



Pia conspiratio

Calvin's legacy and the divisions of the Reformed churches today

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● **Introduction**

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

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

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

The first step has to be a realistic perception of the situation. A survey of the Reformed churches around the world has recently been produced,² and the picture is both impressive and dismaying. A reading of it shows that there are hardly any countries without a Reformed presence, but also that there are almost none where there is only one Reformed church. The book contains information about some 750 churches in all. Many of them are

small and inconspicuous, many are basically open to contacts with other churches, but in many cases the divisions run deep. At all events, the survey shows that communication among the Reformed churches is in a parlous state. Many churches simply go their own way with superb indifference.

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

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

● Calvin and the unity of Christ's church

This is the question I shall explore here. This part of the study is an attempt to outline Calvin's understanding of the church. In the following parts I reflect on its significance for the church today.

The one church resurrected to new life

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

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

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

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

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

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

Calvin belonged to the second generation of reformers. The separation into two camps was the situation he met with from the start; the differences had become accentuated since the beginning of the Reformation. When he began his work the time was already gone for theses, manifestos and programmes of reform that could be negotiated. The true church had to be made manifest. Calvin assumed that God had given him this mission and, just as God's hand had touched Calvin's heart, so Calvin wanted it to touch the hearts of all the waverers. Obedience to Christ demanded an unequivocal decision. As a reformer Calvin had something of the clarity of the Prophet Elijah. Those who wanted to be true "*amateurs du Christ*" could not "go limping with two different opinions" (1 Kings 18.21), they had to make room for the true church.

This was also the crux of the matter in the encounters with the Roman adversary. For him the only point of these was to bring God's Word to bear. In the early years of his activities Calvin accepted conversations in which the differences between the "two fronts" were negotiated: in Frankfurt (1539), in Hagenau (1540), in Worms (1541) and -as a delegate of the city of Strasbourg -in Regensburg (1541).⁵ Even though he was under no illusions that an agreement could be reached -the impatience that can be detected in his letters is evidence enough⁶ - every opportunity had to be taken to work through the controversy about the truth.

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

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

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

The unification of the Reformation churches

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

However, his concern reached far beyond the unity of the local church. Efforts for agreement among the churches of the Reformation camp run like a red thread through all the years of his activity in theology and the church. He sought to overcome the controversies within the evangelical churches through creative proposals and to formulate theologically sound agreements. His "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper" is a masterpiece and remains to this day a model for what genuine "ecumenical theology" can achieve.¹² Calvin differed from Martin Bucer in his efforts for consensus. He did not hold with compromises and distrusted euphemistic formulations. In his view, genuine agreement had to lead beyond the positions in the dispute; both partners had to be able to recognize themselves in the consensus, but neither should emerge as winner. Only a new formulation could bring about a lasting agreement.¹³

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

Calvin's advice was widely sought, his powerful personality was a unifying

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

The church - mother of the faithful

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

The church is not the result of human initiative. It is instituted by God. It is not we who decide to join the church, rather we are made part of God's people. Calvin speaks of the church as mother on several occasions. Right at the start of Book IV of the Institutes the title of the first chapter reads: "The True Church with Which as Mother of All the Godly we must Keep Communion" and the image is developed further in the body of the text: "...there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels" (Inst. IV, 1.4).

The church is the communion of those who adhere in faith to Christ, and for that very reason it is unthinkable that there should be more than one church. Just as Christ is one, so too the church is one. "Hence the Church is called Catholic or Universal for two or three cannot be invented without dividing Christ. ..All the elect of God are so joined together in Christ, that as they depend on one head, so they are as it were compacted into one body, being knit together like its different members; made truly one by living together under the same Spirit of God in one faith, hope and charity, called not only to the same inheritance of eternal life, but to participation in one God and Christ" (Inst. IV, 1,2).

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

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

For human beings to take the church under their own government is to deny the nature of the church. The church then becomes a *falsa ecclesia*,

as happened through the wilfulness and thirst for power of the western church, so that the church became permeated through and through with human considerations and ordinances. The same happens, however, as a result of movements that break away from the church in order to form *new churches*. Something devised by human beings cannot be other than *falsa ecclesia*. Calvin invokes the example of the prophets who "did not form new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which they might have separate sacrifices" (Inst. IV, 1.18).

By what, then, can the true church be discerned? Calvin's answer to this was always the same -by its heeding of God's word. What makes the church the church is the preaching of the word, so it is essential that this spring should flow abundantly. Where the word is preached and the sacraments are observed, the church is there. The word may get lost, but where preaching effectively has a "fixed abode" it will bear fruit. "But be this as it may, when the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard, and the sacraments not neglected, there for the time the face of the church appears without deception or ambiguity and no man may with impunity spurn her authority or reject her admonition, or resist her counsels, or make sport of her censures, far less revolt from her and violate her unity" (Inst.IV, 1,10). It is essential that the proclamation of the word through preaching and sacrament should retain a firm place in the life of the church. Calvin therefore tirelessly urged regular preaching of the word; he also said on many occasions that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated more frequently, preferably at every service. Referring to Acts 2:42 he says: "Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the supper and alms. We may gather from Paul that this was the order observed by the Corinthians" (Inst. IV. 17, 44).²⁰

The invisible and the visible church

"To God alone must be left the knowledge of his church of which his secret election forms the foundation" (Inst. IV, 1,2). The church can and must be regarded from two different standpoints. To the extent that it is God's people of the elect it is hidden from our knowledge and judgement. It is God's secret. As the instrument of grace instituted by God, however, it is visible; it is the communion of all those on this earth who confess Jesus Christ. However much Calvin emphasises God's secret election, he does not for all that distinguish between two churches, one invisible, the other visible. It is one and the same church. He stresses emphatically that those who have come to believe must hold fast to the visible community of all believers. The two standpoints cannot be played off against one another. God has bound up his salvation with the visible community of the church. Therefore, no-one can be sure of belonging to the true church if he or she is not part of its visible earthly fellowship.

Calvin uses many different turns of phrase to stress the importance of belonging to the visible church. Those who cut the ties that bind them into the church and its worship run an immeasurable risk, for they place their salvation at stake. "Abandonment of the Church is always fatal", says Calvin. (Inst. IV, I, 4). Conversely, as we participate in the communion of the church we are strengthened in our faith and certainty of being part of God's salvation. On the subject of forgiveness in particular, Calvin's observations go far.

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

forgiveness of sins. Secondly, This benefit is so peculiar to the Church, that we cannot enjoy it unless we continue in the communion of the Church. Thirdly, It is dispensed to us by the ministers and pastors of the Church, either in the preaching of the Gospel or the administration of the Sacrament, and herein is especially manifested the power of the keys, which the Lord has bestowed on the company of the faithful. Accordingly, let each of us consider it to be his duty to seek forgiveness of sins only where the Lord has placed it" (Inst. IV, 1.22).

Discipline and restraint

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

Yet on the other hand, Calvin's reserve is striking. He knows and repeatedly states that God's people here on earth is not and cannot be a perfect communion. The fact that the church is made up of good and wicked together, and its frequent failures, will not surprise believers, nor cause despair. Purists do not have Calvin on their side. Important as it is that the communion should take visible form, the parable of the tares among the wheat should caution prudence. "If the Lord declares that the Church will labour under the defect of being burdened with a multitude of wicked until the day of judgement, it is vain to look for a church altogether free from blemish" (Inst. IV, 1, 13). We cannot be members of the church without accepting to be part of its ambiguity in history.

A constructive path therefore has to be found between *laisser-aller* and purism. The communion can be endangered as much by indifference as by excessive zeal. Discipline must always be placed in the service of communion. The door must always be open for the restoration of communion. In particular, Calvin discourses at length on the point that no believer has the right to separate from the church for the sake of the church's purity. "Notwithstanding the faults of a few or of many, there is nothing to prevent us from duly professing our faith in the ordinances instituted by God" (Inst IV, 1,19). Calvin suspects the zeal for purity of concealing pride. These people appear to defend the church but in reality they are seeking "to display their own superiority by despising all other men" (Inst. IV, 1.16). "Those who think it sacrilege to partake the Lord's bread with the wicked, are more rigid in this than Paul. For when he exhorts us to pure and holy communion, he does not require that we should examine others, or that every one should examine the whole church, but that each should examine himself" (Inst. IV, 1,15).

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

Church, because the lives of all accord not with our judgement, or even with the Christian profession" (Inst IV, 1,18).

The universal communion of the church

Calvin's thoughts on the universal church deserve particular attention. Starting from a general definition of the universal church (Inst. IV, 1, 19), he concludes that the universal communion is characterised by far greater diversity than the local church. It is the fellowship of believers collected out of all nations and regions. Individual churches in different towns or villages have the name and the authority of the Church and must order their fellowship in a way that reflects God's presence in their particular place. Between the individual churches there is room for considerable differences: only in the essential things is unity required. The foundation, the doctrine on which the church of Christ is founded (*doctrina qua ecclesia Christi fundatur*) cannot be called in question.²¹ The Anti-Trinitarians are to be condemned because they cast doubt on all the principles of our religion (*omnia religionis nostrae principia*).²² Conversely, in his discussion with Joachim Westphal Calvin can insist that they are in agreement about the *praecipuis capitibus* of doctrine.²³ Mutual recognition apparently does not require complete consensus. "If churches have the ministry of the word, and honour the administration of the sacraments, they are undoubtedly entitled to be ranked with the Church..." Calvin continues, "Thus we both maintain the Church universal in its unity, which malignant minds have always been eager to dissever, and deny not due authority to lawful assemblies distributed as circumstances require" (Inst IV, 1,9).

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

How are decisions made in the church?

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

One of the marks of the Reformed tradition is the diversity of ministries. At the local level, preachers are surrounded by elders and deacons (Inst. IV, 3, 8-9). Occasionally Calvin speaks of a fourth office, that of teacher, serving solely the explanation of scripture. (Inst. IV, 3, 4) The interaction between these ministries is essential for the church. As they work together to fulfil different basic offices of the church, they form a *collegium* of mutually complementary ministries, entrusted with the mission and the authority to lead the church in the way of God's word. The ultimate validity

of their decisions, however, lies in the degree to which they correspond to the teaching of Holy Scripture.

Less definite are Calvin's observations on decision-making processes at supra-congregational or even universal level. He was clear in his own mind that it was necessary to distinguish between church and state. During his lifetime he fought for the independence of church structures vis-à-vis the civic authorities, but in fact church structures free of state influence only came about where the Reformed church remained in the minority. It is in France that we find the model for a Reformed decision-making structure, in the form of a synod composed of representatives of local churches, with the power to take decisions concerning the life of the church. Authority lies not with a God-ordained hierarchy but with the local congregations and the office-bearers delegated by them. Here again the collegial element is determinative. The church receives God's guidance in listening together to God's Word.

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

"We readily admit that when any doctrine is brought under discussion, there is not a better or surer remedy than for a council of true bishops to meet and discuss the controverted point. There will be much more weight in a decision of this kind, to which the pastors of churches have agreed in common after invoking the Spirit of Christ, than if each, adopting it for himself, should deliver it to his people, or a few individuals should meet in private and decide. Secondly, when bishops have assembled in one place, they deliberate more conveniently in common, fixing both the doctrine and the form of teaching it, lest diversity give offence. Thirdly, Paul prescribes this method of determining doctrine (I Cor 14.29). For when he gives the power of deciding to a single church, he shows what the course of procedure should be in more important cases -namely, that the churches together are to take common cognizance. And the very feeling of piety tells us that if anyone trouble the Church with some novelty in doctrine, and the matter be carried so far that there is danger of a greater dissension, the churches should first meet, examine the question, and at length, after due discussion, decide according to Scripture, which may both put an end to doubt in the people, and stop the mouths of wicked and restless men, so as to prevent the matter from proceeding farther." (Inst. IV, 9, 13)

Calvin had no opportunity to translate this vision into practice. Apparently the time was not yet ripe for a council of the Reformation churches, but the obstacles were not in outward circumstances alone. Calvin was more concerned not to overstate the authority of the councils than to press the need for a renewal of conciliar practice. Again and again he repeats that the authority of a council cannot be measured by external criteria.²⁵ Set in the overall context of his reflections, the comments just quoted seem more like a concession than a programme. While he may lay the basis for a form of conciliar practice, he has not yet developed his thoughts.

● **What can we learn from Calvin for our situation today?**

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

fragmentation, we will quickly realise that Calvin's observations are highly actual.

a) In contrast to Calvin's understanding, the church today is not understood as being first and foremost *God's gift and creation*, but rather as the voluntary assembly of believers. Talk of the church as "mother of those to whom God is a father" (Inst.IV, 1.1) is seldom heard in Reformed circles nowadays. Only *after* salvation, justification and sanctification have been discussed does the subject of the church receive attention. Reformed Christians think of themselves first as individuals. They tend to measure the church by their own experience and to terminate their membership if it does not measure up to this. Their commitment to the communion of the church willed and ordained by God generally ranks low.

b) In contrast to Calvin, who was not prepared to separate the *invisible and the visible church*, the predominant attitude among Reformed Christians today is critical towards church. What counts is personal faith. What happens at the level of the institution is from the start held in odium as "secondary". Calvin did of course frequently say that there were no institutional guarantees of any kind for God's truth and presence. But he was equally emphatic in demanding membership in the visible fellowship of the faith. He was able to say: "This is the virtue of the unity of the Church that it keeps us in communion with God" (*Telle vertu a l'unite de l'Eglise, qu'elle nous peut retenir en la compagnie de Dieu, Inst. IV; 1, 3*). In his view the *falsa ecclesia* can only be overcome by yet more decided adhesion to the true church. He would therefore have very little time for the equanimity, even indifference with which the divisions of the Reformed churches are accepted today. His doubts about the institution do not shake his conviction that 'God is at work in the power of the Spirit in the visible fellowship.

c) In contrast to Calvin, who constantly reminded the *pasteurs* and other *ministres* of their servant role and demanded they be clearly bound into the college of ministers and elders, today the primary emphasis is placed on the 'performance of the ministers. This is why pastors can so easily become dominant figures in the Reformed churches. Outstanding preachers and leaders can be a blessing, they can contribute to opening new spiritual perspectives. But they have, especially in recent times, also been the cause of secession and division. The authority of the ministry can, as Calvin always maintained, give rise to *ambition* and *orgeuil*. Instead of serving the church through the word, the church can in no time at all become a personal affair.

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

● **Going on beyond Calvin?**

Does Calvin show us the way forward in every respect? Of course not. The churches shaped by his legacy live in a different world. Actual as Calvin

remains in many respects, new perspectives have developed that inevitably lead beyond him. Indeed, in retrospect, it can be seen that there are actually limits to Calvin's understanding of the church which have unintentionally and unwittingly fostered the divisions of the Reformed churches.²⁶ If we are to stand up to the challenges of our times, we have to move on, and here I see at least six important points to be considered.

1. The Reformation led to a break; unity could not be preserved. Calvin speaks, as we have seen, of two camps forming and, in time, these developed into mutually exclusive confessional traditions. Through his struggle for the true church Calvin helped to bring about the "Reformed tradition". Now and then it is clear how deeply he felt the separation. In a letter to a disputatious theologian whose stream of criticism did not halt even before the acknowledged leaders of the Reformation, he exclaimed, "Great God, what does this bring back! In the past we had to separate ourselves from servants of Christ with a feeling no different than if our heart were being tom from our body. And now it should be almost a game to cut off not just any member, but the most important vital organ from our communion?"²⁷ But Calvin saw no other option, and after the incision had been made from both sides, the difference became more and more unbridgeable. Certainly, Calvin continued to believe that traces of the true church were still preserved in the opposing camp, but the living interaction between the camps was broken off. Was this the final word? For many people that was and is the case right up to the present time and, on the basis of a superficial reading of Calvin's writings, they believe they can claim his authority for this view. But could the fronts not shift once more? Could God not effect unexpected resurrections even in the camp of popes, cardinals and bishops? Could the traces of the true church that had been preserved not awake to new life? And conversely, could confusion and disobedience not also develop in the Reformed camp? The supposition that the true church has been made visible for all time is not only an illusion, it certainly also does not correspond to Calvin's deepest intention. The church lives from Christ's love. At all times it is made up of the "*amateurs du Christ I'*", those who give glory to God in this world. That is why, transcending the boundaries of the church, we constantly have to ask anew how the true church of Christ can take shape.

2. Calvin saw it as part of his vocation to bring clarity amidst the confusion that reigned in his time. Inwardly and outwardly Calvin's life was a never-ending succession of conflicts. In the struggle for the *vera ecclesia* there could be neither ambiguity nor compromise. Calvin could in fact be merciless and on the face of it almost unbearably harsh. The severity that characterizes many of his writings is the other side of his *passion for clarity* and unmistakable lines of demarcation. This can be explained partly by the fact that he saw the work of the Reformation threatened, but also partly by the circumstance that he was himself struggling with illness and pain, especially in the later years of his life. He himself admits that he was irritable and had a tendency to be impatient. Whatever the explanation for his style, the result is a strange contradiction. The impassioned exhortations to communion and mutual tolerance seem forgotten in the heat of controversy. Both the emphasis on communion, and the passion for clarity have left their mark on the Reformed tradition, with disastrous consequences in the case of lesser minds than Calvin. The result has been not only clarity, but dogmatism and, all too often, division. The question for us, therefore, is how to handle this aspect of Calvin's legacy. The underlying intention in all Calvin's work is beyond doubt to point to the centre - God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. This centre takes precedence over all borderlines and demarcations.

3. Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper stands in striking contrast both with the practice in the Geneva of his day and that of the Reformed churches up to the present time. In harmony with the Augsburg Confession he too counts "the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ" (Inst. IV, 1, 9) among the *notae ecclesiae*. Christ gave the Lord's Supper (*la cene*) to the church as a token of his presence; bread and wine are in a sense visible words that proclaim to us God's love in Christ. Calvin leaves it in no doubt that this sign of Christ's presence is to be celebrated regularly in each service of worship.²⁸ Yet this did not happen. The contradiction is obvious. The Reformation churches lack the fullness of a sign which, on their own affirmation, is one of the marks of the true church. Is this perhaps one of the reasons why the understanding of the church as God's creation and gift has been lost from sight? Is this why preaching and, above all, the preacher have come to assume such a dominant role?

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

Concerned as Calvin was to maintain the union of the Reformation churches then known to him, his writings offer few pointers for a constructive solution to this question,

5. Calvin admitted *considerable differences in doctrine and practice* in the church. So long as the *notae* could be discerned he felt obliged to recognize a church as the church of Jesus Christ and to remain in communion with it. He considered that each single church had "the name and authority of the Church". With this he laid the basis for a *communio* of churches at national and at universal level, conceived in the widest sense. He understands unity not as uniformity but as mutual recognition and communion in diversity. That, however, leaves the open question of how to articulate that which the different individual churches have in common. The Reformed tradition has never produced *one* common confession and this has certainly contributed to considerable freedom in the way they live with the heritage of the Reformation. At the same time, however, the question of the common basis has gone largely unanswered. Important as it is for the individual churches to recognize one another in their diversity, this still

does not fulfil their common calling, as God's people, to bear common witness. On what basis will they fulfil to this task?

6. Which road will they take in fulfilling them? Calvin did offer a first outline in his considerations on Councils, when he showed what role *synodal or conciliar structures* can have in the life of the church. However, his remarks remain strangely unspecific. Above all, he seems not to realize that the reforms taking place in his times could open up new horizons for the church and hence new challenges and tasks. He saw the function of synodal assemblies of the "bishops" of several churches as being first and foremost "to remove doubt among the people and stop the mouths of troublemakers". The task of finding how the church can respond to new challenges without losing its unity was not one he considered, and it is a task in which Reformed churches have failed again and again. Conservative and progressive forces have settled their disputes by separating and going their own way.

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

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

Originally published in *Pia Conspiratio: Calvin's commitment to the unity of Christ's church*, John Knox Series no.12 (Geneva: JKIRC, 2000), pp.5-6, 37-62.

Notes

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

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

¹ A good example of this is Jürgen Moltmann's book about the church, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Harper Row, New York 1977. He states programmatically, "Once the churches have entered the ecumenical movement, the doctrine of the church can no longer be the slave of the self-understanding of our own particular denomination, and its difference from all the others." (p.12) Important as it is for us to think beyond our own tradition, the reality of our own church cannot simply be shrugged off even in the ecumenical movement. Unless we have deliberately worked

through it and come to terms with it, we will not be capable of a constructive ecumenical discussion. Those who are not willing to see themselves as others see them are not of great value as partners in dialogue.

2. Jean-Jacques Bauswein, Lukas Vischer, *The Reformed Family Worldwide*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1999.

3. CO 28, 466.

4. Reply to Sadolet 1539, in CO 5, 409-410 and Library of Christian Classics, Tracts and Commentaries, Westminster Press, Philadelphia.

5. In late 1541 Calvin published the *Acta* of the Conversations in Regensburg, CO 5, 515-527.

6. Cf Calvin's participation in these conversations as depicted by Karl Barth. *Die Theologie Calvins* 1922, Gesamtausgabe, Akademische Werke 2, Zurich 1993, pp.532-543..

7. Calvin assumes that elect are also to be found in the Roman church and that the Roman church has also preserved remnants of Christianity. In a letter to Lelio Sozzini on December 7 1549, he writes: "When I say that traces of the church have remained even in the papal church, I am not referring only to the elect scattered here and there within it, but I genuinely mean that the ruins of the destroyed church are present among the papists. Without need for long explanations, the authority of Paul must satisfy us here: he says the Antichrist will sit down in the temple of God," CO 13, 487. Or again: "Therefore even in the corruption of papist baptism there remains something that is of God (*aliquid Dei proprium*)", CO 13, 308; cf also, CO 6, 583 and CO 10/2, 149.

8. However stringent the arguments used in the controversial writings, their caustic style makes large parts of them almost unbearable for the modern reader. The action deliberately taken by him against Michael Servet earned him the reputation of being a dictator. This image is certainly not true. Calvin's position in Geneva was so vulnerable that the survival of his work was by no means assured. It was long an open question whether he would succeed in imposing his concern for the reform of the church. Nevertheless, Servet's execution remains a spiritual error which not even the subtlest of explanations can begin to excuse; and it is entirely justified that there is not only the monument in the garden of Geneva university to pay tribute to the Reformers but also the memorial in Champel where Servet perished on the stake. Among the embarrassing aspects of Calvin's polemics is also the dispute with Sebastian Castellio in Basle who, on good theological grounds, had protested against Servet's being burned at the stake. Calvin became embroiled in a bitter dispute with his critic. His attacks culminate in the almost unbelievable phrase hurled at Castellio: May God curb you in, Satan (*compescat te Deus, Satan*)! Cf. Hans R Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio, Humanist und Verteidiger der religiösen Toleranz*, Göttingen 1997, p.163.

9. Letter from the Venerable Company of Pastors of Geneva to the Council of Neuchâtel, September 29 1541.

10. The issue was that, in the eyes of Geneva, Farel had been unrightfully removed. Pierre Viret was sent to Neuchâtel to demand a proper procedure and to defend Farel.

11. His stay lasted for two weeks. Calvin describes his efforts to reach a settlement in a letter to Wolfgang Muslin in Berne, on October 26 1556.

12. Cf. CO 5 and Calvin-Studienausgabe 2, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1994.

13. Thus he writes to Martin Bucer: "In your explication of God's word, especially in the points that are at issue today, you seek to tune your language in a way that will not give offence to anybody. We are certain that you do this with the best of intentions. Nevertheless we must heartily disapprove such away of doing." (Letter of January 12 1538, CO 10/2,142.

14. *Quid? An non hostis quoque ipse diabolus aculeos nobis ad syncretismum agendum ad movere debet?*, Preface to the first edition of the Catechism, CO 5, 321./p>

15. In Karl Holl's judgement: "Calvin had in mind the interests of Protestantism as a whole to a much greater extent than did the German reformers. Wherever an opportunity offered itself around him he seized it and did not consider his duty was done by sending a letter of greeting. He continued to work with those others, with such dedication that one sometimes regrets the time and effort he spent." Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol III, Tübingen, 1928, p.273.

16. Letter of January 5 1556 to the Saxon pastors during the disputes with Joachim Westphal, CO 9, 50.

17. He warned the church in Zurich, for example, not to answer Luther's invectives (cf. letter to Bullinger of November 25 1544, CO 9, 774). A vivid picture of Calvin's efforts for union is to be found in G. Reichel, *Calvin als Unionsmann*, Tübingen 1909.

18. In a letter to Heinrich Bullinger on May 22 1558, Calvin gave vent to his disappointment at the statement in which Lutheran theologians had condemned the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper and to which Melanchthon had also given his assent. He attributes this step in part to the refusal of the church in Zurich to enter into theological conversations, "Now, however, when by your silence and implicit refusal, all hope of a peace accord was gone, Melanchthon and the others with him who were favourably disposed to us, easily surrendered to the stringency of the others." He assures Bullinger, however, that he will always defend the *consensus tigurinus*. "Wherever I journey I shall always be intent not to accept anything that does not agree with my belief, but also to defend our *consensus* with the steadfast faithfulness which shall always hold between us." (CO 17, 174, tr. from Rudolf Schwarz, *Calvins Lebenswerk in seinen Briefen*, vol 3, 1962, pp.946-947)./p>

19. "*Il nous faut néanmoins résoudre qu'il n'y a eu nul âge depuis le commencement du monde, auquel le Seigneur n'ait eu son Eglise.*" Inst. IV,1,17.

20. From the very beginning of his activity in Geneva, in the church order of 1536, Calvin makes it clear that the Lord's Supper should in principle be celebrated "at least every Sunday". As the people were not yet ready for this, he considered it better to celebrate it only once a month in a different church in the city in turn (CO 1, 370). In the 14 Articles presented to the synod of Zurich in 1538, he also adhered to this order (CO 10/2, 190-193). Later he still considered it as the right order that "Each week, at least, the table of the Lord ought to have been spread for the company of Christians, and the promises declared on which we might then spiritually feed" (Inst. IV, 17,46).

21. Calvin to Farel on October 24 1538, CO 10/2, 275.

22. CO 14, 615.

23. Calvin in his second reply to Joachim Westphal, January 1556, CO 9, 50.

24. In the Institutes Calvin gives an example of an acceptable difference in the interpretation of biblical teaching: the question of where souls go after death (Inst. IV, 1.12). On this: Otto Weber, *Die Einheit der Kirche bei Calvin*. in Jürgen Moltmann, ed., *Calvinstudien* 1959, Neukirchen 1960, pp.130-143.

25. At the very beginning of his reflections Calvin states: "I venerate them (i.e. the ancient councils) from my heart, and would have all to hold them in due honour. But there must be some limitation, there must be nothing derogatory to Christ. Moreover, it is the right of Christ to preside over all councils, and not share the honour with any man" (Inst. IV, 9, 1). Or again a little later: "...we are reminded by the examples of almost every age, that the truth is not always cherished in the bosom of pastors, and that the safety of the Church depends not on their state" (Inst. IV, 9, 4). How, in view of all these limitations, is trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit to develop?

26. Karl Holl: "However, the endeavour for wider communion in Calvinism clashes with the equally determined striving for certainty and clarity of personal conviction... *In the course of history this side of the Calvinist spirit has mostly turned inwards against the Calvinist church itself rather than outwards. All the tensions contained in Calvin's concept of the church have surfaced- admittedly in combination with other contributory factors - in the founding of separate churches. A strong tendency to form sects seems to be a characteristic feature of Calvinism.*" Holl adds the following interpretation *in bonam partem* to this observation: "It seems to me that the honesty of argument and the courage for independence evident on the Reformed side also deserve some respect. At all events, the relation of large to small church bodies here shows particularities that merit reflection. Elsewhere the rule is that the closer two entities are, the more strongly they will reject one another. yet here we find that, despite strong competition, the separated denominations get along tolerably well together The development of numerous sects alongside the mother church seems to have served simply to open the way for a broader idea of tolerance. It was in the normal course of development that the union of the 19th century met with few difficulties among the members of the Reformed church and that the modern counter-movement against the continuing fragmentation of Protestantism received a powerful impetus precisely from this quarter." op. cit. p.275.

27. *Quam si viscera nostra a nobis evellerentur*, Letter to Andre Zebedee of May 19 1539, CO 10/2,346.

28. In the "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper" (1541) we read: "Therefore, the custom ought to be well established in all churches, of celebrating the Supper as frequently as the capacity of the people will allow. And each individual in his own place ought to prepare himself to receive it whenever it is administered in the congregation, unless there be some grave hindrance which compels him to abstain." (CO 5, 446 and Calvin: Theological Treatises, Library of Christian Classics, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, p.153). In the Institutes of 1559 Calvin goes further still: communion belongs to the fullness of worship (Inst. IV,17,44) His main concern was that the congregation should actually partake of communion. The practice hitherto had been to communicate once a year, and otherwise to attend the mass but without receiving the bread and wine. In Calvin's opinion this was to neglect Christ's institution (of the sacrament). Partaking of communion is an inseparable part of the Lord's Supper. In this respect celebrating communion four times a year was already a step forward.

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

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

31. Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, Berlin 1957, pp.329ff. In his book, Krusche quotes numerous other relevant passages.

32. Characteristically, the Westminster Confession was expanded by the following sentence in 1902 : "Christ has commissioned his church to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. *All believers* are therefore under the obligation to sustain the ordinances of the Christian religion where they are already established and to contribute by their prayer, gifts and personal efforts to the extension of the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth." The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 10.4, in *The Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, Richmond 1965, p.68.

33. Commentary on Isaiah 18.7, CO 36, 326.