord should be carefully preserved in its purity and the Christian Church properly maintained. . .which cannot be done unless

---

<sup>97</sup>In *Tracts and Treatises*, I:25-69.

<sup>98</sup>This hardly made him a wealthy man. Rather, it was allotted because of his well-known generosity to the poor and especially the many refugees who, fleeing Rome's persecution, often found food and lodging for a period in his home.

<sup>99</sup>In *The Register of the Company of Pastors in the Time of Calvin*, edited and translated by Philip E. Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 35-49.

there is a certain rule and method of living by which each estate attends to the duty of its office; for this reason it has seemed to us advisable that the spiritual government of the kind which our Lord demonstrated and instituted by His Word should be set in good order so that it may be established and observed among us.<sup>100</sup>

This is "the ecclesiastical polity. . . taken from the gospel of Jesus Christ." He alone is Head and Lord of the church to whose rule all are to submit cheerfully.

Already the contours of Calvin's conception of a church organized and administered according to the Word come to clear expression. What we find in his later commentaries, tracts, letters and especially the *Institutes* is but explication, substantiation and defense of what is here set down.

The document begins with four orders or offices together with their assigned tasks. Included is a weekly meeting of the pastors called the "congregation" as well as regulations for ministerial discipline. Under the order of teachers (*doctores*) a pattern for schools is arranged. Theirs is the duty "to instruct the faithful in sound doctrine, in order that the purity of the gospel may not be corrupted either by ignorance or false opinions." This requires theological training for ministers of the Word. But what is added is of importance for understanding Calvin's deep interest in broader education.

But since it is possible to profit from such teaching only if in the first place there is instruction in the languages and humanities, and since there is also need to raise up seed for the future so that the Church may not be left desolate to our children, it will be necessary to build a college for the purpose of instructing them both for the ministry and for the civil government.<sup>101</sup>

Elders are also to be chosen to assist the pastors in supervising the life and morals of the people. Here their responsibilities to both the pastors and the magistrates are far too closely conjoined.<sup>102</sup> Also should there be deacons who in Christ's name minister to the needs of

---

<sup>100</sup>*The Register of the Company of Pastors in the Time of Calvin*, 35.

<sup>101</sup>*The Register of the Company of Pastors in the Time of Calvin*, 41.

<sup>102</sup>Here we see again how difficult it was for Calvin to gain his ideal of a church free from state control. The elders were chosen by the magistrates. Only toward the close of Calvin's life did the "consistoire" become a more distinctly ecclesiastical body.

the poor, the sojourners and the sick.<sup>103</sup> Beggary, which had been forbidden under earlier laws for the city but had again begun to flourish, was no longer to be tolerated among those who claimed to be Christian.

Following this are articles dealing with the administration of the two sacraments, with marriages and burials, and last but by no means least, regulations for preserving healthy discipline within the congregation.

On these foundations Calvin sought to establish the Genevan church in both city and country parishes.<sup>104</sup> Only so would all be able to enjoy their spiritual liberty in Christ without suffering from disorder, revolution and anarchy. Never did he attain the ideal of a "free church" within a "free republic." With changes in personnel of the ruling bodies of the city he met opposition from time to time. At no time were the elders elected by the congregation. Nor did the church's right to withhold the Lord's Supper from unworthy members come easily. But as liberty within the bounds of God's law began to prevail, Geneva with its church became a light which drew hundreds and even thousands to itself for refuge from intolerance and oppression, a city set high on a hill. But let us hear Calvin himself on some of the most important matters here.

That Christ's church cannot carry out its high calling in the world without a proper form of government is stressed by him again and again. Although salvation is entirely of God in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, the church in its visible manifestation is the "instrument" by which he is pleased to bring believers into fellowship with His Son and each other. For this he uses as the chief and all-decisive means "the pure preaching of the Word." But inescapably connected with it is a sound "polity," the principles and patterns for

---

<sup>103</sup>Deacons, too, were not elected by the people but by the magistrates. Their tasks, however, in caring for the poor, sick and distressed were regarded as ecclesiastical, although deacons had no voice in matters dealing with doctrine, worship and discipline.

<sup>104</sup>Although Calvin laid foundations and expressed preference for the "presbyterial" polity, he cannot be faulted for all its details and some of the rigidity with which these have often been applied afterwards. To him, so it seems to us, the latter would be abuse of power not too dissimilar from that of which he rightly accused the Roman hierarchy.

Although the church of Geneva is usually spoken of as one, this must not be applied too precisely. In the city were three church buildings—St. Pierre (the former cathedral), La Madeleine, and St. Gervaise—served by five pastors and three assistants. When the city grew, request was made for setting aside two other structures for worship. In addition, the republic embraced twenty eight small villages, several with their own church. In scheduled gatherings of the pastors of both city and country parishes we see the beginnings of "prebyteries" and "classes."

which God has clearly revealed in his Word. The manner in which he sees these two interrelated Calvin describes in *The Necessity of . . . Reforming the Church*.

If one is desirous of a clearer and more familiar illustration, I would say that the rule in the Church, the pastoral office, and all other matters of order, resemble the body, whereas the doctrine which regulates the worship of God and points out the ground on which the consciences of men must rest in their hope of salvation, is the soul which animates the body, renders it lively and active, and in short, makes it not to be a dead and useless carcass.<sup>105</sup>

In his polemic against Rome, therefore, he accused it both of corrupting the gospel of salvation and of perverting the order of the church by its officially imposed but unbiblical rituals and regulations.<sup>106</sup> From this and all other forms of tyranny only the gospel sets men free.

But to secure and stabilize that liberty for believers, there must be "rule" for and in the church. Without such, all will end in disorder and disruption. Thus he writes,

For as no city or town can exist without a magistrate and civil polity, so the Church of God, as I have already stated and am now obliged to repeat, stands in need of a certain spiritual polity; which, however, is entirely distinct from civil polity, and is so far from weakening or obstructing it, that, on the contrary, it highly conduces to its assistance and advancement. . . .<sup>107</sup>

Here he takes a position sharply contrasted with those of either Luther of Zwingli. Each in his own way placed supervision of and control over the lives of believers entirely in the hands of the political authorities. Calvin insists,

There were from the beginning judiciaries appointed in the Churches to take cognizance of manners, to pass censures on vices, and to preside over the use of the keys in excommunication.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup>*Tracts and Treatises*, I:126-127.

<sup>106</sup>On how closely church order and worship were related in Calvin's mind, cf. the next section.

<sup>107</sup>*Institutes*, IV.11.i.

<sup>108</sup>*Institutes*, IV.11.i.

This "ecclesiastical" power consists in the exercise of "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," entrusted by Christ only to the church. Within the church all members are to submit to it cheerfully. But this does not absolve them from their duty to submit to the laws of the magistrates. Both "authorities" are of God and should cooperate with each other while maintaining their distinctive functions.

On the power of the "keys" Calvin has much to say. By their proper use Christ himself "builds" his church. In this he makes use of men qualified and appointed by him for their task. All true preaching is an employment of the "keys" as Christ affirms in Matthew 16:16.

First, he says that the ministers of the gospel are porters, so to speak, of the kingdom of heaven, because they carry its *keys*; and secondly, he adds that they are invested with a power of *binding and loosing*, which is ratified in heaven.<sup>109</sup>

This is intended to reinforce the solemnity with which the gospel comes and to assure those who hear that what is preached is "of God himself, not a voice issuing from the earth."

But the gospel is not simply to be heard; it is to be believed from the heart, confessed with the lips and practiced in daily life. To secure its free and fruitful course in the lives of church members, Christ has ordained government or rule within the congregation. While the former is restricted to ordained ministers of the gospel, the latter belongs to them together with the elders or bishops.<sup>110</sup> These Calvin calls "governors," who "I apprehend to have been persons of advanced years, selected from the people, to unite with the pastors in giving admonitions and exercising discipline."<sup>111</sup> Together they constitute the "judiciary" for each local congregation by which Christ's church is kept in good order, so that fellowship with Christ and with each other as members of his body may be preserved and promoted. Of that power Calvin says, first, that

---

<sup>109</sup>*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, II:292.

<sup>110</sup>Although at times he makes distinctions, Calvin tells us that he at times uses such titles as elder, bishops, pastors, even teachers somewhat "indiscriminately," since the tasks of supervising the church include both teaching and governing.

<sup>111</sup>*Institutes*, IV.1.xv.

It is not so much authoritative as ministerial; for, strictly speaking, Christ has not given this power to men, but to his word, of which he has appointed men to be ministers.<sup>112</sup>

He adds that this power is also distinctively "spiritual"<sup>113</sup> in the penalties which it may inflict as well as in its aims, for "the Church has no power of the sword to punish or coerce, no authority to compel, no prisons, fines, or other punishments."

The necessity for discipline in Christ's church, even to the point of excommunication from its fellowship, cannot according to him be contradicted with any justification. It is essential to safeguard the integrity and authority of the Word, to preserve the holiness of the church and to serve as a warning to all the members. But even when the last step in its exercise is taken, this is to be done with prayers and in hope that the one excluded may yet come to repentance and amendment of life.

Calvin is very explicit throughout his writings on how this spiritual supervision together with discipline is to be carried out. All members have the responsibility to watch for the soul's welfare of their fellow believers. Such private admonitions are the first foundation for keeping the church in obedience to Christ and his Word. Striking is the comment which Calvin makes as he begins to explain Ephesians 4,

Mutual agreement is the first subject, in the course of which a discussion is introduced respecting the government of the church, as having been framed by our Lord for the purpose of maintaining unity among Christians. . . .<sup>114</sup>

This demands humility, meekness and love, "for where love is strong and prevalent, we shall perform many acts of mutual forbearance." Always the goal is the edification of the whole, so that the unity of faith may be preserved in the bonds of peace. But the implementation of discipline never lies in the hands of an individual; surely not a "tyrannical hierarchy, regulated by one earthly head." Here Calvin quotes Cyprian with approval,

---

<sup>112</sup>*Institutes*, IV.11.i.

<sup>113</sup>Calvin's use of this term differs quite markedly from that of Luther and especially from that of Rome with its nature-grace dualism. For Calvin the antithesis was always that of sin and grace.

<sup>114</sup>*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 266.

There is, he says, one bishoprick, which unites the various parts into one whole. This *bishoprick* he claims for Christ alone, leaving the administration of it to individuals, but in a united capacity, no one being permitted to exalt himself above others.<sup>115</sup>

This is further explained elsewhere, also in connection with the duty of individual members towards others.

For it ought not to be left to the judgment of every individual who ought to be admitted into the Church, and who ought to be expelled from it. This authority belongs to the whole Church, and cannot be exercised without legitimate order.<sup>116</sup>

He then takes occasion to warn against breaking with the church because at times even notorious sinners are for a time tolerated within its fellowship and so defile those who would live uprightly.

It would be unjust, therefore, that any individual should be contaminated with the unworthiness of another, whose approach (also to the Lord's table) is neither in his power nor his duty to prevent.<sup>117</sup>

Church censure is the duty of those appointed to "the office of government" within the church. For this specific and detailed prescriptions have been laid down by Christ. These are to be followed assiduously for the welfare of the whole, lest the entire congregation fall under God's judgment. Here proper distinctions are in order—first between private and public faults; then between "smaller delinquencies" and "flagitious or enormous crimes," upon the latter of which admonition is insufficient, as Paul shows, when he "pronounces sentence of excommunication immediately." Also, the sins of those in office are to be treated with greater severity than those of the other members, although for their "lesser sins" (and Calvin enumerates several) a reprimand may be sufficient while for the "grosser and greater" deposition from office is demanded without undue delay.

As he well knew from his experience as pastor and teacher of Christ's church, by no means all members will cheerfully submit to such correction. But at stake is the honor of Christ and the welfare of the

---

<sup>115</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 281.

<sup>116</sup> *Institutes*, IV.1.xv.

<sup>117</sup> *Institutes*, IV.1.xv.

congregation. Always there will be those who seek the abolition of discipline or obstruct its proper exercise.

But as some have such a hatred of discipline, as to abhor the very name, they should attend the following consideration; that as no society, and even no house, though containing only a small family, can be preserved in a proper state without discipline, this is far more necessary in the Church, the state of which should be the most orderly of all. As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the Church, so discipline forms the ligaments which connect the members together, and keep each in its proper place.<sup>118</sup>

All who resist or reject it "certainly promote the entire dissolution of the Church."

No one in the church is exempt from discipline, whether princes or plebeians. Admonitions together with censures must be firm and unswerving in the interests of truth, yet "tempered with a spirit of gentleness." In sharp contrast with the practice of some Anabaptists, cherishing the ideal of a pure church with none but holy members, the excommunication which Calvin finds prescribed in Scripture differs from an "anathema. . . which ought to be rarely or never resorted to, precluding all pardon, execrates a person, devotes him to eternal perdition."<sup>119</sup>

So weighty is the exercise of the "keys" entrusted by Christ that the church must deal circumspectly in appointing those who preach the gospel and exercise discipline. For this, too, the prescriptions of Scripture are clear throughout. There must be inquiry into their qualifications, for Christ appoints none to these tasks without granting them the gifts necessary. Also they must have a high sense of calling to their respective duties. Thereupon follows election by the congregation, either directly or by tacit approval. None may intrude himself into office. Nor may anyone be imposed on the people against their will. Thereupon follows ordination which in the case of the ministers of the Word should be accompanied by "the imposition of hands." So constantly was it used by the apostles that it

ought to have the force of a precept with us. And certainly this ceremony is highly useful both to recommend to the people the

---

<sup>118</sup>*Institutes*, IV.12.i.

<sup>119</sup>*Institutes*, IV.12.x.

dignity of the ministry, and to admonish the person ordained that he is no longer his own master, but devoted to the service of God and the Church.<sup>120</sup>

But what, we do well to inquire, is the scope of this power which Christ has given to those in office for the edification of church? The answer is crisp and clear: "Now it consists either in doctrine, in legislation, or in jurisdiction."

Before explaining each in turn he reminds "the pious readers" that it is always "to edification and not to destruction." Therefore,

all who make legitimate use of it consider themselves as nothing more than servants of Christ and the people's servants for Jesus' sake. . . .The power of the Church, therefore, is not to be depreciated, yet it must be circumscribed by certain limits, that it may not be extended in every direction according to the caprice of men. . . .For if we grant to men the power which they may be pleased to assume, it must be obvious to every one, what a door will be opened for tyranny, which ought never to be seen in the Church of Christ.<sup>121</sup>

Although referred to repeatedly in many of his writings, the church's power with respect to doctrine is discussed at length in the *Institutes*. The basic principle is first laid down. It is derived from, totally dependent on and always responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ who is "the sole Master in the Church." Even more specifically this authority—Calvin speaks here of prophets, apostles and their successors—

. . .is all given, not in a strict sense to the persons themselves, but to the ministry over which they were appointed, or, to speak more correctly, to the Word, the administration of which was committed to them.<sup>122</sup>

Stating clearly the difference between the apostles and their successors, he proceeds in eloquent language to describe the dignity of the latter.

This is the extent of the power with which the pastors of the Church, by whatever name they may be distinguished, ought to be invested—that by the word of God they may venture to do all

---

<sup>120</sup>*Institutes*, IV.3.xvi.

<sup>121</sup>*Institutes*, IV.8.i.

<sup>122</sup>*Institutes*, IV.8.ii.

things with confidence; may contain all the strength, glory, wisdom and pride of the world to obey and submit to his majesty; supported by his power, may govern all mankind from the highest to the lowest; may build up the house of Christ and subvert the house of Satan; may feed the sheep and drive away the wolves; may instruct and exhort the docile; may reprove, rebuke and restrain the rebellious and obstinate; may bind and loose; may discharge the lightnings and thunders if necessary, but all in the word of God. . . . We conclude, then, that it is not now left to faithful ministers to frame any new doctrine, but that it behooves them simply to adhere to the doctrine to which God has made all subject, without any exception.<sup>123</sup>

And this rule is to be observed in the church universal fully as much as in local congregations. With this the early church Fathers, and here Calvin quotes several, agreed. To the testimony of prophets, the apostles and our Lord nothing in the way of sound doctrine may or can be added.

He then proceeds to discuss the authority of church councils. He respects them and their decisions, in so far as there is full agreement with Scripture.

. . . but here some limits must be observed that we may derogate nothing from Christ. Now it is the prerogative of Christ to preside over all councils, and to have no mortal man associated with him in that dignity. But I maintain that he really presides only where he governs the whole assembly by his Word and Spirit.<sup>124</sup>

To which he adds, "But this [authority] belongs no less to every particular congregation than to a general council."<sup>125</sup> Nor can it be claimed that councils are assembled in Christ's name, when they either detract from or add to what God has so plainly revealed.

But what about the right of the church to interpret Holy Scripture when controversies arise in connection with doctrine? Here he speaks language which cannot be misconstrued. He affirms the relative importance of "a council of true bishops."

---

<sup>123</sup>*Institutes*, IV.8.ix.

<sup>124</sup>*Institutes*, IV.9.i.

<sup>125</sup>*Institutes*, IV.9.ii.

For such a decision, formed by the common consent of the pastors of the Churches, after the invocation of the Spirit of Christ, will have far greater weight, than if every one of them separately were to maintain it in preaching to his people, or if it were the result of a private conference of a few individuals. . . .But I deny it to be an invariable rule, that every interpretation which may have been approved by a council is the true and certain sense of Scripture.<sup>126</sup>

This having been set forth, Calvin then calls attention to the power of legislation entrusted to Christ's church.

The proper aim of all ecclesiastical legislation is "that God may be rightly worshipped according to the rule he has prescribed, and that our spiritual liberty which relates to God may be preserved entire."<sup>127</sup> Here "the pope and his adherents have most cruelly tyrannized over the minds and tortured the bodies of men." That the church has the right to pass rules and regulations Calvin does not call into question. Only in this way can good order and decorum within the congregation be rendered stable and secure. But always there are restrictions to this authority. Never may it lord over the consciences of men which are bound only by God and that for two reasons:

The first is that his will may be received as the perfect rule for all righteousness and holiness, and so that an acquaintance with it may be all the knowledge necessary to a good life. The second is that with respect to the mode of worshipping him aright, he may exercise the sole empire over our souls, to whom we are under the strongest obligation to obey his authority and await his commands.<sup>128</sup>

Since not every detail for ecclesiastical life and worship is prescribed in the New Testament, the Reformer acknowledges the need for well-ordered regulations.

But as there is such great diversity in the manners of men, so great a variety in their minds, and so much contrariety in the judgments and inclinations, no polity will be sufficiently steady unless it be established by certain laws; nor can any be preserved

---

<sup>126</sup>*Institutes*, IV.9.xiii.

<sup>127</sup>*Institutes*, IV.10.i.

<sup>128</sup>*Institutes*, IV.10.viii.

without some settled form. The laws, therefore, which promote this end, we are so far from condemning, that we contend, their abolition would be followed by a disruption of the bands of union, and the total disorganization and dispersion of the Church. . . . But in regard to such regulations, care must always be taken that they be not considered necessary to salvation, and so imposing a religious obligation on the conscience, or applied to the worship of God, and so represented as essential to piety.<sup>129</sup>

For those having power to legislate it is necessary to exert the greatest diligence "to prevent the intrusion of any error which may corrupt or obscure this pure use of ecclesiastical regulations."

This end will be secured if all the forms, whatever they may be, carry the appearance of manifest utility, if very few are admitted, and principally if they are accompanied with the instruction of a faithful pastor to shut the door against all corrupt opinions.<sup>130</sup>

This will impose some restraint on the liberty of the individual, yet is needful for the order and edification of the entire congregation. All this Calvin weaves into our obligation to love.

Only one subject remains to be considered. It involves an issue which agitated the minds and hearts of thousands in Calvin's day. Under what conditions and when may a believer separate himself from the church to which he belongs? Throughout western Europe in his day the ecclesiastical situation was in turmoil. Many had already broken with the Roman church. Several varieties of evangelical churches had sprung up, notably the Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican. But there was also a wide range of sectarian groups often claiming to be the only true representation of Christ's church and then splitting off from each other again and again with frequency.

This constitutes the background for much of what he wrote concerning "true" and "false" church which, according to him, could be clearly distinguished from each other. The guide for such discernment was to recognize those marks of Christ's church which are taught

---

<sup>129</sup>*Institutes*, IV.10.xxvii.

<sup>130</sup>*Institutes*, IV.10.xxxii.

in the Word.<sup>131</sup> Besides what is found in the *Institutes* much can be gleaned from many of the hundreds of letters which he wrote. Although the subject deserves an elaborate and even-handed treatment, only a few comments can be made here.

Unwearyingly Calvin pleaded for the unity of Christ's church which should be manifest in visible form. But always this must be a unity in the truth of God's Word. Not only because it tyrannized over the lives of believers but especially because it had departed radically from Scripture in doctrine as well as ritual and discipline, he did not hesitate to call the church under papal domination "antichrist." At the same time he did not deny that, despite all manner of deficiencies, in that false body there might exist remnants of Christ's church.<sup>132</sup> For him no congregation on earth is without some fault, even at times on minor doctrinal matters. And these may have to be tolerated for a season. Hence his plea for ongoing reformation which, according to Scripture, involves the duty of every member.<sup>133</sup> But where it is attacked, either directly or indirectly, there the church together with its members lives in flagrant disobedience to its Head and King and hastens to its complete dissolution.

To evaluate with precision what he said about "antichrist" and "antichrists" arising from within the church, scrupulous attention will

<sup>131</sup>How circumspectly Calvin dealt with the question of the true unity of believers is clear from many statements, also the following: "Now this communion is preserved by two bonds—agreement in sound doctrine and brotherly love. Between heretics and schismatics, therefore, Augustine makes the following distinction—that the former corrupt the purity of the faith by false doctrines, and that the latter break the bond of affection, sometimes even while they retain the same faith. . . .Let us remember, therefore, that, whenever the unity of the Church is enjoined upon us in the Scripture it is required, that, while our minds hold the same doctrines in Christ, our wills should likewise be united in mutual benevolence in Christ. . . .And when he [i.e., Paul] inculcates our being 'likeminded, and having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind,' he immediately adds that this should be in Christ. . . .signifying that all union which is formed without the word of the Lord is a faction of the impious and not an association of believers"; *Institutes*, IV.2.v.

<sup>132</sup>Also here: "Hence it appears that we by no means deny that Churches may exist even under his [i.e., the pope's] tyranny 'but he has profaned them. . .' in such Churches, Christ lies half buried, the gospel is suppressed, piety exterminated, and the worship of God almost abolished. . . .To conclude, I affirm that they are Churches, inasmuch as God has wonderfully preserved among them a remnant of his people. . . .But on the other hand, because those marks which we ought chiefly to regard in this controversy are obliterated, I affirm, that the form of a legitimate Church is not to be found either in any of their congregations, or in the body at large" *Institutes*, IV.2.xii.

<sup>133</sup>Cf. his comments on 1 John 4:1, "And he addresses not only the whole Church but also every one of the faithful. . ."; *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 230-231.

have to be paid to his comments on 2 Thessalonians 2 and 1 John 1. But his repeated warnings against false teachings, drawn directly from Scripture, leave no doubt on how dangerous he regarded their presence and influence to be for true believers. This, however,

. . .is no just cause for perturbation. Since the Church is like a threshing-floor, the chaff must be blown away that the pure wheat may remain. This is what God does, when he casts out hypocrites from the Church, for he then cleanses it from refuse and filth.<sup>134</sup>

Aside from direct personal counsel in some of his letters Calvin offers no rules on when and under what circumstances a believer may leave the church. Well might we wish for this in view of the present ecclesiastical situation which would unquestionably have appalled him. But the principles which he outlined are as clear as the day at high noon. And the tests for distinguishing "true" and "false" church, drawn as they are from the Bible itself, are as normative today as they were then.

— 6 —

Anyone reflecting at all seriously on the first question and answer of the *Shorter Catechism* soon finds himself drawn to John Calvin and his teachings on worship. That document of the Westminster divines confronts us with life's most penetrating issue.

What is the chief end of man?

To glorify God and enjoy him forever.<sup>135</sup>

Here is man face to face with the inescapable God in whom all live and move and have their being. Only one who has drunk deeply from the Reformer's convictions would so begin to teach the rudiments of the Christian faith and put them into practice. All life, according to him, tends to worship, either true or false.

The language with which the *Institutes* begins may differ somewhat; the thought which is expressed is the same.

Already the earliest chapters demonstrate this. "True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and

---

<sup>134</sup>*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 192.

<sup>135</sup>In Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III:676. Facsimile of the first copy of the *Larger Catechism* with the same question and answer amplified, 675.

the knowledge of ourselves." But this is at a far remove from any cold intellectual speculation. Immediately involved is man's will together with the deepest emotions of the soul. In the light of daily bounties, "distilling to us by drops from heaven," we should become immediately aware "of the infinite fullness of God."<sup>136</sup> This ought, because of man's total dependence on the Creator and Lord of all, to evoke the response of humility coupled with godly reverence and fear.

Let us listen to Calvin on this "first and simple knowledge to which the genuine order of nature would lead us, if Adam had retained his innocence."<sup>137</sup>

For though our mind cannot conceive of God without ascribing some worship to him, it will not be sufficient merely to apprehend that he is the only proper object of universal worship and adoration, unless we are also persuaded that he is the overflowing fountain of all good and seek for none but in him.<sup>138</sup>

From this he concludes,

For this sense of the divine perfection is calculated to teach us piety which produces religion. By piety I mean a reverence and love of God arising from a knowledge of his benefits.<sup>139</sup>

All "this would produce a desire of union with him and confidence in him, if the human mind were not seduced by its own depravity from the right path of investigation."<sup>140</sup>

All men, indeed, "always retain some sense of religion. . . which is closely interwoven with their original composition."<sup>141</sup> This distinguishes man from the beasts. But ignorance and wickedness have corrupted the knowledge which leads to the proper worship of God. Even that knowledge so conspicuously displayed in the creation and government of the world fails to produce that worship to which God is rightfully entitled. Instead, by the perversion of mind and will and heart men, apart from the saving knowledge gleaned from Scripture and imparted by the Spirit, stoop to idolatry with its superstitious and senseless worship.

---

<sup>136</sup>*Institutes*, I.1.i.

<sup>137</sup>*Institutes*, I.2.i.

<sup>138</sup>*Institutes*, I.2.i.

<sup>139</sup>*Institutes*, I.2.i.

<sup>140</sup>*Institutes*, I.2.ii.

<sup>141</sup>*Institutes*, I.3.i.

At length they involve themselves in such a vast accumulation of errors, that those sparks which enable them to discover the glory of God are smothered and at last extinguished by the criminal darkness of iniquity. That seed which it is impossible to eradicate, a sense of the existence of a Deity, yet remains; but so corrupted as to produce only the worst of fruits.<sup>142</sup>

All who learn to walk in the light of the Word are delivered, so that knowing God aright they can now worship him in spirit and truth. Let them therefore not corrupt, by following the follies of man-made traditions or their own imaginations, that which God has ordained for his glory and their true union and communion with him.

But God, to assert his own right, proclaims that he is "jealous," and will be a severe avenger, if men confound him with any fictitious deity; and then to retain mankind in obedience, he defines his legitimate worship. He comprises both in his law, where he first binds the faithful to himself as their sole legislator, and then prescribes a rule for the right worship of him according to his will.<sup>143</sup>

These strongly-held convictions concerning God, man and the tragic consequences of sin provide foundations for Calvin's passionate zeal for the reformation of church worship. At this he worked with indefatigable energy throughout his career as a Reformer.

Luther had already restored preaching to its rightful place in worship and swept away some of the worst abuses of the "Mass" in his *Formula Missae* (1523) and his *Deutsche Messe* (1526). Far less conservative was the "cleansing" of the Zurich churches taken in hand during the summer of 1524.

Zwingli and his colleagues, accompanied by all manner of craftsmen, entered the churches and set to work. They disposed of the relics, raised their ladders against the walls and white-washed the paintings and decorations, carted away the statues and ornaments, the gold and silver equipment, the costly vestments and splendidly bound service-books. They closed the organs in token that no music of any kind would resound in the

---

<sup>142</sup>*Institutes*, I.4.iv.

<sup>143</sup>*Institutes*, I.12.i.

churches again: the people were to give ear to the Word of God alone.<sup>144</sup>

When Mass was abolished the following year, Zwingli devised a new type of liturgy around the sermon, since according to him it was sufficient to celebrate the Lord's Supper but four times each year.

Much more on church worship, however, Calvin learned from Bucer whose views took a middle position between those of Luther and Zwingli.

By the time he arrived in Geneva sweeping changes in the divine services had already occurred under the leadership of Farel. As early as 1524 while preaching the evangelical faith at Montbeliard he composed his *La Maniere et fasson*, the first such manual in the French language. For him and his followers attending church was *aller au sermon*. His view of the Lord's Supper was largely that of Zwingli. However he did insist on barring the unworthy from the holy table. To him we owe the uniquely Reformed *sursum corda*,

Therefore lift up your hearts on high, seeking the heavenly things in heaven, where Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, and do not fix your eyes on the visible signs, which are corrupted through usage.<sup>145</sup>

In 1536, four years after his arrival in Geneva, he succeeded with a few colleagues in persuading the council to abolish the Mass with its accoutrements.

On such mixed foundations Calvin began his work to place church worship more solidly on God's Word. Always he enjoyed the full support of his fellow pastors; often not that of the magistrates whose approval was necessary for any changes; much less that of some of the leading citizens to whom any supervision of the Lord's table was a tyranny even more intolerable than that of Rome. But throughout his lifelong labors Calvin persisted, not without some success, in putting his convictions in practice for the glory of God and the health of the congregation. And several of these were uniquely his own!

Although not a rigid "sabbatarian," he urged the implementation of laws passed for the city long before he appeared on the scene. Everyone, unless seriously ill or otherwise legitimately absent, was

---

<sup>144</sup>*Liturgies of the Western Church*, introduced by Bard Thompson (Cleveland, New York: World Pub. Co., 1965), 142.

<sup>145</sup>*Liturgies of the Western Church*, 187.

compelled to attend worship. During those hours when the congregation was assembled no shops of any kind might be open for business. The Lord's Day, while in principle no more sacred than any other, should be observed with that solemnity and respect which honored God who in Christ offered true rest from sin to all who believed the holy gospel. To this end three services were to be held in every parish: one in the morning, then a catechetical service for children at noon, to be followed by another service in the afternoon. In this way everyone could attend the preaching of the Word without which no thanksgiving, praise and adoration are acceptable.

Nor should the Word be isolated from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in which the union and communion of believers with Christ comes to its clearest and richest expression. In this respect he attempted to restore the pattern followed in the earliest and purest Christian congregations. When the magistrates persistently insisted on only a quarterly administration, he sought to circumvent this somewhat by scheduling its observance in different parishes on different Sundays. Only because Scripture nowhere prescribed a daily or weekly celebration and for the sake of the peace of the church did he yield, but always under protest.

So frequently and voluminously did Calvin write about worship, both private and public, that several books could well be filled with this material. Created in God's image and now restored by grace, the believer is to find life's true fulfillment in worship; not simply a few isolated exercises but every day and in every activity. To this duty, which should also become his delight, the preaching was to direct, instruct and challenge him. Faith in God's saving love, when faithfully and fully proclaimed, is to evoke love for God and fellowmen which is the hallmark of all genuine piety and religion. Only in this light can we rightly assess and appreciate his call to obedience.

Early in 1537 he submitted with Farel the *Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église* which referred explicitly also to church worship. Ancillary to this, in order that children as well as adults might know well what they were about, he prepared *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* first published in French, two years later in Latin and thereupon

greatly revised.<sup>146</sup> Little more could then be done, since soon he and other faithful pastors were expelled from the city.

In Strassburg, while serving the French-speaking congregation, he provided a well-constructed liturgy together with prayers and liturgical formularies for Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Upon his return to Geneva in 1541 this was introduced with some modifications for the congregation.<sup>147</sup>

Nowhere, so far as the writer could find, did Calvin ever speak of public worship as "dialogical" in character, that is, of God addressing the people with his Word and they responding in confession, prayer and praise. Yet this concept, so often stressed by later Reformed liturgists, is entirely congenial to everything he wrote and arranged on this score.

The service began with the solemn and official declaration of Psalm 124:4, "Our help is in the name of the Lord."<sup>148</sup> Here both God's majesty and man's dependence on him for all good are affirmed. Upon this the minister immediately leads the people in a humble confession of sins, pleading for forgiveness on the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only by "the gate of prayer" is the way opened to that union and communion with God which enables worshippers to hear the Word and rejoice in divine approbation. It comes as no surprise, then, that Calvin in Strassburg made use of the Absolution,

For when the whole church stands, as it were, before the tribunal of God, when they declare themselves guilty and have no refuge but in the Divine mercy—it is of no mean or trivial consolation to have Christ's ambassador, furnished with the mandate of reconciliation, by whom they may have their absolution pronounced,<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup>The first catechetical writing of Calvin is entitled *Instruction in Faith* and is reproduced under that title in translation and with explanation by Paul T. Fuhrmann (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959). *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* appeared in 1541, then with some changes in Latin in 1545 and dedicated by Calvin to "the faithful ministers of Christ throughout East Friesland" (in *Tracts and Treatises*, II:34-94). Although soon replaced by others, its influence on these is unmistakable. The dedicatory letter is well worth reading with care to ascertain the aims and high hopes which he cherished with its appearance. Cf. also P. Y. De Jong, "Calvin's Contribution on Christian Education" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 2 (November 1967): 162-201.

<sup>147</sup>*Liturgics*, 197-210, where the differences between the Strassburg and Geneva forms are clearly indicated.

<sup>148</sup>For several details here we are indebted to Bard Thompson in *Liturgics*, 190-192.

<sup>149</sup>*Institutes*, III.4.xiv.

adding by way of explanation,

that the grace of the gospel should be confirmed and sealed, as it were, to the minds of the faithful, in public as well as private, by those whom the Lord has ordained to this office; which cannot be done by preaching alone.<sup>150</sup>

But so strongly did the people in Geneva object to this novelty that some jumped up before the prayer was finished to forestall listening to the absolution. Again the Reformer for the sake of peace yielded without ever changing his convictions on its propriety.

Here the prayer of confession was followed by the congregation singing a metrical version of the Ten Commandments. Its use was intended to bind on the minds and hearts of the people the third use of God's law as that rule for life by which they were to press towards a more diligent and thankful obedience.

In Strassburg Calvin had become acquainted with singing and championed it throughout all the rest of his life as integral to true worship. There both German and French speaking parishes had enjoyed it since 1525. Soon he set his hand to preparing a psalter for the French, the *Aulcuns psaulmes et cantiques* of 1539. It contained seventeen metrical psalms; five by himself, the others by Clement Marot. A few other songs were soon included, showing that he was not committed to exclusive Psalm singing in the churches although praising these as the most profitable and advantageous.<sup>151</sup> His aim was to produce a complete Book of Praise for the churches. It was achieved, largely by others under his direction, in the Genevan Psalter of 1562. Soon it appeared in translations throughout the entire Reformed world and still serves, with modifications, many of those churches today.

This first part of the service, so we are informed, was led by the minister while standing behind the Communion table. Then he proceeded to the pulpit, offering an extempore prayer for the Spirit's illumination so that the Word might be read, faithfully proclaimed and sincerely received by the congregation. The reading and exposition of the Word was one inseparable element which he called "the incomparable treasure of the church." Without it true worship would soon decline, then deteriorate and finally be hopelessly deformed by rituals

---

<sup>150</sup> *Institutes*, III.4.xiv.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. Calvin's preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), esp. xxxvi-xxxix.

which might please the people but would be abominations in the sight of the Lord.

On preaching, including its central place and function in worship, Calvin has so much to say that even a summary here would be both inadequate and misleading. Rather would we refer the reader to his many sermons translated into English, to be followed by perusing T.H.L. Parker's excellent work, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin*.<sup>152</sup> So urgent was this high calling entrusted by God to him, that despite bouts with recurrent and painful illnesses, he preached once or twice each Lord's Day and then three, four and even five times during the alternate weeks assigned to him. He spoke simply and at times even somewhat colloquially, so that the people might clearly understand the message. Always the Word was to be brought; hence, a text whether brief or somewhat longer, depending on its weight. To check any tendency to choose a text which might happen to appeal to him, he followed the pattern of the early church Fathers in preaching through entire books of the Bible. But the material was not merely to be explained; it had to be applied to the lives of the hearers as they went about their duties from day to day. As God is one and salvation is one, so too preaching for Calvin had one central and controlling focus. This he summed up for the congregation in his own words.

As often as we come to the sermon we are taught of the free promises of God, to show us that it is simply in His goodness and mercy that we must trust, that we must not be founded on our merits, nor on anything that we can bring from our side, but God must stretch forth His hand to begin and accomplish all. And that (as Scripture shows us) is applied to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we must seek Him entirely. . .and we must know that Jesus Christ alone leads us. That, I say, is shown us every day. It is also declared to us that the service of God does not consist in imagining foolish devotions. . .but we must serve God in obedience. After that, we are shown in the first place that we must make a sacrifice of our hearts and affections to Him, and that hypocrisy is detestable to Him. . . After that, we are shown how we can call upon God; we are shown to what signs we have been baptized and what is the fruit of our baptism for our whole lives, even to our death; and we are shown why it

---

<sup>152</sup>London-Redhill: Lutterworth Press, 1947.

is that the Lord's Supper is administered. All that is daily declared to us.<sup>153</sup>

Hence the practical application in accordance with the specific content of the text. And such preaching did not leave the Genevan citizenry unmoved.

Following the sermon the congregation, led by the minister, offered the "Great Prayer." Intercessions were made for those in authority as well as for all sorts and conditions of men. To it Calvin added a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer which stressed glorifying God by a life of adoration and holy obedience.

With this, however, the service was not to be regarded as complete. For the Reformed it should be followed by the administration of the Lord's Supper. The way to the table was opened with a prayer of humble access and the recitation of the Apostles' Creed. By this response to the sermon the people expressed their wish "to live and die in the Christian doctrine and religion." At this time the table was furnished with bread and wine. Here the words of the Institution were read with that *Form* which called to mind the rich promises of Christ and the duty to earnest self-examination. It concluded with the *sursum corda*. In an earlier *Form* the following was added,

In joy of heart, in brotherly union, come everyone to partake of our Lord's Table, giving thanks unto Him for the very great love which he has shown to us. Have the death of this good Savior graven on your hearts in eternal remembrance, so that you are set afire, so also that you incite others to love God and follow His holy Word.<sup>154</sup>

To forestall any superstition which might linger in some hearts and to encourage those who partook, the following prescription was mandated for the officiant:

In giving the bread, which shall be without image, the Minister does not suffer it to be adored. As he distributed it into the hands of everyone, so that they may take it and eat, the Minister may say: Jesus, the true Savior of the world, who died for us and is seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, dwell in your

---

<sup>153</sup>C.R. XLIX, 661, translated and quoted by Parker, 81.

<sup>154</sup>*Liturgies*, 223.

hearts through His Holy Spirit, that you may be wholly alive in Him through living faith and perfect love.<sup>155</sup>

After all had partaken, a suitable prayer of thanksgiving was offered in the form of an exhortation which urged them to live the new life in purity and to allow none to remain in poverty but attend to their comfort.

The service was closed with the benediction: "Go in peace, The grace, peace and blessing of God be upon you all. Amen."<sup>156</sup>

Here, then, was a well-constructed service with appropriate songs, prayers and formularies in full accord with Scripture and the practice of the earliest churches. The reading of these was prescribed not only to suppress any notion that the sacraments worked *ex opere operato*, but also to prevent any perfunctory use of the sacred ordinances. Just when and how often singing of the Psalms was inserted seems to have been left somewhat to the discretion of the officiating minister. We do know that at times one was sung at the opening of service; another in connection with the reading and expounding of the Word; perhaps also when the Lord's Supper was administered. Today this may seem to many, even of Reformed lineage, as far too simple and straightlaced. But in its awareness of the grace, holiness and majesty of God together with the call to heartfelt obedience on the part of the worshippers, it has seldom if ever been surpassed. Well might we ask whether, with all the liturgical novelties which are so much the order of the day, we are exchanging a precious heritage for a mess of pottage.

As for Calvin's teachings on personal and private devotion we turn to his views on the Christian life, as this is to be practiced each day anew.

— 7 —

Of Calvin's many contributions few are so difficult to summarize as what he wrote on the Christian life. At every turn we meet with occasional statements or lengthy passages on this theme. Nor is this surprising, since Scripture itself leads the way. It derives from God himself and therefore is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for *training in righteousness*, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (1 Tim. 3:16-17).

---

<sup>155</sup>*Liturgies*, 223.

<sup>156</sup>*Liturgies*, 224.

Although a competent scholar in letters and law, Calvin used his energies as a theologian, a defender of the gospel, a preacher and teacher, an organizer of the church and a friend to believers throughout much of Europe. But in these capacities he saw himself always as a pastor, a shepherd of souls to be guided into an understanding of themselves as the people of God.

In any summary of his understanding of the Christian life with all its nuances we cannot begin to scratch more than the surface.

But where shall we start when attempting to deal with the comprehensiveness and complexities of this subject?

Frequently this has been done by attending to relevant chapters in the *Institutes*.<sup>157</sup> There we do find the fruits of Calvin's life-long reflections on the Christian life. But these cannot be properly assessed except in the light of the rest of this volume and his other writings. Seldom does he content himself with simply passing on information. His aim was always practical and pastoral: that "the man of God" would "be equipped for every good work." Only by reading widely in Calvin can we feast on the rich and rewarding insights which are profusely sprinkled on so many of his pages. Of course, he has not spoken the last word; never did he suppose he could. Some of his interpretations and applications may well be open to question. He was a man of his own time and spoke to people who were his contemporaries and struggled with the problems of that age. But for anyone reading with a sympathetic heart he remains also here "a man for all seasons."

Nowhere do we find a simple, straightforward but adequate definition of the Christian life from which the rest can be deduced. Far less will we meet a series of legalistic prescriptions covering every detail of life. Nor does he begin with that inescapable but indefinable yearning of man's soul which longs to attain the *visio Dei*. Also here the Reformer of Geneva refuses to be forced into some mold of our systematizing. But there is an over-arching unity of perspective which comes through with ever greater clarity as we read. For him there are psychological, sociological and historical aspects to the Christian life which deserve attention. But above all, Calvin's understanding is always theologically grounded and theologically controlled. With Paul he

---

<sup>157</sup>*Institutes*, III: "On the manner of receiving the grace of Christ, the benefit which we derive from it, and the effects which follow it." The following chapters are especially relevant to "the Christian life": 2. On faith; 3. on repentance; 6. Exhortation to live the Christian life; 7. Self-denial; 8. Bearing the Cross; 9. Meditation on the future life; 10. The right use of this present life.

asserts again and again that all things, especially our salvation in Christ, are of God and through God and unto God, so that,

. . .our being should be employed for his glory; for how unreasonable would it be for creatures, whom he has created and whom he sustains, to live for any other purpose than for making his glory known?<sup>158</sup>

Valuable assistance in introducing us to the many-sidedness of Calvin's view of the Christian life can be gained by inquiring into what scholars have written on this subject. Most of them, however, deal with only one or two aspects. For their thoroughness in treating this theme as a whole at least two deserve our attention. Each from its own perspective is excellent.

John H. Leith's *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*<sup>159</sup> provides a penetrating insight into those theological themes which lie at the root of the Reformer's understanding of the Christian life. The author deals with justification by faith as well as with predestination and providence together with Calvin's view of history and man's place in it. His interest lies in inquiring whether and in how far this presentation has any relevance for the believing individual and church in today's world.

Quite different and more detailed is the approach taken by Ronald S. Wallace in his *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*.<sup>160</sup> He states the problem which also faces us.

It is difficult, on a first reading of Calvin, to see how some aspects of his teaching can be reconciled with other aspects.<sup>161</sup>

But then he concludes,

. . .all Calvin's decisions on widely differing aspects of the Christian life can be understood and seen in their unity as they are seen to arise from his doctrine of the person and work of Christ as involving once-for-all the sanctification and destiny of His Church. The whole of the life and death of Christ must be

---

<sup>158</sup>This basic affirmation is introduced as early in the *Institutes* as I.2.i. and developed throughout.

<sup>159</sup>Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989.

<sup>160</sup>Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1959.

<sup>161</sup>Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, v.

regarded as a process of self-sanctification in fulfillment of His royal priesthood on our behalf.<sup>162</sup>

Somewhat the same approach was taken earlier by Wilhelm Kolffhaus in *Christusgemeinschaft bei Johannes Calvin*.

These and others are helpful, indeed, if only to alert us that putting it all together under this theme in Calvin's writings is difficult without falling into misunderstandings and misrepresentations.

For him to be a Christian is to be "in Christ." This is the "new life" received as a gift of free grace. It radically transforms the whole of our existence and experience as it grows by that same efficacious grace to maturity, in spite of every trial and temptation, until at last it is perfected in glory. It is a life of union and communion with the fullness of Christ both personally and corporately. It springs from the Father's electing love, is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ and is wrought and preserved in us by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Its pattern is the revealed will of the triune God laid down in the Word. Its aim is "holiness perfected in the fear of the Lord."

That "new life in Christ" is entirely of God: in its source, its preservation and progress, and its final perfection. But it is wrought in us and summons us to serve the God of our salvation reverently, obediently and joyfully in every one of life's relationships and situations. Only by way of a lively faith is it received, experienced and enjoyed. This always humbles the Christian as he sees his own imperfections while at the same time assuring him of everlasting mercies.

St. Paul [so Calvin begins his sermon on Ephesians 2:8-10] has shown so far that our salvation is the true mirror in which to behold the infinite glory of God, for it is his will to be known by his goodness above all things. And for that reason also he has shown that God chose us before the creation of the world, however not in respect of anything that could be found in us, but to content his pure mercy. Here, therefore, he concludes the matter, and shows what he meant when he told us that our adoption hangs on and proceeds from God's choosing of us in his everlasting mercy, that is to say, in order that we should be, as it were, bowed to the dust, confessing that whatever we are

---

<sup>162</sup>Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, v.

and whatever goodness we have, we hold it all wholly from God and of his free grace.<sup>163</sup>

Not only are we elected in Christ Jesus, so carefully explained earlier, but we are also renewed in him.

Now seeing we are created in Jesus Christ, it is the same as saying that all the righteousness, all the wisdom, all the virtue, all the goodness that is in us we draw from that source, and God does not pour them out haphazardly here and there, but has put the fullness of all things belonging to our salvation into Jesus Christ, so that when we are once members of his body, we are also partakers of all his benefits. . . .<sup>164</sup>

To make the picture even more complete for those listening to this sermon he adds, explaining that we are God's workmanship,

. . . God must go before us with his own grace. For what can we do, seeing we are as rotting carcasses until God has renewed us again by the power of his Holy Spirit?<sup>165</sup>

Here, as in so many of his messages, all the strands of our life in union and communion with Christ are woven into a consistent whole.

This life differs radically from that of the old existence with which the believer has entered the world. It is a second birth without which none enters the kingdom of God to experience the riches of salvation. That this was also imparted to the faithful in the Old Testament Calvin never questions. But its fullness has come only with the appearance of Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Of decisive importance for understanding him on this new life is what he affirms on the image of God. Here he distantiates his position sharply from that of both the Romanists and the Anabaptists. Salvation as a radical change in man does not elevate the believer to a higher level of being. Nor does it replace that old pattern of existence, so that concern for renewing society and state can be forgotten; this mundane life itself being doomed to destruction. For Calvin, and he never wearies of stressing this, salvation is a renewal, a restoration, a refurbishing of man's life, so that everywhere he now begins to live in obedience to the glory of God.

---

<sup>163</sup>*Sermons on Ephesians*, 155.

<sup>164</sup>*Sermons on Ephesians*, 165.

<sup>165</sup>*Sermons on Ephesians*, 156.

While making distinctions, he refuses to divorce the physical and the spiritual; the personal and the social; the earthly and the heavenly; the temporal and the eternal. Never is the antithesis that of matter and form; of nature and grace. It is the sharp and all-encompassing distinction between sin and grace, so clearly taught in Scripture.

From the beginning man by God's appointment occupied a unique place and purpose in the created order—that of living obediently in blessed fellowship with the Creator to whom he owed all things. From this high estate man fell by wilful disobedience into sin. This subjected him to the wrath of a good, holy and righteous God and alienated him from participating in any true blessedness. But immediately upon man's fall God intervened with grace, moved by the infinite love of his divine being. By it God pledged to restore, revivify and renew man's life in Christ Jesus who as the second Adam is the perfect image of the Father. In this way both God's glory and man's self-fulfillment are achieved. Now life can again be lived "before the face of God" with courage, joy and an unshakable hope. This is in Christ Jesus alone, the eternal Son who became man for us and our salvation. By dying and rising again he "consecrated" himself perfectly to the triune God for the sake of his people. That life is embraced by faith apart from any works on man's part. Receiving Christ and all his benefits man is now called to "consecrate" himself in every attitude, activity and aspiration to God. Commenting on Romans 12:1f., Calvin explains,

Paul now passes on, according to the best order, to show how the life is to be formed. If it be that through the saving knowledge of God and of Christ the soul is, as it were, regenerated into a celestial life, and that the life is in a manner formed and regulated by holy precepts and exhortations; it is then in vain that you show a desire to form this aright, except you prove first that the origin of all righteousness in man is in God and Christ, for this is to raise them from the dead.<sup>166</sup>

How this is effectuated in the believer's life he explains elsewhere. On this union and communion with Christ two figures, drawn from Scripture itself, compel his attention repeatedly: that of "the vine and the branches" and of "the head and members of the body." Both emphasize a living, dynamic, organic union to Christ which grows and increases towards the end for which God has created and now brings

---

<sup>166</sup>*Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the apostle to the Romans*, 449.

man to full salvation. Here divine activity and human response are inextricably connected.

Calvin begins with that first principle which believers must learn: ". . . that we are by nature barren and dry, except in so far as we have been ingrafted into Christ, and draw from him a power which is new and which does not proceed from ourselves."<sup>167</sup> What the Savior here teaches, according to him, is that he lays solid foundations for our self-understanding as believers.

Now there are three principal parts: first, that we have no power of doing good but what comes from himself; secondly that we, having a root in him, are dressed and pruned by the Father; thirdly, that he removes the unfruitful branches, that they may be thrown into the fire and burned.<sup>168</sup>

From this comes the knowledge of how and why we receive this union with Christ.

But this is given to the elect alone by special grace. So, then, the Father is the first Author of all blessings who plants us with his hand; but the commencement of life is in Christ, since we begin to take root in him.<sup>169</sup>

Throughout his reflections on this new life he is distinctly "trinitarian" in emphasis. To refer salvation to one person of the deity to the obscuring of the others is a perversion which detracts from the glory of the one true God and wreaks havoc in our spiritual experience.

At the same time this gracious gift summons the believer to a sweet and sustained spiritual response, without which we imperil our salvation.

He [i.e., Christ] again exhorts them to be earnest and careful in keeping the grace which they have received, lest our indifference should carry us away and make us fly to destruction. In order to prove that he did not begin the work of our salvation for the purpose of leaving it imperfect in the middle of the course, he promises that his Spirit will always be efficacious in us, if we do not prevent him.<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>167</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:106.

<sup>168</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:107.

<sup>169</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:107.

<sup>170</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:109.

If we feel that we "are starved," the fault lies not in "that rich fatness which is necessary for yielding abundant fruit" but solely in ourselves for which the remedy is to turn again to God (Calvin is as strong on daily "repentance," as was Luther). This for him "is a very useful admonition, for the Lord often suffers us to hunger, in order to train us to earnestness in prayer."

Now he urges a diligent use of those means which God himself has provided. We learn to "abide in Christ" by abiding in his words.

He means that we take root in him by faith; for as soon as we have departed from the doctrine of the Gospel, we seek Christ separately from himself.<sup>171</sup>

All things tends to praising and magnifying God by bearing the desired fruit.

But by this end or effect he kindles in them the desire of doing good; for there is nothing which we ought to value more highly than that the name of God may be glorified by us.<sup>172</sup>

Because of his emphasis on obedience as a proper response to God's grace, Calvin has often been accused—first by the Romanists of his day and today by many who know him only superficially—of ignoring the love-dimension. Not only in his explanations of the divine law as the rule for Christian conduct but also here this is consistently affirmed. Faith which includes the true knowledge of God and bears the fruit of obedience is empty and hypocritical without love.

It ought also to be observed that a more abundant knowledge of Christ is here represented as an extraordinary reward of our love to Christ; and hence it follows that it is an invaluable treasure.<sup>173</sup>

Even more fully is this explained in his comments on John 16:27.

These words remind us that the only bond of our union with God is to be united with Christ; and we are united to him by a faith which is not feigned but which springs from sincere affection which he describes by the name of *love*; for no man

---

<sup>171</sup>*Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:101.

<sup>172</sup>*Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:112.

<sup>173</sup>*Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:158.

believes purely in Christ who does not cordially embrace him.<sup>174</sup>

Always God's love in Christ, applied to our hearts, awakens and stimulates ours. Always Christ's power is available, on which we should draw daily. Here the themes of "consecration" together with the pursuit of "holiness" come into focus again.

It is because he consecrated himself to the Father that his holiness might come to us; for as the blessing on the first fruits is spread over the whole harvest, so the Spirit of God cleanses us by the holiness of Christ and makes us partakers of it. Nor is this done by imputation only. . . because he has, so to speak, presented us to his Father in his own person, that we may be renewed by his Spirit.<sup>175</sup>

Small wonder, then, that Calvin has no patience with the notion and practice of approaching God for his blessings through the mediation of the saints and the blessed Virgin. This denies the clear teaching of Scripture. It casts a threatening cloud over the love and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. It robs believers of that assurance of faith which comes when relying only on the perfection of the Savior's person and work.

And Christ, though residing in glory at the Father's right hand, never remains at a distance from those who seek him. With his majesty, power and grace he as the God-man does not leave us alone.

In much the same fashion Calvin discourses at great length, both in commentaries and sermons, on "the head and members of the body." Even more than in the preceding exposition, we are reminded that God's salvation in Christ is never received, experienced and enjoyed by individuals in isolation from the "body" which is the church. Especially in this sense *extra ecclesia non salus*.

Hence what has been said respecting the nature and condition of the human body must be applied to us; for we are not merely a civil society but, being ingrafted into Christ's body, are truly members one of another. Whatever, therefore, any one of us has, let him know that it has been given him for the edification of his brethren in common. . . . Let us have a regard to the common advantage, in order that we may not destroy the

---

<sup>174</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:158.

<sup>175</sup> *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:181.

Church by malignity or envy or pride or any disagreement; but may, on the contrary, every one of us strive to the utmost of his power to preserve it.<sup>176</sup>

In this light he discusses the gifts and offices which Christ through the Holy Spirit has distributed severally to the members, so that each has need of others while at the same time serving them in love.

Now as the law of love calls upon us *to love our neighbors as ourselves*, so it requires us to consult their welfare. The Apostle, however, does not expressly forbid individuals to consult their own advantage, but he requires that they should not be so devoted to their own interests, as not to be prepared to forego part of their right as often as the welfare of their brethren requires this.<sup>177</sup>

On such foundations he discusses not only Christian liberty but also the principle of self-denial as well as intercessory prayer as characteristics of that life in Christ which becomes increasingly fruitful.

This life, the image of God restored in us by grace, is to be lived fully here on earth. All gifts of God are to be received and enjoyed; their use sanctified by the Word of God and prayer. Yet correlative with this is a proper meditation on the future life which is the hope of our glory with Christ. Again and again for him this-worldliness and other-worldliness cross paths in the Christian's life. Never may we become so preoccupied with the things of earth that we forget the far richer and more rewarding life which awaits us. Nor may we become so lost in the contemplation of our future glory that we are of little or no use here. Calvin, fully as much as Luther, speaks of our place and purpose in the present world as "vocation." Each of us has received from God an assigned position. For the discharge of this in obedience to the Word, the Spirit supplies every grace and gift necessary. But these are given in proportion to need,

. . .for it is necessary to the common benefit of the body that no one should be furnished with fullness of gifts, lest he should heedlessly despise his brethren. . . .By this most beautiful order, and as it were symmetry, is the safety of the Church indeed preserved, that is, when every one imparts to all in common

---

<sup>176</sup> *Commentary on Corinthians*, I:412.

<sup>177</sup> *Commentary on Corinthians*, I:423.

what he has received from the Lord, in such a way as not to impede others. He who inverts this order fights with God, by whose ordinance it is appointed. . . .<sup>178</sup>

Let us then, so Calvin concludes, consecrate ourselves to God's service in "holiness" in every daily activity. But, while pursuing the goal of perfection, we can never attain complete sanctification in this life. Always there remain those imperfections which are remnants of our old nature. To these we are called to die daily. Also the trials and temptations of the present age will impede our progress, unless we turn humbly to God for that grace which he always bestows lavishly on those who love and seek to obey him. And to cheer us in every circumstance this God, who loves righteousness because he is righteous, holds before our eyes the reward, a crown of victory and glory. Freed at last from those infirmities which still cleave to us *"we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is."*

This, then, is the only way of sustaining our faith, so that we may wait patiently for the life promised to us. . . .we shall be like him because he will make our vile body conformable to his glorious body, as Paul also teaches us. . . .For the Apostle intended shortly to show that the final end of our adoption is that what has in order preceded in Christ shall at length be completed in us.<sup>179</sup>

How then should the Christian view his new life in union and communion with Christ? We note again how radically his version differentiates itself from ideals cherished within the context of Roman Catholic and Anabaptist piety.

According to Calvin, "consecration," made possible by the restoration of the image of God in us, should characterize all our day-by-day activities, so that we may become conformed to a pattern displayed in Christ's obedience to the Father. He is the "example" and "mirror" and "image" of that for which we are to strive and which we shall one day become. Christlikeness as the goal of our adoption into God's family, frequently discussed by Calvin, deserves far greater treatment than we can give it here. But always the believer is to look to the Savior, remembering that as in this life he died and arose, so our life

---

<sup>178</sup> *Commentary on Corinthians*, I:398.

<sup>179</sup> *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 205.

will be a daily dying and a rising in him.<sup>180</sup> Thus our sufferings, as well as those of the church as a whole, are to be esteemed as necessary and beneficial, so that together we may all make progress in godliness and sanctification. But this goal cannot be attained without those spiritual exercises and exertions, which God prescribes in his Word.

Only so shall we grow up into all things in Christ. This is that "manhood" or full maturity of which Paul speaks.

How does the Christian then see himself in response to the gracious gift of salvation? First and foremost as a *believer* who has come to know and trust in Jesus Christ alone. This active faith is the driving principle of his new life. Whatever is done in faith receives God's approval; all that does not spring from faith is sin. By faith he sees himself as a *member* of Christ's body, united with fellow-believers and called to serve and be served by others. He begins as a *babe* who, because of the gift of that life which never dies, is commanded to grow in grace and knowledge, as Peter

. . .also exhorts us to make progress; for it is the only way of persevering, to make continual advances and not to stand still

---

<sup>180</sup>On Christlikeness as "our conformity to Christ" he has much to say. Although the nobler heathen philosophers have urged justice and righteousness on people, together with a wide circle of duties.

. . .they advance no argument but that we ought to live agreeably to nature; but the Scripture deduces its exhortation from the true source, when it not only enjoins us to refer our life to God the author of it, to whom it belongs, but, after having taught us, that we are degenerated from the original state in which we were created, adds that Christ, by whom we have been reconciled to God, is proposed to us as an example, whose character we should exhibit in our lives, (*Institutes*, III.6.iii).

He takes sharp issue with the "imitation of Christ" practice advocated by the Roman church with its fastings and footwashings.

It deserves our attention that Christ says that he *gave an example*; for we are not at liberty to take all his actions, without reserve, as subjects of imitation.

Of them he says, "They were not imitators but apes." And

This display of buffoonery is nothing else than shameful mockery of Christ. At all events, Christ does not here enjoin an annual ceremony, but bids us be ready throughout our whole life to wash the feet of our brethren and neighbours (*Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, II:61-62).

Ours is to be a conformity to the death and resurrection of Christ, that is, a daily dying to self and sin and a daily living according to God's will by the power of "our union and communion with Christ" (cf. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 47-48).

in the middle of our journey; as though he had said, that they only would be safe who laboured to make progress daily.<sup>181</sup>

Our life, then, will be seen as a *pilgrimage*. Here Calvin refers to the similarity between us and Israel as it traveled through the wilderness from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. We journey safely only in so far as and when we listen to, learn from and obey the God whose we are and whom we are called to serve.

All this we experience together as God's *family*, his sons and daughters. Every regulation laid down for our lives is beneficial, since it proceeds from his love and faithfulness to keep us united to Christ. Sin of all kinds threatens this blessed union and communion; hence godly repentance is always requisite. At the same time we are God's farm, his *husbandry* and his *building*.

You have been planted in the Lord's field by the labor of men in such a way, that our heavenly Father is himself the true Husbandman and the Author of this plantation. You have been built up by men in such a way that he himself is the true Master-builder.<sup>182</sup>

This is accomplished when his ministers in their work build on no other foundation than Christ and those who hear respond obediently in faith.

We are also to regard ourselves as *disciples*, receiving with that meekness which is appropriate to pupils and learners of the Word. We should also aspire to and begin to attain the stature of *teachers* able and eager to instruct others by our words and deeds.

Such progress unto "the fullness of Christ" never comes easily in the present age. Always there are enemies from within and without whom we are exhorted to resist. These are the self, the world and the devil. We must see ourselves as *soldiers* enrolled for battle under orders of the Captain of our salvation. Calvin loves, especially in letters and sermons, to make use of the military language employed by Paul. He also refers to the Israelites who were frequently summoned to fight the battles of the Lord. At this point it is well to remind ourselves that the Reformer urges for the advancement of our spiritual life a faithful reading and reflecting on the Old Testament. Even when the battle is fiercest, a Christian need not fear and much less give way. Every weapon needed has been richly supplied by God. All he must do is put

---

<sup>181</sup> *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 426.

<sup>182</sup> *Commentary on Corinthians*, I:132.

them on with prayer and then stand firm in the Lord's strength. Victory is fully assured to those who are faithful.

For this the Christian should exercise himself daily as a necessary preparation for life. In like manner the Reformer calls attention to the believer as an *athlete*. He is a *runner* in that race which is not completed until the day of death. He is a *wrestler* who can subdue his opponent only by sustained and strenuous effort. Strangely enough, Calvin does not say much about the "beating" or "boxing" in which Paul claimed to be involved, except to lay down the rule for athletes as this applies to believers.

For he [i.e., Paul] does not indulge himself but restrains his inclination—which cannot be accomplished unless the body is tamed, and, by being held back from its inclinations, is habituated to subjection like a wild and refractory steed. . . . Let us, however, treat the body so as to make a slave of it, that it may not by its wantonness keep us back from the duties of piety; and farther, that we may not indulge it so as to occasion injury or offense to others.<sup>183</sup>

Does he have a low estimate of the body? Hardly, if we remember how frequently he speaks of it as a glorious creation of God. Only because man has fallen into sin has it become a servant of unrighteousness by which the self now indulges for lusting in what is contrary to God's will and man's own true interest.

Calvin also has much to say about death. It is the unavoidable reality which all believers should face without fear. But that requires strengthening ourselves by trusting God's promises in Christ. He will never leave us alone; in Christ he has opened the way to glory for us. Although divested for a season of this mortal body, we will not linger in some state of unconscious slumber but instead receive a *building of perpetual duration*. On this phrase Calvin comments,

It is not certain whether he [i.e., Paul] means by this term a state of blessed immortality which awaits believers after death,

---

<sup>183</sup>On *running* Paul has much to say, esp. in his *Commentary on Philippians*, 102; very little on *wrestling* since the term appears so seldom in Scripture; nothing on *beating the air*, which he equates with *wrestling* but many commentators, including Leon Morris in his *First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983), explain as *boxing*: "He is not a boxer who strikes but the air (either 'shadow-sparring' or missing the opponent). . . . He puts everything into direct and forceful Christian endeavour," 140.

or the incorruptible and glorious body such as it will be after the resurrection. In whichever of these senses it is taken, it will not be unsuitable; though I prefer to understand it as meaning that the blessed condition of the soul after death is the commencement of this *building*, and the glory of the final resurrection is the consummation of it. . . .<sup>184</sup>

And what is that condition?

Believers. . . who appear in the view of God, clothed with Christ and adorned with His image, receive the glorious robe of immortality.<sup>185</sup>

For the Christian's progress in sanctification God has provided those "external aids" which are necessary and useful. Chiefly is this his Word which awakens and strengthens faith. It comes through the church in the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of Christian discipline. Added to the Word are "the visible words of God," the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Each in its own way serves to strengthen us in our union and communion with Christ. Here God assures us that we are his own. Both are signs and seals of that grace by which we can live and strive and even suffer in the firm hope of everlasting glory. All this we experience and enjoy only in the church as "the communion of saints." Even here, while urging us to build each other up in love and good works, Calvin hints at a "missionary outreach."

But I rather think that reference is here made to the last coming of Christ, the expectation of which ought especially to rouse us to the practice of a holy life as well as to careful and diligent efforts in the work of gathering together the Church. For to what end did Christ come except to collect us all into one body from that dispersion into which we are now wandering? Therefore the nearer his coming is, the more we ought to labor that the scattered may be assembled and united together, that they may be one fold and one shepherd.<sup>186</sup>

To all this must be added the privilege and power of prayer. Every believer is exhorted to be diligent and fervent in its exercise, praying not

---

<sup>184</sup>*Commentary on Corinthians*, II:217-218.

<sup>185</sup>*Commentary on Corinthians*, II:218.

<sup>186</sup>*Commentaries on the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews*, 242.

only for himself or even for others but above all for the glory of God in the coming of Christ's kingdom. This is the chief part of that gratitude which we owe God for all his benefits. By it we "consecrate" ourselves from the heart to his service. Especially his exposition of the Lord's Prayer demonstrates how integral to making spiritual progress is this exercise to which we are called each day anew.<sup>187</sup>

Only a taste of the food which Calvin serves on the Christian life has been offered. Hopefully it stimulates the appetite for more, reading his own writings rather than contenting ourselves with what others have said about his views.

Much of this has been commonplace in Christian literature ever since the days of the earliest church fathers. To a large degree he offered nothing new. But his contributions on this theme, while comprehensive and copious, are welded into a harmonious unity which finds few parallels. Through the confessions, catechisms and especially sermons of the Reformed churches throughout the world Calvin set a unique stamp on the lives of those who embrace his teachings.

This is a legacy which deserves to be remembered, appreciated and, above all else, to be put into daily practice for the spiritual development of ourselves, our children and our fellow believers.

— 8 —

This "new life in Christ," according to Calvin, is to be lived in loving obedience before God's face everyday and everywhere. Now for the first time man can begin a truly authentic human life. As Christians they may not seek escape from the corruptions and perversions which characterize society because of man's tragic fall into sin. Believers should always see themselves as "salt" and "light" and "a city set high on a hill."

Reconciled to God and restored to the divine image, perfectly exhibited in Jesus Christ, they are to live this new life every day and everywhere in gratitude, for the welfare of their fellow-men and to the glory of the God whose they are and whom they serve.

For this the Reformer of Geneva provided no program of social ethics. Rather, what he said about marriage, society, economics, education and the state we find scattered throughout his writings as he explained the gospel in its application to life. By his Word and Spirit

---

<sup>187</sup> Calvin has a very long chapter on prayer in *Institutes*, III:20; on the Lord's Prayer, cf. III:20.xxxiv-xlix.

the God of salvation summons his people to action, in order that everywhere the contours of "the kingdom of Christ" may become increasingly evident in a decaying and dying world. All who have been mastered by God are now under obligation to serve him also by serving others, each according to the calling and with the gifts given by God, and that together as his "new community" of faith.

This was the radical and revolutionary dynamic<sup>188</sup> of the gospel as Calvin preached and sought to have it practiced in Geneva. In turn, it set its stamp, despite every opposition, on multitudes ever since his day. Even now, in the face of growing apostasy, secularism and antichristian ideologies, his influence on many nations has not evaporated.<sup>189</sup>

All the societal responsibilities of believers he sought to explain in the light of Scripture. At times, he appealed to "nature," to "natural law," to "experience," sometimes in a manner which seems to raise one or more of these as a kind of second "norm" for life. But this is a misrepresentation of his views. Even for the non-Christian always God's will for mankind is to be obeyed. While many have no acquaintance with Holy Scripture, they still retain within themselves some knowledge of God and his will, so that they can recognize right from wrong however much they may suppress this in unrighteousness.<sup>190</sup>

To deal in depth with Calvin's views on the application of God's will for the totality of our lives is, of course, an impossibility. Only a few themes will be mentioned with a quotation or two from Calvin himself.

Basic to all human existence is marriage, home and family. Here the Reformer says much that can be found in Christian writings of all ages. It is a divine institution, rooted in God's creation for the purpose

<sup>188</sup> "Radical"—from *radix*—means that God's grace gets at the root of man's pains and problems which is sin, alienation from God, his will, and therefore from man's true humanity; "revolutionary" means that God in Christ turns man's life completely around, leaving in his people nothing untouched and untransformed by the gospel. This power becomes evident in repentance and faith which calls for total obedience to his will in grateful "service." In this way we show love for him and others. On this Calvin comments in his frequent references to the relationship between the two tables of the law.

<sup>189</sup> Visser 't Hooft makes a telling observation on this: "If men had paid attention to Calvin, certain great misfortunes would never have happened. I will offer one example. 'To each according to his needs, from each according to his capacities' has had for Communism. . . . But neither Lenin nor Marx, was aware that three hundred years before Marx Calvin had already formulated this thought in his exposition of 2 Corinthians 8:13-14." ("Foreword" to Andre Bieler, *The Social Humanism of Calvin* [Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964], 8).

<sup>190</sup> Cf. his comments in *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the apostle to the Romans*, 94-98, 69, 71; also relevant chapters in *Institutes*, I.

of loving companionship, mutual assistance and the procreation of the race.

Now the human race could not exist without the woman and, therefore, in the conjunction of human beings, that sacred bond is especially conspicuous, by which the husband and the wife are combined in one body and one soul. . . .<sup>191</sup>

Although the words of Genesis 1:18 were spoken directly to Adam, he adds,

. . .yet I do not restrict the declaration to his person alone, but rather regard it as a common law of man's vocation, so that every one ought to receive it as said to himself, that solitude is not good, excepting only him whom God exempts as by a special privilege.<sup>192</sup>

Note again his emphasis on "vocation," a calling or office for which God also qualifies the human race. This elevates the man-woman relationship far beyond an instinctive level. Hence Calvin warns repeatedly against reducing it to one even lower than that of the beasts.

Both within and outside of marriage, woman occupies a dignity equal to that of man, created as was he in God's image, although her role is clearly distinct from his.

Now, since God assigns the woman as a help to the man, he not only prescribes to wives the rule of their vocation, to instruct them in their duty, but he also pronounces that marriage will really prove to men the best support of life.<sup>193</sup>

In his day, as well as now, not a few scoffed at marriage. To this he addressed himself.

The vulgar proverb, indeed, is that she is a necessary evil; but the voice of God is rather to be heard. . . .I confess, indeed, that in this corrupt state of mankind the blessing of God, which is here described, is neither perceived nor flourishes; but the cause of the evil must be considered, namely, that the order of nature which God has appointed has been inverted by us. For if the integrity of man had remained to this day such as it was from

---

<sup>191</sup>*Commentary on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 128.

<sup>192</sup>*Commentary on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 128.

<sup>193</sup>*Commentary on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 129.

the beginning, that divine institution would be clearly discerned and the sweetest harmony would reign in marriage; because the husband would look up with reverence to God, the woman would be a faithful assistant to him, and both, with one consent, would cultivate a holy as well as friendly and peaceful intercourse.<sup>194</sup>

Children are to be regarded as a distinct favor from God. They are his; therefore to be taught by word and deed to love, honor and obey God and their parents. Few sins are so destructive of harmony within the family as the refusal of one or more to abide by the respective positions and roles which God in his goodness and wisdom has assigned.

Celibacy, while so highly honored by Rome, Calvin rejects out of hand as a better and more spiritual pattern for man's life. Nor is divorce permissible except in the case of the adultery of one or the other of the two partners. Childlessness, together with suffering and death, is to be borne in patient submission to God's will. These are chastisements intended to draw us the closer to him and his service. All this is possible because of that special grace which Christ always gives to those who ask.

Also within the family, where primary authority rests with the father, Calvin applies God's requirement that each must be subject to the other, explaining that the one demand does not cancel out the other,

It is true that the father ought to be honoured by his children. Nevertheless, since it is so honourable a title, it will cost them very dearly if they do not govern their households discreetly. And in that government there is also subjection. Similarly between the husband and the wife. For is it not a subjection that the husband supports the frailty of his wife, and is prudent enough not to use rigour towards her, holding her as his companion, and taking upon himself a part of her burden both in sickness and in health? Is that not a subjection? Not without reason then does St. Paul remark generally that all they who wish to prove themselves faithful must be subject one to another, namely, every man in his condition and rank.<sup>195</sup>

---

<sup>194</sup> *Commentary on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 129.

<sup>195</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, 561.

For this the pattern is provided believers in the union of Christ and his church which should encourage and incite them daily to live to God's praise within their families.

Seeing that men, in doing their duty towards their wives, and wives also in obeying their husbands, may behold in that they are joined to Christ, and that they do the things that belong to the heritage of the kingdom of heaven, is it not necessarily the case that we are too unthankful if we do not consider how our Lord Jesus Christ labours by all means to win us and to make us walk under his yoke?<sup>196</sup>

Even more, marriage itself is used by God for our spiritual growth in preparation for glory.

And moreover he not only allures us by gentle and loving means, in order that we should take the better courage to serve him and to do the things that our condition and state require, but he also draws us to himself, and, even in this world and in the transitory and earthly things, sets forth for us the eternal salvation prepared for us in heaven. . . .<sup>197</sup>

Here, then, we find no set of rules laid down in impersonal and legalistic fashion.<sup>198</sup> Rather, love is to be exercised in Christ for each other and that within the bounds of God's will which always seeks the good of his people.

What Calvin had to say about education and its importance need not long delay us.

All, even secular writers, acknowledge that Christianity from its beginnings brought new life to a dying civilization in its confrontation with pagan philosophy and science. After several centuries of neglect

---

<sup>196</sup>*Sermons on Ephesians*, 604.

<sup>197</sup>*Sermons on Ephesians*, 604.

<sup>198</sup>These and other sermons should be read to learn how practically and pointedly Calvin preached, knowing well the temper and temptations of his hearers. A few examples: "Every man complains about his wife, saying, I cannot live with her, she is a mad beast, there is nothing in her but pride and haughtiness and rebelliousness. I cannot say a word to her without her paying me back with four" (596). "He then that takes two wives is worthy to be cut down the middle; and he that takes three is worthy to be cut in pieces" (610). Those who refuse to heed God's help in marriage are "wretched people" for whom "it is better to be branded a hundred thousand times" (613). On rebellious children, "God will have them dispatched out of the world, for they are monsters, and an infection to pollute the whole world" (623).

a revival of learning occurred with the Renaissance. Universities were established throughout much of western Europe, usually under the controlling influence of the Roman church and its hierarchy. But education was far too frequently the privilege of a comparatively few. The masses remained in ignorance.

With the Reformation radical changes took place. Its leaders, each in his own way, stressed learning for everyone, so that also the Scriptures could be read and understood. With the expulsion of monks what little remained of grammar schools had to be reorganized. In Geneva Calvin supplied much needed leadership in this field.<sup>199</sup> Parents were exhorted from the pulpit to train their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. The church was to pay due attention to children and young people, so that they might embrace the truth which brought salvation. Hence the catechisms<sup>200</sup> which Calvin penned and the special service on the Lord's Day to ascertain whether its truths were properly inculcated. But he with fellow pastors urged the Council to reorganize the day schools and provide these with good teachers. His crowning achievement was the establishment of the Academy in 1559 which soon developed into a university. Only by such means, so he insisted, could both church and state be well served with leaders who served the Lord.

---

<sup>199</sup>Calvin viewed the office of teacher as a divine appointment, having as its highest duty that of educating 'the faithful in sound doctrine' from the Old and New Testaments. But he felt no less strongly that before the learner 'can profit by such lessons he must first be instructed in the languages and worldly sciences.' Calvin therefore sought to develop the Genevan school system under the ecclesiastical conception of teachership. A 'learned and expert' man was to be appointed as head of the school, and teacher-in-chief, with 'readers' to give secondary instruction, and 'bachelors' to teach the little children under his control. The teacher was reckoned in the ministry, put under its disciplinary regulations. . . . In Calvin's judgment, the school was an integral factor in the religious training of the community\* (Williston Walker, *John Calvin* [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], 270).

<sup>200</sup>Hardly can the role which catechisms played in Calvin's mind for the welfare of young and old in the church be overrated, so that the true faith might be perpetuated from generation to generation and be translated into a life of Christian service. His first, far too long overlooked, was *Instruction in Faith* (1537) in which love for God and charity towards fellowmen shines through clearly. The second was a far more ambitious effort, entitled *The Catechism for the Church of Geneva* (1541/2). This he translated into Latin in 1545 with a dedicatory address to the Ministers of the Gospel in East Friesland, in the hope that it would serve to unite evangelical churches more closely. The material appeared in the form of 373 questions and answers, the whole conveniently arranged in sections to be used from Sunday to Sunday. With introductory analysis it appears in *The School of Faith*, translated and edited by Thomas F. Torrance (London: James Clarke and Co., 1959), 3-65.

The basis for all sound knowledge of God, self and the world was, of course, Holy Scripture. But Calvin was no foe of knowledge accumulated among the pagans, so long as this was tested and transformed by God's self-revelation in the Word. Nor was the acquisition of truth by itself adequate; all truth for him was unto goodness, that is, a life conformed to God's will. Much of the pagan ideal with its pride in reason and its emphasis on self-reliance and self-control, was ardently championed by men of the new learning. While appreciative of the role of the intellect in human life as well as of self-control and moderation, Calvin stressed the uniquely Christian virtues of humility, meekness and surrender of life to God. Never does the truly Christian life allow for such purely personal aims as unbridled ambition for possessions, position and worldly pleasures. Far too soon these clog the channels by which love should flow to others. Indeed, wealth ought not be despised but properly employed as are all the other gifts which may derive from learning.

If a man knows how to make use of present abundance in a sober and temperate manner, giving also a share to his brother, according to the measure of his ability and is also not puffed up, that man has learned to *excel* and to *abound*.<sup>201</sup>

On that true "wisdom" which comes from God and should be the aim of all education, Calvin has much to say in his comments on 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. There it is contrasted sharply with "the wisdom of this world."

. . .for if even the wisest become fools, when the Lord takes away a right spirit, what confidence is to be placed in the wisdom of men? Farther, as it is usually God's way of punishing to strike blind those who, following their own judgment, are wise in their own esteem, it is not to be wondered if carnal men. . .with a view to subjecting His eternal truth to their rashness, are turned into fools and become vain in their imagination.<sup>202</sup>

And then,

---

<sup>201</sup>*Commentaries on the epistle of Paul to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 124.

<sup>202</sup>*Commentary on the epistle of Paul the apostle to the Corinthians*, 80.

We must carefully notice these two things—that a knowledge of all the sciences is mere smoke, where the heavenly science of Christ is wanting; and man, with all his acuteness, is as stupid for obtaining of himself a knowledge of the mysteries of God as an ass is unqualified for understanding musical harmonies.<sup>203</sup>

These and other statements on education must be seen in the light of Calvin's emphasis on the interdependence and interrelation of man's knowledge of the one true God and of himself together with the world in which he lives. And this knowledge comes only from the Christ revealed in Holy Scripture.

In other respects, too, it holds true that without Christ sciences in every department are vain, and that the man who knows not God is vain, though he be conversant with every branch of learning. Nay, more, we may affirm this too with truth, that these choice gifts of God—expertness of mind, acuteness of judgment, liberal sciences, and acquaintance with languages—are in a manner profaned in every instance in which they fall to the lot of wicked men.<sup>204</sup>

Especially here Calvin again rejects that age-old dualism between the secular and the sacred. Although Scripture does not serve as a textbook for astronomy, the physical sciences or the language arts, only in the light which it sheds can we know ourselves and the world wherein we are called to live and work.

On what he had to say about man's responsibilities to fellowmen in society our comments must needs be restricted, even though this aspect of man's life deeply concerned him.

All human beings are born into and live within a social order, such as civil government.<sup>205</sup> No one can do without the other. And the

<sup>203</sup> *Commentary on the epistle of Paul the apostle to the Corinthians*, 82.

<sup>204</sup> *Commentary on the epistle of Paul the apostle to the Corinthians*, 83.

<sup>205</sup> That Calvin's views on the civil magistracy did not change markedly during the years of his ministry can be demonstrated from section 33, "The Magistrate or Civic Officer" in his *Instruction in Faith* (1537). Here a few of the several statements: "The Lord has not only testified that the status of magistrate or civic officer was approved by him and was pleasing to him, but also he has moreover greatly recommended it to us, having honoured its dignity with very honorable titles. . . . Hence princes and magistrates must think of him whom they serve in their office, and do nothing unworthy of ministers and lieutenants of God. All their solicitude must be in this: to keep in true purity the public form of religion, to establish and to guide the life of the people by very good laws, and to procure the

rule, laid down for everyone by God, is love. The entire race of mankind has been constituted, as it were, as a family. Only because of sin is there self-seeking with its envyings and hatreds. All such and similar sins destroy the harmony which should prevail; they produce injustice, corrupt sound morals, create inequities. In the end these shatter every semblance of a society among mankind. But in his compassion for men and to render them without excuse God restrains for his glory some of the raging of sinners and the ravages which they wreak on themselves and others. This he does chiefly by instituting and persevering civil government, together with the voice of conscience and the pressures of public opinion.<sup>206</sup>

Calvin acknowledges that the unregenerate can show a measure of concern and affection for each other as well as effect some good.<sup>207</sup> But apart from Christ none can show that love for others which delights the Lord. Only in and through the church as his redeemed people can love which is the bond of perfection begin to be exhibited.<sup>208</sup> Always believers are to show concern for and do good to others, including those not of the household of faith. This, as Christ and the apostles clearly taught, embraces even enemies when engaged in hating and cursing and persecuting those who love the Lord. In this way they demonstrate that they truly are "children of their heavenly Father."

Calvin not only preached this virtue; he sought to practice it as much as opportunity allowed. He was well-known for his generosity to the poor. He opened his home, not without disadvantage to himself and his family, to needy students and refugees who had fled their homelands for Christ's sake. He persuaded the Council and citizenry of Geneva to provide better care for the poor, the sick and the imprisoned. Laws against vagrancy and begging, on the books before he arrived, he would have implemented for the common welfare, so that the reputation of Geneva, professing to live according to the gospel, might be

---

welfare and the tranquility of their subjects, both in public and in private. . . .For just as a good prince is a testimony of the divine beneficence for maintaining the salvation of men, so a bad and evil prince is a plague of God for chastising the sins of the people. . . .to both the power is given by God, and we cannot resist them without our resisting the ordinance of God. . . .If men command us to do something against him [i.e., God], we must do nothing, nor keep any account of such an order" (76-78).

<sup>206</sup>On conscience, cf. *Institutes*, III.19.xv-xvi; IV.10.iii.

<sup>207</sup>Cf. Herman Kuiper, *Calvin on Common Grace* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1928).

<sup>208</sup>André Biéler, *The Social Humanism of Calvin* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 23.

untarnished. Lest with a burgeoning population too many would find themselves without gainful employment, he advocated the development of industry and commerce, even to the point of suggesting the introduction of silk weaving. Wealth when legitimately gained was not to be despised. But always it was to be held in check also by reminding the rich of their responsibility for the poor.

Here, then, was also a calling for the magistrates. Biéler in his *The Social Humanism of Calvin* summarizes it for us.

While the living Christ reestablishes this order of God among the members of his church, who let the divine Word guide them, the state must tend partially to restore that order in society as a whole.

For Calvin, the political mission of the state implies a certain intervention in economics.

The state is to do this not by force, not as a producer, but as a regulator of economic exchanges and distribution of the benefits of wealth. If the state were not this regulator, sin would destroy the good functioning of economic life. Hoarding and monopolies obstruct the circulation of goods among men, while waste deprives society of wealth.<sup>209</sup>

Calvin was by no means that champion of *laissez faire* capitalism which some of his later followers would have liked him to be. He defended the right to private property as well as the necessity of money as an efficient medium of exchange and the propriety of receiving a modest return on loans. But as Biéler reminds us,

For Calvin, ownership of a good is not absolute. It is limited and conditional. For a standard, Calvin does not hesitate to quote the ancient Jewish law which foresaw a periodic redistribution of lands and liberation from debts to the end that property should never (through individual hoarding and general involvement in debt) become a source of social oppression.<sup>210</sup>

But the state has a far broader mandate and responsibility. This is treated at some length in the final edition of the *Institutes*, to which we

---

<sup>209</sup>*The Social Humanism of Calvin*, 39.

<sup>210</sup>*The Social Humanism of Calvin*, 40.

refer the reader.<sup>211</sup> It is entrusted with a God-given authority to promote order in society, to ensure the life and liberty of the populace, and to punish those who break its laws even to the use of the sword. Those who rebel against it are guilty of rebelling against God himself.

For those in such authority the church and its members are to pray, in order that they may live quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness. Thus Calvin sees the state as a defender of the true religion without having the right to interfere with the internal administration and affairs of the church. Within the bounds of its authorization from God, it must uphold the commands of both the first and the second tables of the law. It has no jurisdiction over men's hearts and consciences. But blasphemy, propaganda for false religion and blatant transgression of the Sabbath which God ordained for the good of society were sins punishable under law. Any notion of a "neutral" state in matters of religion was quite inconceivable for him. No person had an inherent right to sin against God any more than against himself or his fellowmen.

All this, so Calvin was convinced, Scripture itself clearly taught. Magistrates in the exercise of their office were subject to God's revealed will from whom their authority derived, to whom they were accountable and by whom they would be judged.

Practice in Geneva fell short of these ideals which the Reformer proclaimed. At times there was an invasion of privacy which cannot be excused. Nor did the Genevan authorities always administer justice and equity in an evenhanded way. But that city during much of Calvin's career and because of his influence served as a shining example in the ever-deepening ecclesiastical, social and political distresses of those decades.

Chief among the duties assigned to the state, according to him, was the defense of itself and its people against foreign attack. In this present age such wars were not only unavoidable, but also warranted. Yet Calvin always urged a strong and sustained effort to insure peace. At the request of the magistrates he engaged in such enterprises not as a preacher but a private person who enjoyed the privileges of living in that city which had a right to its independence.

But what were Christians to do when kings and princes and even city magistrates enforced evil laws which robbed them of their liberties? To this issue he addressed himself time and again in personal letters and public writings. When commanded to sin openly against God

---

<sup>211</sup> *Institutes*, IV:20.

believers must refuse. Yet no individual or any group of persons may undertake the overthrow of a legitimate government. Always the consequences of such rebellion are certain to be worse than the causes which prompted it. Rather Christians, when suffering under the tyranny of kings and nobles who oppress them, do well to remember that they may be called to suffer for Christ's sake with patience, knowing that in his time God himself will bring relief. How far the lower magistrates may legitimately proceed against the oppression of princes and prelates is somewhat of an obscure point with Calvin. That they have an official responsibility here he affirms. But to what extent this permits open rebellion with force of arms remains obscure. Later his followers embroidered on what he wrote to justify Huguenot resistance to the French king and his armies, the Dutch war for independence against Spanish tyranny, as well as the overthrow of Charles I and James II in England to safeguard the liberties of the people. But all this was a later development. The basic biblical principle of obedience under God to "the powers that be" remained unimpaired.

One aspect of Calvin's reflections on biblical teachings remains to be considered. It requires a lengthier consideration as fundamental to his life and world view.

As a last look at his contributions to Christ's church we turn briefly to his understanding of history, of man's place in it, and of its consummation at Christ's return with new heavens and a new earth filled with righteousness. Although he never wrote a commentary on *Revelation*<sup>212</sup> much, perhaps, to our regret, his writings are replete with indications of what he believed and taught on this inescapably decisive teaching of Scripture for the Christian's life.

Here the "meaning" of life for the believer and the church is unfolded. Here in the struggle of the ages life's apparent inconsistencies and contradictions to the gospel are addressed with clarity and consistency. For Calvin, who never aspired to pen a philosophy of history after the fashion of Augustine's *City of God*, his calling lay in the direction of helping God's people to see how they could live hopefully in the face of apparently hapless and hopeless circumstances. Always, especially in his commentaries in the light of which the final edition of the *Institutes* is best understood, a profound pastoral concern motivates him. Believers should stand with both feet firmly planted in their

---

<sup>212</sup>On whether or not Calvin ever wrote a commentary on the book of Revelation, cf. T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (London, 1971), 75-58.

present existence, living and striving and suffering with hearts lifted up to heaven and looking with confidence to the glorious return of their Savior-King. Also here the Reformer's view is as this-worldly as it is other-worldly, as otherworldly as it is this-worldly.

Calvin's understanding of history together with its consummation has been aptly summarized by David E. Holwerda.

In the Middle Ages history was viewed as static, and eschatology was not really concerned with history. Consequently there was no dynamic movement in history. There was a passing of time, but no essential change. At best events were recorded as examples of timeless truths, not as signs of the times. History was static and so was the kingdom of God, for it was embedded in the permanent and unchangeable structure of the church. The Reformation challenged these static views of kingdom and history. The dynamic, active God of the Bible was rediscovered, and from that flowed the vision of history as constant change and meaningful turmoil until the final consummation of the kingdom.<sup>213</sup>

In shaping this new and challenging view of life for the believing church Calvin, more than any other Reformer, was in the vanguard. What seems so tragic is that on this score he had been frequently misunderstood and misrepresented. Far too often those who read him fail to recognize that his views are better compared with an ellipse with its two foci than with a simple circle.

Several strands of his thought are woven into this theme.

For him the eternal God always remains sovereign over the created order. Not only does he preserve all things but also governs them according to his eternal counsel. Yet this in no way robs man of his responsibility to the Creator in whom all live and move and have their being.

At the same time whatever happens serves his purpose to show forth the glory of his divine attributes. Sin, indeed, continually defaces and deforms the world and all who live in it. Hence judgments fall upon mankind in various forms.

---

<sup>213</sup>David E. Holwerda, "Eschatology and History: A Look at Calvin's Eschatological Vision" in *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 312.

Before the world's foundations were laid, however, God purposed to bring reconciliation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. For his coming the Old Testament is both preparation and foreshadowing. Nowhere has Calvin so pointedly described this, together with the response which our reflection should elicit, as in the "Argument" prefacing his *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*.

For by the Scripture as our guide and teacher, he not only makes those things plain which would otherwise escape our notice, but almost compels us to behold them. . . . For if the mute instructions of the heaven and earth were sufficient, the teaching of Moses would have been superfluous. This herald therefore approaches, who excites our attention, in order that we may perceive us to be placed in this scene for the purpose of beholding the glory of God; not merely to observe them as mere witnesses, but to enjoy all the riches which are here exhibited, as the Lord has ordained and subjected them to our use.<sup>214</sup>

On that foundation he builds to show how Moses leads us, when we are properly instructed, to a contemplation of Christ.

And he not only declares generally that God is the architect of the world, but through the whole chain of history he shows how admirable is his power, his wisdom, his goodness, and especially his tender solicitude for the human race. Besides, since the eternal Word of God is the lively and express image of himself, he recalls us to this point.<sup>215</sup>

Should anyone object, quoting Paul, that "the world through wisdom knew not God." the answer is supplied,

For he thus intimates that God is sought in vain under the guidance of visible things; and that nothing remains for us but to betake ourselves immediately to Christ; and that we must not therefore commence with the elements of this world, but with the Gospel, which Christ alone sets before us with his cross and holds us to this one point.<sup>216</sup>

---

<sup>214</sup>*Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 62.

<sup>215</sup>*Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 62-63.

<sup>216</sup>*Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 63.

Behind the scenes of history, which men without the Word contemplate in vain, lies the drama of God's recovering of a creation now subjected to vanity by man's rebellion at the instigation of Satan. After discoursing in detail on seed and serpent and Satan, Calvin again leads us to Christ.

Further as the perpetuity of the contest is noted, so victory is promised to the human race through a continual succession of ages. . . . But since experience teaches that not all the sons of Adam by far arise as conquerors of the devil, we must necessarily come to one head, that we may find to whom the victory belongs.<sup>217</sup>

Again he interprets Scripture in the light of Scripture, the Old Testament in the light of the New. While Satan can and does lead "the sons of men captive at his will," there comes

one stronger than he, who has descended from heaven, who will subdue him, so that in the same manner, the whole Church of God, under its Head, will gloriously exult over him. . . . but at the same time he admonishes us that it only has its commencement in this world; because God crowns none but well-trying wretches.<sup>218</sup>

This view of world history Calvin embroiders throughout his commentaries on the Old Testament, explaining not only the struggles and apparent defeats but especially the divine pledges of victory. Also here his pastoral concern to instruct and comfort the believing church is paramount. History is never a recital of bare facts to be reviewed impersonally and objectively; it is the story of God's dealings with mankind and the world to which the only proper response is faith which ripens into the sweet fruits of an obedient heart and life.

As in the Old Testament, so too in the New, our eyes are opened to the scenario of redemption and renewal in Christ which embraces not only the believing church but also the created order. With his appearing, especially upon his ascension, history enters a new and definitive stage. All authority and power is now his, not only to gather out of all nations a people for his own possession but fully as much to rule with an iron rod kings and nobles and everyone unwilling to submit to his

---

<sup>217</sup>*Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 170-171.

<sup>218</sup>*Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, 171.

government. In this frame of world events his people often suffer. This should not surprise them,

For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil. It is the heavenly Father's will thus to exercise them, so as to put his own children to a definite test. Beginning with Christ, his first-born, he follows this plan with all his children.<sup>219</sup>

Now we begin to understand better why Calvin urges upon his readers the profitableness of self-denial, cross-bearing and meditation on the future life.

Let Christians, then, daily lift up their hearts to heaven, where Christ is enthroned in glory and from whence comes their joy and strength and hope in every trial. Already on earth "the kingdom of Christ" is everywhere present and advancing. By gospel preaching it is established in the hearts and lives of believers to demonstrate its transforming power in every relationship. Nor does it leave them passive. They engage themselves by grace in worship, witness and work, exhibiting their "new life" in Christ. The line of demarcation which distinguishes them from the unbelieving and ungodly must come to clear expression.

We are God's; to him, therefore, let us live and die. We are God's; therefore let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions. We are God's; towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed. O how great a proficiency has that man made, who, having been taught that he is not his own, has taken the sovereignty and government of himself from his own reason, to submit it to God. For as compliance with their own inclinations leads men most effectually to ruin, so as not to place our dependence on our knowledge or will, but merely to follow the guidance of our Lord, is the only way to safety.<sup>220</sup>

Calvin adumbrates this for our instruction in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer with its eschatological dimensions.

---

<sup>219</sup>*Institutes*, III.8.i.

<sup>220</sup>*Institutes*, III.7.i.

For though all things fail us, yet God will never forsake us; he cannot disappoint the expectation and patience of his people. He will amply compensate us for the loss of all others, for he comprehends in himself all blessings, which he will reveal to us at the day of judgment, when his kingdom will be fully manifested.<sup>221</sup>

This is the glorious hope to which all believers may with inexpressible joy look forward. What now is restored in principle and in part will then be perfected, when Christ comes surrounded by the heavenly host to judge the living and the dead. While this should awaken terror in the hearts of the unredeemed, Calvin reminds his readers that it is for them who await his return with longing the day of victory. Not only will they, body as well as soul, be glorified with their Savior; also the restoration and renewal of all creation will be accomplished, "for God will restore to a perfect state the world, now fallen, together with mankind." On precisely how God will effect this he refuses to speculate, urging us simply to content ourselves with no more than Scripture states.<sup>222</sup> All traces of sin and its destructive influence will be effaced, the devils together with antichrist and all ungodly men banished from the new world, while believers will enjoy eternal felicity in the service and praise of the God of their salvation.

For his view of history with man's place in it, Calvin consistently weaves together the themes of creation, man's fall and redemption together with the consummation. All things are of God and through God and unto God; therefore, echoing the words of Paul, to him alone belongs the glory forever.

So vast and comprehensive is Calvin's view on history and its consummation that only some passing glimpses into it could be mentioned. Neither space nor sustaining the reader's attention any longer allows for even the briefest mention of Calvin's views on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, the place of the Jewish people in God's economy, the millennium, the coming of Antichrist, the condition of those who fall asleep before Christ's return, the signs of the

---

<sup>221</sup>*Institutes*, III.20.iii.

<sup>222</sup>*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 420, 424. Note also his attack on those who also in his day claimed that this world would last forever. "It here appears that the power of nature is not sufficient to sustain and preserve the world, but that, on the contrary, it contains the very element of its own ruin when it may please God to destroy it. . . . We see now how egregiously they err, who stop at naked elements, as though there was perpetuity in them, and their nature were not changeable according to the bidding of God" (416).

times, and much else. But while his writings also on these themes spanned more than a quarter century, we find in them a clarity, a consistency and a comprehensiveness which arouses admiration for his gifts as teacher and pastor of the Lord's church.

Holwerda, in concluding his essay, reminds us that Calvin's followers have often been less than faithful to what he taught here. Some with a pietistic and individualistic bent have focussed "on a Christ divorced from the realities of world and cosmos." Others stressing the eternal decree have "divorced (it) from eschatology, and the result has been a kind of static, almost fatalistic determinism." Also those who see him "as a social and political revolutionary" easily "become captive to a kind of social Darwinianism, promising a gradual but inexorably progressive development which will bring human society to a state of perfection—provided, of course, that Christians work hard enough and possess sufficient faith."<sup>223</sup> Even in the light of the few quotations supplied above such people have read too much their own agenda into his writings and present a Calvin which he would reject out of hand. In the interest of truth let us who owe him so much and claim to be pupils in his school be on guard against stumbling into such snares which do his teachings injustice and ourselves and others grave disservice.

With this we bring to a close our survey of Calvin's contributions to the Lord's church.

Today that church together with the social, economic and political orders finds itself, as in his time, at loose ends. Increasingly the cry recorded by the ancient psalmist, "Who will show us any good?," haunts the corridors of the closing years of this century. The only sure and satisfactory answer is: God who speaks to mankind in the Holy Scriptures. And to help us hear his voice more clearly and consistently he has also given us John Calvin.

Few situations are more painful and perplexing to a sincere believer than the fragmentation among evangelicals, including those claiming to be Reformed, who profess whole-hearted allegiance to the Word of God. They remind the writer of those five blind men of India who longed to "see" an elephant. Each was led to and felt a part of that magnificent beast's anatomy. Each was sure he now knew the truth while falling so far short of it. It may well be that Calvin, even so many years after his life and labors, can help us see the fullness of God's truth

---

<sup>223</sup>Holwerda, *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, 339-341.

for our day móre clearly, consistently and comprehensively. Too much are we inclined to forget that integral to *sola Scriptura* is *tota Scriptura*.

To this principle Calvin as pastor and teacher of Christ's church sought to be faithful. Its appropriateness for God's children comes to convincing expression in the prayer with which he concluded his sixth lecture on Ezekiel,

Grant, O Almighty God, since Thou hast counted us worthy of enjoying the privilege of daily listening to Thy word, that it may not find our hearts of stone and our minds of iron, but may we so submit ourselves to Thee with all due docility, that we may truly perceive thee to be our Father, and may be confirmed in the confidence of our adoption, as long as Thou perseverest to address us, until at length we enjoy not merely Thy voice, but also the aspect of Thy glory in Thy heavenly kingdom, which Thine only-begotten Son has acquired for us by his blood. Amen.<sup>224</sup>

As captive to the God of the abiding Word he served the churches of his generation faithfully and so can also serve them fruitfully until the glory of God is fully manifested at the end of the ages.

---

<sup>224</sup>*Commentaries on the book of the prophet Ezekiel*, 118. This commentary is of special interest and significance, because it constitutes his last chief work. It stops at the twentieth chapter since his pain-racked body made it impossible to continue. Each lecture, given over the course of many years, begins with the same simple petition, "Grant us, Lord, to meditate on the heavenly mysteries of Thy wisdom, with true progress in piety, to Thy glory and our edification. Amen." Each concludes with a prayer appropriate to the passage which he expounded. From these we can learn as much about his personal piety as about the way in which he believed faithful exposition of the Word served God's glory in the reformation and renewal of the churches.